

## Education and buddhist education

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Culture is largely believed to be among fundamental elements that build up national identity; yet the foundation on which culture is based is education. It is thus obvious that the educational system at a specific time of history is shaped, to some extent, by the philosophy or values of life in that period. It can be seen that the current philosophy of life or the present orientation of culture, whether it be in the East or in the West, would be more or less under the influence or even the outcomes of the following educational philosophies which are in vogue these days.

The very first belief is that universities are where knowledge should be born and spread. With such belief, tertiary education would, on the one hand, be derailed from its core function of instruction and inspiration; and on the other, it would paralyze the learner's cognition and judgement. Krishnamurti has once asserted "Education is not only learning from the books, memorising some facts, but also learning how to look, how to listen to what the books are saying, whether they are saying something true or false. Education is not just

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to pass examination, take a degree and job, get married and settle down, but also to be able to listen to the birds, to see the sky, so see the extraordinary beauty of trees, and the shape of hills, and to feel with them, to be really, directly in touch with them.”<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, it has been largely believed that colleges and universities would be where the prospective workforce of a country is trained and qualified. The function of tertiary education in this model is thus limited to moulding learners to fit certain accepted stereotypes. As a result, learners’ creativity and freedom are restricted and their perception of the values of life diminished.

The third model of tertiary education emphasizes training of the youth’s conducts, spirits and outlook of life while NOT undervaluing individual development. Not every single aspect of a person, however, should be encouraged, for uncontrolled, casual or unilateral development would lead to unbalanced outcomes to individuals as well as to the entire society. It is commonly recognized that education not only aims to teach individuals to think and act independently, but to help them realize their most valuable purpose of life, that is, ‘to be useful to the community.

It is also necessary to be reminded that the crises we are currently concerned are definitely not the outcomes of education, but the consequences of the cultural orientation or the living philosophy. Hence, if we just focus on the social disorders alone and blame these crises on the existing educational system, the symptoms of the problems may be cured, yet their root causes would remain untouched since “a civilization’s style is the expression of its religion and is decided by the quality of the religion on which it is based.”<sup>2</sup>

It is presumably obvious that many problems that raise great concern in today’s world are not the outcomes of the existing education systems but the direct consequences of the [dis]orientation of culture or philosophy of life. Blaming all negative phenomena or social crisis on education would be like giving medical prescription

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1. Krishnamurti, *On Education*, All Indian Press, 1995

2. A. Toynbee - D. Ikeda, *Man Himself Must Choose*

merely based on symptoms while their real cause remains unknown. This reality leads to many assumptions that all current crises take roots from religious foundation originating from “Semitic tradition of Hebrew and Christianity, then spread everywhere where the roots of Western culture, both Greek and Hebrew, considered the aim of life the perfection of man, modern man is concerned with the perfection of things and knowledge of how to make them.”<sup>3</sup> Such cultural orientation has supposedly given birth to the presently popular tendency of living that obsesses a large part of humanity: the ideal happiness comes from the material values and their expected profits people may gain.

It is clear that all means to this end, including educational philosophies, have thus been constantly invented and improved. Arising economic systems and modern technologies to flatter human desire for perfection of material things have magnified material abundance, making this world more prosperous, modern and civilized. The other side of this glamorous coin, however, is an increasing number of ethical, cultural or environmental disasters which have occurred all around the world. The outcomes of these educational modalities can be seen in an unbalanced or inharmonious development of personal traits, contributing to the doomy gloomy panorama, extending from human to natural world, threatening the healthy existence of all species including human beings.

