

# Buddhism: Education for a Modern World

By Yung Dong

## ABSTRACT

*In the digital age, the rapid development of advanced technology creates the challenge of complicated changes in life styles, values, behaviors, and work ethics. Because of the fast pace of life and demands of multi-tasking, people are confronted with greater uncertainty. Should the education system be reformed or remain unchanged? During this new era, what is the place of Buddhist thought and practice in the classroom? Can it make any contribution or be integrated with educational curricula?*

*In this paper, I will view the purpose, meaning, method, function, system, organization, and features of Buddhism, concluding with the idea that since its origins, Buddhism has been a system of education, characterized by the systematic teachings of the Buddha.*

## Introduction

Today's society in America and elsewhere in the world is rather abnormal, a phenomenon that has not been witnessed before either in the West or the East. We suffer from the environmental pollution coming from the byproduct of technology and begin to understand the need for protecting our environment. However, the problem of mental or spiritual pollution, raising the environmental pollution, is many times more serious than that of the environment. Therefore, the Taiwanese government precedes its reform of education with effort for few years, however, it is not successful yet. Recently, a university professor wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. He commented that people shouldn't put too much weight on the recently released trends in SRA scores<sup>1</sup> of the state's high school students. The professor went on to describe some of the unanswered questions about the nature and value of assessment. He mentioned that one of the problems with assessment was the ongoing disagreement on the very purpose of education. A few days later, a scathing response was printed from a community member who questioned whether the University really wanted someone on their staff who didn't even know the purpose of education.

As a Buddhist educator, is Buddhism significant to education? How can Buddhism and education be reciprocal nowadays?

## The Educational Meaning of Buddhism

What is the meaning of education? Webster defines education as the process of educating or teaching. *Educate* is further defined as "to develop the knowledge, skill, or character of..." Thus, from these definitions, we might assume that the purpose of education is to develop the knowledge, skill, or character of students. Unfortunately, this definition offers little unless we further define words such as *develop, knowledge, and character*.

What is meant by knowledge? Is it a body of information that exists "out there"—apart from the human thought processes that developed it? However, there is considerable research leading others to believe that knowledge arises in the mind of an

individual when that person interacts with an idea or experience. This is hardly a new argument. In ancient Greece, Socrates argued that education was about drawing out what was already within the student. (The word education comes from the Latin *educere* meaning “to lead out.”)

Buddhism was founded in India 2,500 years ago. In fact, the history of Buddhist propagation is a broad and profound educational history.

1. What is the definition of Buddhism? The Bequeathed Sutra taught by the Buddha says, “Doing all the good, not doing all the evils and purifying your mind is called Buddhism.” Good is that which produces good effect and relieves one of sorrow and stress; evil generates ill effects and prolongs the agony of suffering and stress. The prescription for moral conduct is carefully laid out not as laws or injunctions to be obeyed as a matter of duty or obligation, but as rules or principles of conduct which flow from a theory of reality capable of validation and verification. Buddhism is defined as “the ultimate concern and means of transformation.” Here the word ultimate implies eternal and absolute.
2. Buddhism is the pinnacle of the world’s philosophy and it provides the greatest enjoyment for humanity. Buddhism is a special kind of knowledge which protects us from delusion, thereby obtaining release from suffering.
3. Buddhists practice Buddha Dharma through listening, thinking and experience. In Buddhism, we encourage the person to come, see and experience instead of persuading him/her to convert to a Buddhist. What is education? It is the meaning and the value of human life, the relationships between human beings, the relationships between human beings as well as those between humans and the universe. In accordance with the theory of Buddhist Yogacara School, the whole process of both the universe progressing and the human society evolution is continual, and this continual process is result of seeds that are stored in our Alaya consciousness. The essence of education is the nurture and manifestation of seeds rooted in our consciousness over our numerous previous lives.

### **The Educational Purpose of Buddhism**

(A) “The one real object of education is to leave a man in the condition of continually asking questions.” —Bishop Creighton

“The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think—rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men.” —Bill Beattie

1. The Buddha himself attained enlightenment by thinking how to resolve the problems and stop the suffering of human beings’ birth, sickness, old age and death. Therefore, the Buddha’s teachings are not a cold philosophy designed merely to rearrange the concepts in our minds; they are a living act of compassion intended to show us how to open our hearts to the miracle of awareness—our own awareness among the awareness of others through the same practice thinking and experience.
2. In society today, teachers and parents alike advocate an education of loving speech, of teaching by using kind and gentle words. Oftentimes, Chan masters

do not use words but instruct face to face through silence. Silence, like a thunderclap, is grand and majestic, and louder and richer than language. The students can easily think in silence which helps them find the answer by themselves.

