

(Draft copy. Not for citation)

International Buddhist Conference on
**Promotion, Protection & Preservation of
Buddhist Culture and Heritage**

Organised jointly by
The Government of Nepal,
Sitagu International Buddhist Academy and
Theravada Buddhist Academy of Nepal

at Lumbini Sacred Garden, Nepal
15-18 November 2014

A Keynote Speech
on
Buddhist Education System

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Abstract

The core of Buddhist practice is indeed a systematic education. Buddhist monasteries played a prominent role in disseminating both religious and secular education. In fact, two of the most important contributions Buddhism made to premodern society were the establishment of educational facilities and the improvement of literacy. Buddhism plays a great role in designing the traditional educational infrastructures and the positive attitudes of Buddhist societies toward learning, writing, memorizing, and preserving traditional sources of knowledge. Accordingly, Buddhism owns the oldest collections of Canon in a large number compare to other world religions.

Buddhist preaching halls have historically functioned as sites for disseminating education related to religious matters, morality, good conduct, and healthy habits. Within traditional Buddhist education, “preaching the doctrine” (*dhammadesanā*) developed the act of teaching, while “listening to the doctrine” (*dhammasavana*) functioned as a form of learning. In this context, “doctrinal discussion” (*dhammasākacchā*) paved the way for those seeking clarification on what they heard in the sermons which led to evaluation and analysis of the Buddha’s teachings in a more intellectual fashion that included monastic debates, scholastic disputes, and exegetical treatises. These Buddhist learning strategies strengthened critical awareness within Buddhist learners.

In a traditional monastic education system, teachers met with students individually, and helped them complete set tasks. In the traditional Buddhist education system, students had ample opportunity for self-learning through the use of Buddhist texts and other learning resources. Not surprisingly, the traditional monastic curriculum focused on Buddhist themes and was heavily religious in nature, but in later development it provides a well-rounded education. Although the traditional Buddhist curriculum included training on morals and etiquette, it did not provide the knowledge and skills necessary for the more complex lifestyle of modern times. Through the ages, Buddhist education system has developed and transformed to provide students with a broader education in science and technology, which became a requirement of modern secular society.

In the 21st century, Buddhist education has stepped out to a wider world in a spirit of non-sectarian tolerance, multi-disciplinary and with scientific research and communication. In many cases it has transformed from a sacred education to a secular available for all. These days it is not surprising to witness Buddhist education in alienated field of study like medical schools, physics, sciences, astronauts and even digital technologies etc. This paper is a reflection of these Buddhist education systems, which had developed from a premodern monastic education to modern Buddhist education, and recent development of postmodern Buddhist education system.

Introduction

Let me begin by thanking the Most Venerable Sayadaw Dr. Nyanissara of Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, All Nepal Bhikshu Mahasangha and the Government of Nepal for organising this very important conference and for doing me the honour of inviting me to deliver to you a keynote address on Buddhist Education System. This conference is unique in its kind. This might be the first time that we are bridging sacred, secular and academic aspect of Lumbini on the same platform. We have world renowned UNESCO affiliated Lumbini archaeologists, UNEP affiliated Climate Change expertise and Buddhist monastics and esteemed Buddhist scholars of multi disciplinary on the same platform working for the same goal of promoting, protecting and preserving Buddhist culture and heritage in a broader sense and particularly about Lumbini, the sacred birthplace of the Buddha.

First of all I should say that this is my third presentation I deliver in this sacred land of Lumbini for international Buddhist conferences. In 2001, the government of Nepal organised an international Buddhist conference in Lumbini Sacred Garden, the birthplace of the Buddha under the theme of 'Lumbini in the New Millennium' and asked me to present a theme paper on 'Youth in Buddhism.' Later in 2004, amidst the political turmoil of Nepal, the government of Nepal and Lumbini Development Trust again organised the World Buddhist Summit under the theme of 'Lumbini: a Symbol of Unity in Diversity – the Fountain of World Peace' and asked me to present a theme paper on 'Indispensability of Peace in the Present World Context.' And after a long gap of 10 years I am standing here again in front of you to deliver yet another keynote speech on Buddhist Education System. In fact, when I looked through my old papers I could see that I have been emphasising the important of Buddhist education system from my first paper onward. I am delighted that today I am talking on the subject which have been working unconsciously within my head for years in this very sacred garden of the Buddha's birth place.

Education verses Buddhist education

I wonder if we have ever asked ourselves what education means. Why do we go to school, why do we learn various subjects, why do we pass examinations and compete with each other for better grades? What does this so-called education mean and what is it all about?

