

Buddhist Education in the 21st Century

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Introduction

The world has seen unprecedented progress in the fields of science and technology, transforming life on a scale unimaginable a few decades ago. Nations across the globe are exploring ways to enhance human life and experience through innovative economic and social activities. Universities and other educational institutions are either investing heavily in hard-core science and technology to create powerful economic engines, or investing in soft sciences to run the economic engine. Today, success is determined largely by the ability to contribute towards economic and physical growth and, therefore, money is deemed the absolute power. Because of enhanced economic growth, a substantial percentage of the world's population enjoys physical comforts and conveniences never even imagined in the past.

On the other hand, there is an increase in human conflict and human crises at all levels. Just as there are individual problems in a family such as lack of trust, disrespect, debt, prejudice, bullying, oppression, exploitation, domination, sanctions, and impositions, nations too are experiencing the same problems, albeit on a larger scale. These days, many countries are targets of terrorism, violence, crime, drugs and human trafficking. In reality, we are in a world of crises in every sense that we can possibly imagine: environmentally, socially, politically, and spiritually.

Thus, there is an immense need for a holistic solution that can address many of the world's crises. Since the majority of the man-made crises are created by the human mind, the only solution is to educate the mind. This article aims to inform and provoke policy makers to think of alternative approaches to educating the mind by introducing Buddhist education that is relevant to the times we are living in.

Purpose of Life

The natural state of the mind is pure consciousness which is the Buddha nature that is intrinsic to all beings. The Buddha said that happiness is intrinsic in nature and suffering is purely our creation - it does not exist if we do not create it. So we should turn inwards and shut down the manufacturing unit of suffering. For most of us life revolves around our jobs, our families, our businesses, status, authority, power, careers, wealth, and how to win. In the process we forget the very reason for our existence. The purpose is to live a full life, not a life filled with stress and discord.

Purpose of Education

Educationists, social scientists, and thinkers from all religions and belief systems are beginning to see that there is a need to re-evaluate the very purpose of education. Different societies have defined the purpose of education in various ways but the general consensus seems to be to broaden the horizons of human perception and “to bring people to as full a realisation as possible of what it is to be a human being.”¹

Ironically, education is largely seen as an avenue to facilitate the capacity to climb up the socio-economic ladder, whether or not we produce sensible, conscious, and joyful individuals. When indicators of success in education are purely mundane, limited and exclusive, our emphasis will naturally be towards fulfilling those conditions. As a result, the growth of other dimensions of the human experience is totally ignored. We are producing graduates to fit into the economic engine that we have created. Moreover, we are teaching them the skills to compete with each other because we have created the idea that they will not reach their full potential unless they are in competition with others instead of teaching them the tools and skills to be inclusive. It is always about “you versus me.” The question is how and when to develop cognitive and other life skills in our learners. Perhaps the most holistic and effective way is by inculcating mindfulness and self-awareness in every student as the foundation to all other aspects of human development. This is what the Buddha’s teachings have stressed over thousands of years.

¹Arthur W. Foshay, “The Curriculum Matrix: Transcendence and Mathematics,” *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 1991

What is Humanity Really Suffering From?

To find a holistic solution to human problems, we must first identify what the world is suffering from today. If we reflect deeper into the nature of our problems, whether it is the natural calamities triggered by climate change or human activities such as terrorism, war and crime, they are all manifestations of the human mind. We are either suffering from the expressions of our human minds (terrorism, war, crime, etc), or are suffering in our own minds (afflictive emotions). Fundamentally, our suffering is our creation because if we spend the whole day filled with negative emotions such as anger, irritation, agitation, frustration, stress, depression, hatred, jealousy, grudge, or animosity, we live in a disturbed state of mind. The Buddha said that the primary source of most human suffering is our afflictive negative emotions and thoughts, irrespective of our race, nationality, power, status, religion, belief systems, and educational background.

What can 21st Century Buddhist Education be?