3. The teaching and learning of Chan school traditionally has paid a lot of attention to transmission from teacher to student, and teaching and learning to achieve enlightenment. Chan encourages the students to begin with doubt. A little doubt will lead to a little realization. A great doubt will engender a great realization. Without doubt, there will be no realization. So the Chan master always gives students difficult and tough questions to study. Contemporary education stresses inspiring interest and guiding step by step. But the Chan way emphasizes asking difficult questions and challenging one's wits. As soon as one changes from being passively inspired to actively exploring, then one becomes a master and not a follower.
4. The Chan way stresses that a person should determine things on his/her own, and not be led around by the nose or swayed easily by the opinions of others. Self-realization of intrinsic nature is important. "Without his own soaring determination, a man will not simply copy the way of the Tathagata (Buddha)." This is what characterizes the Chan master's self-realization.

(B) "No one has yet realized the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure."

—Emma Goldman

"The only purpose of education is to teach a student how to live his life by developing his mind and equipping him to deal with reality. The training he needs is theoretical, i.e., conceptual. He has to be taught to think, to understand, to integrate, to prove. He has to be taught the essentials of the knowledge discovered in the past and he has to be equipped to acquire further knowledge by his own effort." —Ayn Rand

"The central job of schools is to maximize the capacity of each student."

—Carol Ann Tomlinson

1. The goal of Buddhist education is to attain wisdom. In Sanskrit, the language of ancient India, the Buddhist wisdom was called "Anuttara-samyak-sambhodi" meaning the perfect ultimate wisdom which can perceive the universal truth and the reality of life. The Buddha taught us that the main objective of our practice or cultivation was to achieve this ultimate wisdom. He further told us that everyone has the potential to realize this state of ultimate wisdom, as it is an intrinsic part of our nature, not something one obtains externally. However, most of us have become confused through general misconceptions and therefore, are not able to realize this potential. Therefore, if we break through this confusion, we will realize this intrinsic part of our nature. Thus, Buddhism is an educational system aimed at regaining our own intrinsic nature. It also teaches absolute equality which stemmed from Buddha's recognition that all sentient beings possess this innate wisdom and nature. There is no inherent difference among beings.
2. The core of Buddha's teaching contains three major points: discipline, meditation and wisdom. Wisdom is the goal and deep meditation or concentration is the crucial process toward achieving wisdom. Discipline

through observing the precepts is the method that helps one to achieve deep meditation; wisdom will then be realized naturally. Buddha's entire teachings as conveyed in the sutras never really depart from these three points. Buddhism encompasses the entire collection of works by Buddha Shakyamuni and is called the Tripitaka. This can be classified into three categories: sutra, vinaya (precepts), and shastra (commentaries) which emphasize meditation, discipline, and wisdom respectively.

3. The aim of Buddhist education is assistance in the attainment of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual freedom. Indeed, the Hua-Yen (Avatamsaka) sutra proclaims that everything is created by mind alone. The self is not an entity or complete unit unto itself but rather a stream of energy (karma) whose elements are constantly changing. Buddha thus conceived an entirely impersonal universe where there is no First Cause or Supreme Creator, only an impersonal process whose ultimate nature can only be viewed as in constant flux. This logic forms the foundation of Buddhism's theory of self-creation, perhaps one of the most unique characteristics. The theory of self-creation plays a very significant role in the structure of Buddhist education because it not only liberates the individual from dependence on outside influences, such as dependence on a supreme being, grace, scriptures, etc., by encouraging direct contact with the true self, or Buddha-nature, but also results in a heightened sense of respect of other beings, as well as their views, because they too possess Buddha-nature. Obviously, this teaching is not only beneficial to the individual, but the mutual respect and tolerance resulting from this attitude are also desirable qualities in a pluralistic society.