This is really a very important question, not only for the students, but also for the parents, for the teachers and for everyone who loves this Earth. Why do we go through the struggle to be educated? Is it merely in order to pass some examinations and get a job? Or is it the function of education to prepare us while we are young to understand the whole process of life? Having a job and earning one's livelihood is necessary but is that all? Are we being educated only for that?

Surely, life is not merely a job, an occupation and money; life is something extraordinarily wide and profound, it is a great mystery, a vast realm in which we function as human beings. As a human we can just sit and do nothing or we can educate ourselves and transform our perception, society and the whole world.

So, whether we are teachers or students, is it not important to ask ourselves why we are educating or being educated? And what does life mean? Is not life an extraordinary thing?

The birds, the flowers, the flourishing trees, the heavens, the stars, the rivers and the fish therein, all this is life. Life is the poor and the rich; life is the constant battle between groups, races and nations; life is meditation; life is what we call religion, and it is also the subtle, hidden things of the mind: the envies, the ambitions, the passions, the fears, fulfilments and anxieties. All this and much more is life.

But we generally prepare ourselves to understand only one small corner of it. If he is a Buddhist monk he passes the exams, become a teacher, become sangha administrator, build temples and that is considered a successful life of monk. In case of lay, we pass certain examinations, find a job, get married, have children, and then become more and more like machines. We remain fearful, anxious, frightened of life. So, is it the function of education to help us understand the whole process of life, or is it merely to prepare us for a vocation, for the best job we can get?

What is going to happen to all of us when we grow to be men and women or even a venerable monk? Have you ever asked yourselves what you are going to do when you grow up?

In all likelihood in case of a monk you will build the temple, you might have many disciples, and you end up with running a temple. In other words, you become homeless to run a temple! In case of a lay, you will get married and, before you know where you are, you will be mothers and fathers; and you will then be tied to a job, or to the kitchen, in which you will gradually wither away. Is that all that your life is going to be? Have you ever asked yourselves this question? Should you not ask it? If your family is wealthy you may have a fairly good position already assured, your father may give you a comfortable job, or you may get richly married; but there also you will decay, deteriorate. Do you see?

Surely, education has no meaning unless it helps you to understand the vast expanse of life with all its subtleties, with its extraordinary beauty, its sorrows and joys. You may earn degrees, you may have a series of letters after your name and land a very good job; but then what? What is the point of it all if, in the process, your mind becomes dull, weary, stupid?

So, while you are able, must you not seek to find out what life is all about? And is it not the true function of education to cultivate in you the intelligence which will try to find the answer to all these problems?

Do you know what intelligence is? It is the capacity, surely, to think freely without fear, without a formula, so that you begin to discover for yourself what is real, what is true; but if you are frightened you will never be intelligent.

Any form of ambition, spiritual or mundane, breeds anxiety, fear; therefore ambition does not help to bring about a mind that is clear, simple, direct, and hence intelligent.

You know, it is really very important while you are young to live in an environment in which there is no fear. Most of us, as we grow older, become frightened; we are afraid of living, afraid of losing a job, afraid of tradition, afraid of what the neighbours, or what the wife or husband would say, afraid of death.

Most of us have fear in one form or another; and where there is fear there is no intelligence. And is it not possible for all of us, while we are able, to be in an environment where there is no fear but rather an atmosphere of freedom – freedom, not just to do what we like, but to understand the whole process of living?

Life is really very beautiful, it is not this ugly thing that we have made of it; and you can appreciate its richness, its depth, its extraordinary loveliness only when you revolt against everything – against the present rotten society – so that you as a human being find out for yourself what is true. Not to imitate but to discover – that is education, is it not?

It is very easy to conform to what your society or your parents and teachers tell you. That is a safe and easy way of existing; but that is not living, because in it there is fear, decay, death. Do remember that the fear is in fact an acronym of False Evidence Appearing Real (F.E.A.R.)! To live is to find out for yourself what is true, and you can do this only when there is freedom, when there is continuous revolution inwardly, within yourself i.e. *vipassanā*.

In another words, to put this in a Buddhist term is indeed to attain Buddhahood, to become the Awakened One to the noble truth. Therefore, when we contemplate Buddhism in essence we could see that the whole process in Buddhism to be a *sekkha* or to be an educated one. Therefore, education is the most important aspect of Buddhism. Particularly, Buddhist education leads to change or transformation of a person from ordinary persons (*puthujjana*) to a better person (*kalyanajana*) and to training person (*sekha puggala*) to the Noble ones (*ariya puggala*) or the fully trained person (*asekha puggala*). Enlightenment is the ultimate goal of Life. The Person who has attained Enlightenment is called a Buddha or an Enlightened One. So through Buddhist Education has one reached Summon Bonum of Buddhism.