Post 21st century education should be relevant to the times we live in, especially with the arrival of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML). Education, in the form of accumulating information and reproducing it without spiritual intelligence,² will become irrelevant. Therefore, humanity should strive to focus on things that only human beings can do, such as developing individuals who have love and compassion. And the pedagogy to teach and learn should be on the basis of first person enquiry which is explorative, investigative, and contemplative in nature so that learning is not just a transaction of information but is a continuous experiential and transformational process.

One of the most effective ways to make holistic education accessible and relevant to the masses is to impart skills that ensure peace and happiness that align with success in work and business. If we are able to use the skills of happiness in all aspects of life, especially in the economic process, family life, material success, we will be able to do the same things joyfully. The purpose of Buddhism is to create a heightened level of awareness in every human being to end suffering and ensure the continuity of happiness from within, without any input from outside. Only when one is happy and joyful from within is one able to access greater possibilities in life

²Holistic understanding of human needs in terms of need of the mind as well as the body and fulfilling them accordingly.

and Buddhism offers that opportunity in a myriad ways. When we hear the term Buddhism, the first thing that comes to our minds is “religion,” and people tend to think it is a belief system like any other religion. But Buddhism is essentially an educational training system that facilitates the transformation of human civilisation that leads to excellence and well-being. The following are some of the basic Buddhist teachings that are relevant to students of the 21st century:

- Spiritual Intelligence: Understanding Human Needs;
- Loving Kindness: the First Baby Step;
- Identification of Primary and Secondary Causes of Happiness;
- Mindfulness and Consciousness: Tools for Managing the Mind;
- Identity: The Basis of all Human Doings;
- Mindful of Our Mortal Nature; and
- Assessment: Looking for Success Indicators.

Spiritual Intelligence: Understanding Human Needs

Spiritual Intelligence is fundamentally about the understanding of human well-being. One of the effective ways to understand human well-being is by understanding true human needs. The body is a material unit that coexists in perfect harmony with the mind which is a consciousness unit. The needs are physical: wealth, property, transport, housing, clothes, equipment, food, water, air etc. Therefore, as long as we have a body we need business, industry, and technology to produce and maintain these needs. The other dimension of life is happiness, joy, peace and exuberance, which are beyond mere survival. True happiness and joy is possible only through feelings of love, compassion, respect, devotion, reverence, etc.

The quality of life is not decided by what car we drive, or by our bank balance, or by how big a house we live in. Rather, it is determined by how peaceful and joyful our experience of life is. So our ability to distinguish the separate needs of our body and mind is the very foundation of our well-being. We are also able to see that if the primary causes of happiness (love and compassion) are sustained, then happiness is also sustained even if our wealth is limited. In order to fulfill those needs one has to employ a higher order of intelligence which is beyond one’s sensory perceptions. This is what spiritual intelligence means: intelligence that explores within.

Loving-kindness: the First Step

Love and compassion are essential tools for human happiness. Even for social order and enlightenment, love and compassion are the key requisites. One needs to develop a thought process which goes, “I want to make the other person happy”, whoever that person is. When you think of making someone happy it already makes you feel good. When this intention is deliberate there is a subtle change in our mannerisms and behaviour. To cultivate this loving kindness, we need to train our minds to always think of making the other person happy. First, start the day by aspiring to make two people happy, then three people, four people, then gradually 10, 20, and eventually anyone you meet that day. This is the Boddhichitta mind - what we think is what we feel, and what we feel is what we do and this can make a difference in the world.

Identification of Primary and Secondary Causes of Happiness

Many of us know that suffering comes essentially from our pursuit of happiness that is based on material well-being. But the understanding of well-being differs from person to person for some, well-being means one's own happiness, while for others it is their family, community, society, nation, and for a few, it is inclusive and all-encompassing - everyone and everything on the planet. Therefore, it is important to understand what the primary and secondary causes of happiness are. Sensual pleasures - the secondary causes of happiness - will either lead to discomfort or lead to more craving. Therefore, pleasantness derived from the outside or from material things is, in many ways, limited, and temporary, misleading and deceiving because it is not capable of creating lasting happiness, even though it may appear so initially.