(C) "Religious educators must lead people out from the lived experience of their faith."  
—Thomas Groome

"Good education must be cognitive, affective, and behavioral." —Thomas Groome

"The central task of education is to implant a will and facility for learning; it should produce not learned but learning people. The truly human society is a learning society, where grandparents, parents, and children are students." —Eric Hoffer

1. The goal of Buddhist education—whether modern or traditional—is to get the student to this liberated state. The technique, or spiritual prescription, combines three different aspects: faith (belief in Buddha-nature, which involves emotional conviction and joy at the possibility of being released from suffering); understanding (knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures, essentially the Four Noble Truth, which is an intellectual approach to the goal); and practice (application of the Eightfold Path, which involves ethical morality). Faith, understanding, and practice form the basis, or process, of religious education in Buddhism and, interestingly, agree with Thomas Groome's observation that "good education must be cognitive, affective, and behavioral."<sup>2</sup> What Groome refers to as "cognitive" is similar to the Buddhist concept of intellectuality; "affective" can be compared to emotions; and "behavioral" is similar to Buddhist ethical morality.
2. Sakyamuni Buddha established the continuing education system for teachers. Many of his students were well accomplished under his instruction. Every year, these students were assigned to teach at different

places for nine months. During the raining season, all the students would come back to meet with the Buddha to receive additional teachings and to learn from each other in class discussions. This is what we call summer retreat currently. The modern continuing educational system is necessitated by the advancement in technology. However, twenty-five hundred years ago, Buddha had already adopted this idea in bringing his students back for additional teachings.

3. Venerable Master Hsing Yun, the founder of Foguanshan Buddhist community, promotes the comprehensive Buddhist teaching by combining monastery, library, museum, music and architecture at all its worldwide branch temples. There we also can find many multifunctional classrooms, and conference room or meeting rooms.
4. Venerable Master Hsing Yun established Buddha Light International Association to unify all the old and young lay Buddhists to learn and help each other in the family, society and the whole world. And he encourages and trains all the disciples and members to start a book club in each family. Now not only Buddhist monastery is a school, but also all the Buddhist houses are schools.
5. Buddhism is not only a lifelong endeavor, but actually begins while the child is still in the womb. In Buddhist societies, women have traditionally been urged to prepare themselves spiritually for at least one year before becoming pregnant in order to ensure that they will attract a spiritually developed consciousness when conception takes place. Then, during the time of pregnancy, the mother is encouraged to withdraw from worldly influences, be peaceful, pray and purify herself so that the child growing within her will be exposed only to positive influences. This is called education of the child within the womb<sup>3</sup>. For at least three years after birth, Buddhist parents are advised to protect their child from all negative influences, such as anger, bad language, etc.
6. The idea of Pure Land Buddhism is a whole life study and practice program in which the relationship between the Buddha and the disciples can be compared as teacher and student. The students will follow the teacher life by life for attaining the ultimate educational goal. The external environment in the Western Pure Land is the outcome of city plan and environmental protection.
7. The primary goal of Buddhist education is spiritual awakening and ultimate enlightenment. The goal of enlightenment has both spiritual and sociological implications for the individual and the community because the enlightened being no longer experiences any sense of separation from others. Subject and object cease. Because of this oneness, the enlightened man embodies and practices true compassion and wisdom within society. This state, described as "One-Body-Benevolence," is the essence of the Mahayana Humanistic Buddhist Bodhisattva idea, whereby the individual works toward his spiritual liberation while guiding and assisting others along the way with whatever help is required, spiritual or social. In this concept of the religious educator assumes social responsibility as well as spiritual.

The above mentioned quotations demonstrate the diversity of beliefs about the purpose of education. How would you complete the statement, “The purpose of education is...”? If you ask ten of your fellow teachers to complete that sentence, it is likely that you’ll have ten different statements. Some will place the focus on knowledge, some on the teacher, and others on the student. Yet people’s beliefs in the purpose of education lie at the heart of their teaching behaviors. Buddhism not only covers the whole range of diversity of beliefs about the purpose of education, but also trains the teachers very strictly and requires them to have rightful behaviors by observing the precepts.

The purpose of Buddhism is transmission of experience, exploration of potential and providing all the sentient beings (students) the way to self-liberation.

### **The Educational Method of Buddhism**

What is the proper and desirable process and method of Buddhist education for the realization of its goal? As is widely known among Buddhists, the Buddha used various concepts and methods based on the age, class, sex, and occupation of the disciples, just like a doctor prescribes various medicines according to the illness and conditions of the patients. The enormous volume of Buddhist scriptures is partly due to the richness of its contents from the development of its thoughts, and partly due to the diversity of its method. This attitude of the Buddha brought forth various sects in time, which, in turn, developed their own various methods of education. From this we can easily conclude that the Buddhist process and method of education is not fixed but quite resilient. It requires Buddhism to experiment with ever-new approaches to education.