I can affirm that Buddhism as a whole is the perfect educational system in itself. It has its own philosophy of education, its systematic curriculum, its contents or subject matters to learn; its elaborate methodology of learning; its clear sequence of its achievement and the criteria for the evaluation of the achievement.

Etymologically, in Pali the term education is *sikkhā* which is made up from *sayam+ikkha* = self-seeing or understanding; *saha+ikkha* = communal understanding; or *sayam (samma)+ikkha* = right seeing or understanding. Therefore, education or *sikkhā* in Buddhism means learning or experiencing things through self-seeing or seeing together which are conducive to righteousness and humanity.

In English 'education' is derived from Latin words 'Educare' and 'e'+ 'duco'. The term 'educare' means to bring up, to rise, and to nourish, to train or mold. 'E+duco,' on the other hand, the term 'E' means 'out of' and 'duco' means 'to lead.' Education, therefore, is to bring out or lead out true humanity into life which is exactly what Buddhist education all about.

Buddhist Education System

From a perspective of Buddhism, Buddhist education system is unlike any other system. Buddhist education is aiming for opening one's eyes i.e. people's wisdom which can make them see light by themselves. Teacher works only as a guide showing the path and arrange all information in a systematic form. Knowledge is something a learner gets from source of information with a deep contemplation within a framework and extends to a wider till he ends up at true knowledge and finally see the true light in the subject he never had heard and never learned from anybody or any sources. It will be a totally a new idea, the wisdom.

The *paññā* or wisdom is the crown and pinnacle of the entire system of Buddhist education, and all the preliminary steps in a Buddhist educational system should be geared toward the flowering of this supreme virtue. It is with this step that education reaches completion, that it becomes illumination in the truest and deepest sense, as exclaimed by the Buddha on the night of his Awakening: "There arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and light."

Buddhist education system, therefore, is not kind of the traditional education. However, some tradition may uses as a data but it is not considered as knowledge. This is truly different from Brahmanic education of *veda* which is limited to a certain caste and memorization of the texts alone.

To educate one still needs to rely on data but owning massive data does not guarantee the knowledge. He could have less knowledge or none of it. His brain might be cluttered fully with memories. The stored data become too much and not helpful at all. Therefore, the Buddha once said in the Alagaddupama sutta that 'theoretical education (*pariyatti*) is a poisonous snake.' The Buddha has mentioned a danger of wrong education system in the Alagaddupama sutta as follows:

1. One does not wisely examine the purpose of education one thoroughly has studied
2. Untrue knowledge will not yield insight and cannot be proven
3. One uses education only to criticize or for refuting others in disputation
4. One grasped on the wrong knowledge and accordingly will bring harm and suffering for himself and other for a long time.

For a note, if we ponder on the current education system in the world, we can see that most educational institutions are producing more poisonous snakes as most graduates misuse obtained knowledge and wisdom for their own sake regardless of others. Therefore, the Buddha said: ‘Wrong education lead to harm and suffering for a long time just like catching a poisonous snake wrongly he would be bitten by the snake to death.’ In other word, wrong education can be danger for our society.

The Buddha classified education into three levels:

1. *Saccānurakkhana*: maintain theoretical truth as one has studied (*pariyatti*). This is the knowledge one gains from listening, studying from others or based on theories (*sutāmayapaññā*). This knowledge is not good enough to firmly hold on to it. One can simply says I have heard like this.. or the theory goes like this...and so on.
2. *Saccānubodha*: knowledge spring out from contemplation and analysis based theories (*cintāmayapaññā*). This leads to investigation whether the theory really works or not.
3. *Saccānupatti*: ability to develop new idea, new action, and innovate new inventions (*bhāvanāmayapaññā*) to a success.

The development of Buddhist education, therefore, needs to achieve the third level of education proposed by the Buddha as much as possible. This is a heavy and challenging task for all educational institutions both monastic and secular. Unfortunately, most of our education system these days has a nature of a factory-model education. The factory model of education reflects the idea that schools were originally built to train future factory workers during the industrial revolution. The belief was “the back door of the school lead to the front door of the factory,” and students should only be taught the essential skills required to become a successful factory worker. Many educators believe the education system is based on the factory model of education and limits the potential of many students. However, this system is difficult to shift and the introduction of technology has begun changing the entire education system.