According to Bertrand Russel, “the world has a need of a philosophy, or a religion, which will promote life. But in order to promote life it is necessary to value something than life. Life devoted only to life is animal, without any real human value, in capable of preserving men permanently from weariness and the feeling that all is vanity.”<sup>4</sup> It is, therefore, assumed that the crisis we encounter these days would be the crisis of philosophy of life, hence the disorientation of culture, rather than educational inefficiency alone. The focal point of the current problem, which needs to be thoroughly uncovered, is ‘what is a human being?’ and ‘what is the aim of human life?’ Since human being himself but not anything else is the real masters of his life, his orientation of life would seriously affect, to a large extent, the

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3. Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism*

4. Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction*

stability or imbalance of the entire world. Unfortunately, presently driven by the desire for material perfection, human beings have turned themselves, unnoticed, to be slaves of their own mindset of 'possessing' rather than 'being'. In other words, the current cultural norms have inclined more heavily towards materialism and pragmatism than spiritualism.

Contemporary education systems which highlight career-orientation or specialized knowledge are considered the way to satisfy human desires. Achievements in science and technology, computer science, nuclear industry and others have shown the impacts of this cultural tendency. According to Krishnamurti, however, "the man who knows how to split the atom but has no love in his heart becomes a monster."<sup>5</sup>This is why it is not enough to teach man a specialty. It is because through it he may become a kind of useful machine but not a harmoniously developed personality. He should be taught how to appreciate the beauty and the values also. Otherwise, with his specialized knowledge, he more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person.<sup>6</sup>

An alarming rate of complete insensitivity of individuals to the suffering of other members of humankind around the world could be resulted from this automation or modernization tendency. Countless natural disasters such as droughts, floods and storms, and ice-melting are immeasurable consequences of human lifestyles which overvalue self-indulgence and material comfort. It can be reckoned that the contemporary educational norms have contributed to the imbalance and disharmony of human life, because there are two main aspects in education as it is often thought, viz., cultural and product one. Cultural aspect makes a person grow and productive one makes a person do things.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary education, in this respect, has succeeded in producing material values, yet failed to communicate the meaning and value of cultural and spiritual life, for "the quality of education must be reflected in the quality of life in its value and

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5. Krishnamurti, Education and The Significance of Life

6. Elbert Einstein, Idea and Opinion

7. J C Aggarwal, Theory & Principle of Education

grace.”<sup>8</sup>Under such circumstances, Albert Einstein believes that man needs a new kind of morality to solve this problem.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, people hardly discuss morality without associating it with religion, since ‘a moral life without reference to religion is like a house built upon sand’ and ‘life without religion is incomplete and so is morality as religion and education are natural allies’<sup>10</sup>. But what religion could suggest an educational philosophy that matches today’s social needs? And how to apply that theory to our education is not a simple question. In its principles, the philosophy of a complete education should provide answers to these three fundamental questions: (1) What makes up the nature of a human being? (2) What qualities can an individual obtain through that education system? And (3) What should be done to have such qualified people?<sup>11</sup> My very own belief is that Buddhist education philosophy, particularly its concepts of Dependent Origination and of the Five Groups of Existence, would offer a worthy solution to culturalists and educationalists.

Concerning the nature of human beings, Buddhism points out that a human being is comprised of the five groups (aggregates), i.e. form, sensation, perception, volitional activities and consciousness. In modern words, man is regarded as the combination of physique, emotions, perceptions, intellect, and cognition. These five elements could then be classified into Visible and Invisible, or simply Body and Mind. A true man should have both capabilities developed in harmony. Overemphasis on either respect will probably lead to an unbalanced development of an individual as well as of the society. Should education merely focus on physical development (the Body), the spiritual aspect would be neglected. On the contrary, too much emphasis on the spiritual aspect, and the importance of material world would be underestimated.

It could be concluded from above arguments that the contemporary theories of education expose the mentioned imbalance, where, in

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8. J C Aggarwal, Theory & Principle of Education