The most representative theories for enlightenment, the goal of the individual in Buddhist education, are the teachings of the Eightfold Path contained in the early sutras and Chan theory in Mahayana Buddhism. The theory of the Four Noble Truth teaches the teachers how to help the students find the problem, its cause and the way to resolve the problem. The theory of the Four all-embracing bodhisattva virtues (giving what others like, affectionate speech, conduct profitable to others and cooperation with and adaptation of oneself to others) shows the teachers how to treat the students skillfully. The theory of the pure land symbolizes the achievement of enlightenment and the purification of society at the same time. The basic research upon these theories has been undertaken with particular attention to the educational task.

No matter what kind of theory, in fact, the indifferent process of Buddhist education has been summarized into what is called “The Three Studies”: 1) moral discipline—keeping the precepts in order to eliminate desire; 2) meditation practice—to eliminate anger; and 3) cultivation of wisdom—to eliminate ignorance. According to the Lotus Sutra, the purpose of the Buddha’s appearance in the world was to reveal truth; to explain the meaning of truth and to help human beings to understand it; and, ultimately, to lead them into nirvana.

The Buddha put stress on the self-education of mind. He ever said, “All the teachings given by the Buddha is to cure the mind; the teachings are in vain without mind.” There are several types of methods used by Buddha to cultivate the disciples’ mind.

1. To provide education for all people without discrimination;
2. To teach without weariness;

3. To use skillful means;
4. To set examples by one's own action;
5. To fight evil with evil;
6. To verify the truth with example;
7. To give compliments to meritorious deeds;
8. To adapt persistently to all sentient beings;
9. To cultivate both bliss and wisdom;
10. To balance between understanding and practice.<sup>4</sup>

All the countless aspects, forms, etc. of the world and natural phenomena are the teaching materials of the Buddha.

### **The Educational Function of Buddhism**

A purpose is the fundamental goal of the process—an end to be achieved. Functions are other outcomes that may occur as a natural result of the process—byproducts or consequences of schooling. For example, some teachers believe that the transmission of knowledge from school to the real world is something that happens naturally as a consequence of possessing that knowledge—a function of education. It is the content of assessments that largely drives education. How is the capacity/ability to think creatively assessed in today's schools? To what extent is the typical student recognized and given respect? How often are students given the opportunity to recognize and evaluate different points of view when multiple choice tests require a single 'correct' answer?

Teachers who hold a more humanistic view of the purpose of education often experience stress because the meaning they assign to education differs greatly from the meaning assigned by society or their institution. It is clear in listening to the language of education that its primary focus is on knowledge and teaching rather than on the learner. Students are expected to conform to schools rather than schools serving the needs of students.

However, Buddhism is concerned with the reformation of society as well as the salvation of the individual? The Buddhist prescriptions for living built around loving-kindness, compassion and generosity pertain to individual as well as social conduct are well documented in the texts. For example, the Discourse on the Admonition to Sigala. The sutra contains a broad spectrum of social relations governing relations between different categories of persons, e.g. parent and children, teachers and pupils, marital relations of husband and wife, friendship relations and the laity and clergy. All of these recognize mutual responsibilities – e.g. parents and children, and recognizes above all that pursuit of individual happiness and welfare is inextricably linked with the welfare of others.

Buddhism has six characteristics of humanism, emphasis on daily life, altruism, joyfulness, timeliness, and universality which lead us to progress ourselves by self-cultivation and reciprocal education anytime and everywhere, in this life and all the future lives.

### **The Educational System of Buddhism**

What is the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings? It is to attain the Perfect, Complete Enlightenment. According to the Mahāyāna point of views, there are three

stages within this enlightenment: "Proper Enlightenment", "Equal and Proper Enlightenment", and "Perfect, Complete Enlightenment".

The Buddha told us, that although scientists, philosophers and religious scholars may have reached a good understanding about life and the universe, this realization is neither complete nor proper. Why? Although they have obtained some understanding, they are far from having freedom from anxiety, from ending their afflictions. They indulge themselves in the Five Poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and doubt. They remain mired in all the troubles of human relationships and are swayed by personal feelings. In other words, they are human.

If a person has severed greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt and afflictions, the Buddha will acknowledge this person as having attained the first level, that of Proper Enlightenment. He or she will be called an Arhat, the initial academic degree in Buddhism. Arhats differ from Buddhas in the way that they use their mind. They use it in the same manner we do. The difference is that we still have afflictions while Arhats do not.