Mindfulness and Consciousness: Tools for Managing the Mind

Mindfulness means to be mindful of whatever we are doing so that we do not suffer and, at the same time, we create pleasantness within. When we are happy, we are more forgiving than when we are agitated. So mindfulness is observing the activity of the mind to detect any afflictive emotions and be conscious that when we create any negative thoughts or emotions, we suffer. We become mindful of our physical actions: we will not engage

in any misconduct that would bring unpleasantness to ourselves and the people around us. A conscious mind may, depending upon one's culture and convenience, choose to recite aspirational prayers or chant mantras as a mechanism for inner transformation. When this happens, calmness and peace becomes the way our mind rests. So our education should include training in the skills to become more mindful and conscious.

Identity: the Basis of All Human Doings

One of the core Buddhist tenets is ego-less-ness or selflessness or anaathma. It is about identity. How we identify ourselves. Today, modern education places so much emphasis on material well-being and the notion of success being about me and mine and limiting our identity to ourselves or our family, our religion, and our race. In a world where human beings are empowered with technology, such divisions can be even more disastrous.

In contrast, Buddhism teaches us to identify ourselves with all sentient beings. The concept of universal brotherhood and sisterhood, and the Boddhichitta, encourages us to be inclusive - foster positive feelings in relationships, embrace – express these feelings through one's behaviour, and engage – relate to others with love, compassion and respect. Therefore, if the leaders of affluent nations, with all their economic, political, ideological and technological power, would become a bit more inclusive and embrace the world with love, they have the potential to transform the world into a better place. Instead of investing heavily in warfare, military exercises, exploitative business regimes or unfair power equations, they could invest in education.

Similarly, resource depletion and pollution are also the result of our limited identity. Thinking that nature is an inexhaustible source solely meant for human consumption, has led to excessive and mindless exploitation and a wanton mastery over nature. A sensible person is able to see that he does not exist in isolation and, therefore, he should identify himself with everything around him: the trees and mountains; the rivers and the sky, the moon and the solar system; and the galaxy and space.

He will look at everything as his lifeline and see that nature is our golden goose and not harm her. This is one of the values that should be inculcated in children from a young age. Identity is also trainable.

Mindful of Our Mortal Nature

Awareness of life's impermanence is a fundamental value in Buddhism and Bhutanese culture. We know that our body comes with an expiry date but, unlike goods in the store, the exact date of expiry is unknown. It follows that we should treasure every moment of life and make it as meaningful, productive, and dynamic as possible and not squander it on doing unwholesome things. The awareness of the preciousness of life and the imminence of death ought to be part of a child's holistic education that fosters an understanding and appreciation for life, and where skills and abilities are developed to live that life in a constructive and natural way.

Assessment: Looking for Success Indicators

Behaviour is a natural, outward expression of a person's inner thoughts, emotions, and values. Therefore, the observation of behavioural patterns would give us a measure of those expressed values. In the classroom, teachers could assess the behaviour of their students by observing their interactions with others and taking note of any significant variations to the norm. If anything unusual should happen, the teacher could talk to students about the experience and relate it to their behavioural patterns, thus making them more mindful and aware of their experience.

Another method of gauging the values and inner thoughts of the students could also be through journal writing, essay assignments or speaking in class about their daily activities, highlights of their day, pleasant experiences or incidents that triggered negative emotions such as anger, hatred, jealousy, etc, with a focus on what they had gained from the encounters. Taking time to reflect is part of experiential learning. This exercise in mindfulness will help the students understand that their lives are largely determined by their experience and not necessarily by what they do.

Conclusion

The most desirable outcome of education is the creation of a conscious and sensible human being. However, the tragedy with modern education is that we produce highly competitive graduates who know a lot about their discipline and the world, but have little or no knowledge about self and life. The most important part of education - human transformation - is neither taught nor demonstrated.

Human success is all about the progressive realisation of knowing who we are and the ability to love and have compassion and be joyful and exuberant within ourselves without any physical input from outside. As a real definition of success, 21st century education should ensure that this is taught. Children should be instructed and given the skills to collaborate and live together harmoniously rather than compete with each other. Love, compassion and respect should be extensively used as efficacious instruments instead of aggression and competitiveness in all facets of life. The measure of success of an education should be the student's ability to be joyful, conscious, and mindful human beings.

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