The characteristic of existing Buddhist education system is not that different from a secular factory-model education. In many Buddhist countries we produce abundant Buddhist graduates with Tripitakacharyas, Dhammacharyas, Pali IXs, Geshees and even doctorates in Buddhist studies and Buddhology. The question still lies are we educating our students with the type of education the Buddha wanted us to be obtained?

In the 21st century, Buddhism has transformed itself into a global source of education. For example, it is very clear from a three-year academic conference of International Association of Buddhist Studies (founded in 1976). The IABS is a learned society dedicated to promoting and supporting scholarship in Buddhist Studies in a spirit of non-sectarian tolerance and with scientific research and communication as preeminent objectives. The IABS’s memberships are scholars of all academic disciplines from universities around the world. Looking at there gathering it is amazing to learn that how Buddhist education has developed in the present world context. It is really noteworthy to see how Buddhism has transformed the world education even in unlikely fields and places of the world. We can simply say that there is no boundaries and field limitation for Buddhist education. Buddhism

has deepened into every field of subject matter from scientific to socio-cultural world and to a way of life of this planet. In many cases, Buddhism has embedded into a certain culture, education and knowledge without carrying a bold label of Buddhism. It has grown not only as a world religion but a source of world civilization. These days Buddhism is seen in a world stage be in the United Nations Organization or the World Economic Forums etc. Buddhism has become a trend set of the modern globalization.

Looking at the existing current Buddhist education system all over the world, we can simply classified it into three categories:

1. Premodern monastic Buddhist education system
2. Modern Buddhist education system, and
3. Postmodern Buddhist education system

1. Premodern monastic Buddhist education system

When we speak about Buddhism and education, we are prone to referring to the past when temples were the center for education and monks were the trainers and teachers in charge of education. This type of reference is a way of showing the value of Buddhism in society, which once really existed. But at the same time, it is like accusing oneself of a kind of negligence because now these values and benefits no longer exist, which can be called a kind of degeneration. Moreover, turning away from the confusion and void of the present and finding amusement and pride in the richness of the past might be viewed as a symptom of people who have run out of hope, who are trying to escape the sorrow of the present by turning to and making references to the past and finding pleasure and fulfillment there. This is not an auspicious thing to do nor a sign of progress that we should be pleased with.

In most Buddhist countries, the premodern monastic Buddhist education system is still operating. It emphasize on educating Buddhist monastics to be an expertise on Buddhist Canon as well as well versed in Buddhist Canonical languages. But question lies with all those degrees and honors where have we achieved according to the five levels of education proposed by the Buddha in the first sermon? When the Buddha said: “There arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and light.”

To put those five levels of education in layman terms I would say that the level of vision (*cakkhu*) is the preliminary education system of mankind. It is a system of education how we obtain knowledge through our senses. The second level of education is the ‘knowledge’ (*ñāna*) itself. Knowledge here means simply validating the memory we stored through our senses when we encounter those subjects. The third level of education is wisdom (*paññā*). With wisdom we are able to see thing as they really are. Not seeing, as we want. Then the fourth level of education, understanding (*vijjā*) is developed. Through understanding we can destroy ignorance (*avijjā*). Finally, the illuminating knowledge (*āloka*) arises which is the characteristic of the Buddha as the Knowing One.

However, I am not proposing that there is a fault in premodern Buddhist education system but I am asking that apart from having a good memory and knowledge of the Buddhist text are we able to present and apply efficiently to modern society and help heal the society? We are proud of great Buddhist scholars who can memorize texts after texts but we always face the problem with applications of those texts in a real life! The good side of the premodern Buddhist education system is that it builds firm faith in Buddhism.

2. Modern Buddhist education system

In the late 19th century, with the introduction of Western education system, many Buddhist countries started modern Buddhist education system in addition to existing premodern

Buddhist education system. The results were modern Buddhist colleges and universities with the design of curriculum similar to secular colleges and universities. Those modern education institutes were aiming to produce graduates who equally gain Canonical knowledge together with modern sciences and technologies. Many Buddhist countries eager to establish modern Buddhist education system and successful in producing large numbers of Buddhist graduates. While many pursue good jobs out of those systems many end up in wrong places. I have personally encountered many Buddhist graduates in prisons!

Therefore, I proposed here a question how do we consider available modern Buddhist education system. Buddhist colleges and universities have produced abundant Buddhist graduates but do those Buddhist graduates transform themselves to be a true Buddhist practitioner? It is worth to think how many outstanding Buddhist graduates and scholars have we produced so far within this century through the modern Buddhist education system!