The next higher level of enlightenment is that of Equal and Proper Enlightenment, represented by Bodhisattvas. They resemble Buddhas in motivation but have not yet reached the same level of enlightenment. The minds of Bodhisattvas are genuine; they remain forever unchanged and are similar to those of Buddhas. Buddhas use the full and perfect true heart. Buddhas represent the highest level of enlightenment, which is the Perfect Complete Enlightenment.

These three levels of enlightenment can be compared to our college educational system. The level or degree of Arhat is similar to earning an undergraduate degree. The level of Bodhisattva is similar to earning a Master's degree and the level of Buddha is similar to earning a Doctorate's degree.<sup>5</sup> The word Buddha is not exclusive to Buddha Sakyamuni, but is a common title for any being who has attained the perfect complete enlightenment. Thus, Buddha, Bodhisattva and Arhat are only names or titles to represent the levels of enlightenment or a degree we receive in Buddhism. And they are most certainly not deities to be worshiped.

So, a Buddha is one who has fully comprehended the truth of life and the universe and acquired the ultimate and perfect wisdom. This is also the goal of Buddhist education; to enable beings to attain this same level of wisdom. Therefore, Buddhism is an education of wisdom.

### **The Educational Organization of Buddhism**

Buddhism officially came to China in 67 A.D. The Emperor had sent special envoys to India to invite Buddhist monks to come to China to teach Buddhism, which in that period, was regarded as an educational system, and not as a religion.

The first two monks, who came to China, Moton and Chufarlan, were received by the "Hong-Lu-Si" which is equivalent to our present Foreign Ministry or State Department. "Si" was designated as ministry of the government. The Chief of Hong-Lu-Si is equivalent to a foreign minister or Secretary of State. However, Hong-Lu-Si could only receive foreign guests temporarily. In order to allow them to stay permanently, the Emperor added another ministry, "Bai-Ma-Si," to take charge of Buddhist education.<sup>6</sup> Originally, the "Si" had nothing to do with a temple, but merely



denoted a ministry of the imperial court, now it denotes a temple in contemporary Chinese. “Si” was used for sutra translation other than education.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun says that a monastery is a school which conduct a variety of teaching and educational programs. The abbot/abbess is the principal who takes charge of all the educational administration, projects, facilities and management. Under him, the chair venerable is the dean of the study department, the superintendent is the chair of general service, and the leading master is the dean of department of students.

Every different branch temples of Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Community establishes one or two or even more of the following educational organizations: Kindergartens, Ethnic School or Chinese School, Sunday School, Social School, Buddhist College, and Correspondence School for disciples, Secondary school, Online Buddhist College, Buddhist College and Universities for the purpose of both education and cultivation.

### Conclusion

Today, our education has lost the emphasis on filial piety. Schools only teach skills that are superficial and not the root of education. When the root is rotten, it shakes the foundation of society and causes the chaos that we are experiencing today. Elementary schools are like the root of education: junior highs, high schools, and colleges are the flowers and leaves. Teachers should start teaching filial piety to our children as early as possible.

It is time for the focus of education to shift from what’s “out there—the curriculum, assessments, classroom arrangement, books, computers—to the fundamental assumptions about and definitions of education held by educators and policymakers. NASA did not send men to the moon by building on the chassis of a model T. In the same way, education cannot hope to move beyond its present state on the chassis of 18<sup>th</sup> century education.

Buddhism is an education that will enable us to attain truth, virtue, beauty, wisdom and genuine eternal happiness. Buddhism inspires self-discipline, initiative, compassion, tolerance, giving and so on of both teacher and student. It will be an excellent educational model to the current reform of education system. I sincerely hope that all the schools in America and elsewhere will be open to accept and integrate with Buddhism

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<sup>1</sup> New Jersey Statute and Administrative Code provide for an alternate assessment of twelfth-grade students who have met all graduation requirements except for demonstrating proficiency in all content areas of the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). The Special Review Assessment (SRA) process is the designated alternate assessment for the HSPA. The SRA provides students with the opportunity to show their proficiency of the HSPA knowledge and skills in a familiar setting.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1980), p.21

<sup>3</sup> Norma H. Thompson, *Religious Pluralism and Religious Education* (Religious Press Birmingham, Alabama 1988), p.249

<sup>4</sup> Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Practical Buddhism* (Fo Guang Shan Publisher, Taiwan), p.25

<sup>5</sup> Venerable Chin Kung, *Buddhism: The Wisdom of Compassion And Awakening* (The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Taipei, Taiwan, p.14

<sup>6</sup> Venerable Chin Kung, *Three Merit of Pure Land Practice* (Amitabha Society, Temple City, CA), p.6

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