9. Elbert Einstein, Idea and Opinion

10. J C Aggarwal, Theory & Principle of Education

11. Thich Chon Thien, A Concept of Personality through the Pancanikaya

the writer's point of view, lies the root of the problem. A theory of education should be considered valuable only if it takes into account the above-mentioned five elements. Education could only help as long as [it provides an environment where] man is trained in all respects. In other words, it should be high time that an idea of Middle Path be considered as an answer to the current problem. The reason for this is that an education system, in its true meaning, should provide complete training, in which the inseparable relation between Body and Mind, the reciprocal relationship between individuals and the community are respected. Buddhist education could meet these criteria as it regards an individual as a whole, not a combination of separate parts. The Buddha asserted, "Consciousness can take its existence with matter as a means, with matter as an object, with matter as a refuge... (similarly as with sensations, perceptions and volitional activities). It is because if anyone says that he can clearly point out the appearance, the going, the disappearance, the arising, the development and the distinction of consciousness from matter, sensations, perceptions and volitional activities, then this is an untruth"<sup>12</sup>. In this sense, there is no 'spiritual entity' existing separately from this physical world. Likewise, a merely physical form of a human being can hardly be considered a complete man. This is the important difference of thought between Buddhism and other religions.

Regarding the second issue on the nature of humankind, Buddhism asserts the supreme status of man in all other beings. Man has capability to become the perfect personality in this life as in the Buddha's prophecy: 'I am the present Buddha and you all the would be Buddhas'. In the status of a man, The Blessed One proved his words to the whole mankind. His Enlightenment opened a new chapter in the history of human ideology, liberating human beings from all forms of slavery, even slavery to supernatural or celestial beings as Robindranath Tagore has once said: "...Lord Buddha has sanctified this life by His embodiment in flesh and blood on earth..."<sup>13</sup>

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Not only a slave to supernatural world, man also becomes a slave

12. Samyutta Nikaya, III

13. Huong Van, A String of Pearls

to his own sensual desires, denying his supreme status and losing his dignity. Sensual desires and his lust to have them satisfied have turned man – the master of the world, into man – a slave to himself and to his material world. Taking an example, if a person hardly keeps control over his emotions at the sight of a beauty, he is dominated by and be a slave to that beauty. A man who makes himself a fool at the sight of a beautiful girl could be under the control of or even a slave to beauty. In the same manner, if a person is driven by lust for wealth, fame, beauty, food, and sleep, he is also dominated by and be a slave to those external forces. Good education should instruct people to realize the quality, meaning and value of life. Buddhist education can help people see the truth about the meaninglessness and risk of sensual desires so as to liberate themselves from craving. Buddhist ultimate goal is the liberation, the enlightenment - i.e. the true freedom". One can be himself and realize the happiness only when he released from all bonds, especially from that of the self (the ego) for "The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self."<sup>14</sup>

The third basic question of education is what to do to have such qualified people we expect. The answer Buddhism offers lies in the forth truth of the Four Noble Truths the Buddha taught after Enlightenment, i.e. the Truth of the path leading to the End of Suffering. This way is also called the Middle Way (Majjhima Patipada) since it goes beyond all extremes and preconceptions which could be the cause of any individual or social troubles. The Middle Way is usually known as the Noble Eightfold Path, consisting of Right View, Right Thoughts, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. The Eightfold Path means the eight factors that form the three focal points in Buddhist education, i.e. Morality (sila), Mental Culture (samadhi) and Wisdom (panna).

Morality or the virtue of moral conducts – Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood – is the principles which lead to peace and happiness for individuals, families and the entire society. These

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14. Elbert Einstein, Ideas and Opinion

three factors can be regarded as the ground for a moral lifestyle. It is impossible to expect a harmonious and stable development for both individual and society without an establishment of moral disciplines. In addition, because Buddhist ethics are based on compassion,<sup>15</sup> they can promote understanding and sympathy among humans, as well as between humans and the rest of their world.

Concentration or The virtue of purified mind – Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration – is to train and provide our mind with tranquility and wisdom in order to respond appropriately to any situation in our life. The power of concentration is attained through total absorption of our mind in one single object, which helps us make the best use of our potential. Without these three factors, no achievement can be obtained. In reality, it is lack of this concentration that people these days easily get angry or become hatred, act.