3. Postmodern Buddhist education system

Parallel to modern Buddhist education system there arose postmodern Buddhist education system particularly in Western context. Therefore, the Buddhist education in the West has largely been due to secularisation. It is seen that in countries where there has been a state religion for a long time, Buddhism has until recently often not been studied from a critical point of view but often just learned as the handing down of a tradition.

Many western scholars, therefore, studied and investigated Buddhism from a pure academic exercise. This led to mushrooming of Buddhist study courses in many leading universities of the world. Buddhism is studied from multi disciplinary approach with critical analysis. Out of this revolution produced many Buddhist scholars and influential Buddhist books. The question lies these new scholars are less grounded in Buddhist faith. Even many Buddhist monastics go through this postmodern Buddhist education system and they are able to deconstruct all Buddhist doctrines impressively but they ended up with no faith in those teachings and not put those teachings in action. These new scholars always see that the major problem with Buddhist education in Buddhist countries is the emphasis on memorization and the lack of emphasis on critical analysis.

In conclusion, premodern Buddhist education system gives firm ground on the Buddhist Canonical texts and memorization but lacks critical analysis and application of those texts in a real life situation. Secondly, modern Buddhist education system tries to balance Buddhist Canonical knowledge with modern scientific education but in reality we are successful in producing only mediocre Buddhist scholars who are not well versed in both fields. The whole purpose of modern Buddhist education ends up as a factory model education. Lastly, postmodern Buddhist education system promotes critical analysis of the Buddhist texts and deconstruction of Buddhist teachings but it ends up in transforming Buddhism to be more of academic subject rather than instruments for personal transformation and final liberation.

Where Buddhist education system should heads to?

Ideally, education is the principal tool of human growth, essential for transforming the unlettered child into a mature and responsible adult. Yet everywhere today, both in the developed world and the developing world, we can see that formal education has become so routinized rather than an adventure in learning. The word “education” literally means, “to bring forth,” which indicates that the true task of this process is to draw forth from the mind its innate potential for understanding. The urge to learn, to know and comprehend is a basic human trait, as intrinsic to our minds as hunger and thirst are to our bodies.

The industrial growth model of society demands that the educational system prepare students to become productive citizens in an economic order governed by the drive to maximize

profits. Such a conception of the aim of education is quite different from that consistent with Buddhist principles. Practical efficiency certainly has its place in Buddhist education, for Buddhism propounds a middle path which recognizes that our loftiest spiritual aspirations depend on a healthy body and a materially secure society. But for Buddhism the practical side of education must be integrated; with other requirements designed to bring the potentialities of human nature to maturity in the way envisioned by the Buddha. Above all, an educational policy guided by Buddhist principles must aim to instill values as much as to impart information. It must be directed, not merely toward developing social and commercial skills, but toward nurturing in the students the seeds of spiritual nobility.

In the modern world of education, it has recognized that to cope with the 21st century problems we need to have 21st century skills which comprise of the three Rs which refers to the foundations of a basic skills-orientated education program within schools: reading, writing and arithmetic together with the 21st century themes; learning and innovation skills of 4Cs: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity; information, media and technology skills; life and career skills.

Following this global development of education, we can see, in fact, that the world is turning to Buddhist education system. Needless to say, the heart of Buddhism is the education itself and simply it can be summarized under Buddhist 3Rs or threefold education viz. *Sīla* (Regulating/Relationship), *Samādhi* (Reflecting), and *Paññā* (Reasoning). In other words, Buddhism is to be proficient in 3Ss i.e. society (*sīla*), self (*samādhi*) and spirituality (*paññā*). This threefold Buddhist education is in fact the practical essence of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. This Buddhist education teaches us how to manoeuvre our lives to be peaceful, prosper and happy in addition to the highly competitive knowledge for today's economic driven society with constructive creativity and social relationship. In other words, it fully answers what the 21st century skills looking for.

Last but not a least, I would like to propose here to rethink of the Lumbini Asokan inscription as a part of Buddhist education among us. I am wondering how correct the translation of Lumbini inscription specially the last sentence where it is said: "...Lumbini village was taxed reduced and entitled to the eight part (only)."

Having studied all existed Asokan inscriptions it is noteworthy to notice that the King Asoka hardly inscribe anything about his political propagandas but mostly encourage people to follow good social norms and practice pragmatic Buddhism. Based on this fact, could it be that King Asoka encouraged '...villagers of Lumbini to follow the Eightfold Noble Path.' If we could provide a good evidence of this new interpretation, this would be a great historical achievement of this international Buddhist conference on promoting, protecting and preservation of Lumbini.