Wisdom or the virtue of wisdom – Right View and Right Thoughts – is the correct recognition and understanding of the true nature of the surroundings, relating human existence and meaning of life. With wisdom, we can see clearly the nature of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering and the path leading to the end of suffering. Closely linked with liberation and selfless live, wisdom can create happiness for all beings. It should be noticed that such social evil or unwholesomeness as lust, hatred, selfishness, violence and so on are all resulted from a lack of wisdom. This explains why the motto of Vietnam's Buddhist education is "Wisdom is the one and only commitment". However, according to Buddhist philosophy, a human being in its complete sense should have both affection and intellect. Affection speaks the language of heart and feelings while intellect is the voice of brain and knowledge. Missing either of these, man could be uneven or misguided.

More importantly, according to the Law of Dependent Origination, *"When this is, that is. This arising, that arises. When this is not, that is*

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15. In Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha stated: "I appear in the world of the welfare and happiness of the many, of the good, welfare and happiness of gods and men, out of compassion for the world"

*not. This ceasing, that ceases.*"<sup>16</sup> This Buddhist principle offers us a deep understanding about the intertwining relation of individual and his community. In term of Buddhist philosophy, there is no 'I' out of 'We'. Likewise, there is no 'We' without 'I'. As a result, an individual's happiness or misery, stability or crisis correlates with that of the society. Well nourished in such context, the mindset of 'one for all' and 'all for one' would become a foundation of a better world of peace, happiness and sustainable development. The natural environment would be conserved as an irreversible outcomes for the well-being of mankind as well as other species. Main causes of all turmoil in life such as greed, hatred, selfishness, heartlessness and cruelty would be gradually replaced by beautiful qualities like non-greed (generosity), non-hatred (compassion), non-delusion (wisdom), selflessness and altruism. With such philosophy of life or cultural orientation, we would soon be able to control and suppress the epidemic crises currently spreading in all directions and aspects of life.

Being neither religious faith, worshipping, rituals nor a dogma of mere theory and punishment, Buddhism is a righteous way leading to true peace, happiness and freedom through the perfection of morality, wisdom and spirituality. Because of this, in the West, Buddhism is considered 'an Art of Living' rather than/ not a religion. The reason is obvious. Unlike other philosophies and thoughts, the Buddha's teachings are built on the foundation of His own experience but not His mere thinking. This is clearly reflected in the following statement of the Enlightened One: 'I do what I teach, and I teach what I do. So I am called a Tathagata'.<sup>17</sup> It is these practical values of Buddhism that appeal people of the more developed world in the West. This fact is illustrated by the following quotations from Herman Hesse, a famous writer: "...Knowledge from what the Buddha taught is but a half of His contribution. The other half stays in His life, the real life He had...He did complete his self-perfection and taught his disciples the same way. He determined the noblest aim of life and achieved it, which made Western well-known activists take their hats off to Him...The Buddha embodied all the noble qualities that He taught. During His forty five years of lively and successful teaching, He had

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16. Samyutta Nikaya

17. Samyutta Nikaya

demonstrated his words through his actions.”<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, through this presentation, I believe that the philosophy of Buddhist education should be a feasible solution to the problems of our today's world. With the assertion of the mutual relation between physical and mental aspects Buddhist education aims to provide a complete training in which human affection and intellect are developed in good proportion and in harmony. In Buddhist point of view, man should be the master of his own life. Happiness or misery depends on his conducts. If man bases his philosophy of life on the 'self' and the satisfaction of his sensual desires, he will be at once fastened in his selfish and narrow self. The aim of Buddhism is to liberate man from any concept of the self and from any attachment to it. This is the reason why it is declared by the Buddha that He who can be free from the bondage of lust and craving driven by that illusory self is called an Awakened One, a Holy One in real life. The way to attain that goal is the Middle Way, or the Noble Eightfold Path. With a right understading about man, his true values and his purpose of life [his true values and the aim of life man should have], Buddhist education lays a foundation not only for a peaceful and happy life for mankind but also for a sustainable co-existence for all living beings on this planet.

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18. Thich Tri Thu, A. Billings, J C Cleary, Phuong Thuan, Buoc Dau Hoc Phat, Giao Diem, 2002