

An Engaged and Engaging Postgraduate Education: Turning Vision into Reality in Nan Tien Institute

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The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)¹ offer both a call to arm for a better world as well as a challenge for Buddhist Studies. These goals require institutions of higher learning to devote themselves for encouraging inquiry and sensitivity to world issues and encouraging journeys of introspection and cultivation to improve the society in which students belong. As world leaders affirmed their determination

1. During the United Nations General Assembly 2000, world leaders issued the Millennium Declaration that led to the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals to make the world a better place by 2015. The goals are to (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieve universal primary education; (3) promote gender equality and empower women; (4) reduce child mortality; (5) improve maternal health; (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) ensure environmental sustainability; and (8) global partnership for development.

for “just and lasting peace all over the world”² in the Millennium Declaration, religious practitioners teach that peace is best sustained from each individual’s inner peace. Buddhist leaders explain that social change and inner transformation are inseparable.³ Hence, the attainment of the MDGs is a long-term process of education in inner awakening for compassionate involvement, a bodhisattva ideal. Responsibility for such deep education now lies beyond the doors of Buddhist temples and has made its way into higher education.

The Nan Tien Institute (NTI) is Australia’s first accredited university-level institution grounded in applied Buddhist wisdom. It also has the honour of being Australia’s first higher education institute established by a Buddhist order. When it was established in 2010, the founder, Venerable Master Hsing Yun of the international Fo Guang Shan order, gave it a broad vision “to support and inspire learning through the pursuit of research and creative practices. NTI shall contribute to the advancement and integration of knowledge, culture and ethical understanding for the benefit of humanity in an increasingly complex and globally interdependent world.”⁴ Such a vision underlies the development of a unique Applied Buddhist Studies curriculum that is values-based so that individuals may explore the Buddhist philosophy of life and ethical principles.

A postgraduate level education grounded in Buddhist values goes a long way towards helping one be aware of global issues and look for resolutions that begin from changing oneself mindfully, compassionately and wisely. This paper explores the extent to which the Applied Buddhist Studies program in NTI engages and inspires students to think about the society-at-large and how individuals interested in contributing to the MDGs may find the curriculum

2. UN General Assembly, “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly: 55/2 United Nations Millennium Declaration,” September 8, 2000, <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>.

3. Kenneth Kraft, *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 12.

4. Nan Tien Institute, “Vision and Mission,” *Nan Tien Institute*, 2013, http://nantien.edu.au/about_us/vision-and-mission.

rewarding. I will refer to documented learning outcomes and feedback from students. Instead of focussing on the MDGs specifically, I shall look at the broader context stated in the opening paragraph of the Millennium Declaration: that of building a “more peaceful, prosperous and just world.”⁵

From Vision to Start-up: Nan Tien Institute

Before analysing NTI’s curriculum, I shall begin with the founder. Venerable Master Hsing Yun, a monk of Chinese descent, thought of founding universities, newspapers and television stations when he was only a novice monk in his teens.⁶ He grew up amidst the Japanese war, experiencing both destitution and lack of good education. Hence, he set his mind towards eliminating social inequalities, poverty and moral degeneration through education and culture. Not only did Master Hsing Yun found Fo Guang Shan headquartered in Taiwan with 260 branches worldwide, but also five universities, sixteen Buddhist colleges, nine art galleries, 26 libraries and presses, twelve bookstores, one daily newspaper and one television station that broadcasts every day. Here is evidence of the willpower of one Buddhist monk resolved to apply the bodhisattva path in his lifetime to make the world a better place.

In the Year 2000, the local government gave 29 acres of land in Unanderra (New South Wales) to Fo Guang Shan Nan Tien Temple to set up an educational and cultural centre. Master Hsing Yun said the following on 6 October 2007, the day of ground-breaking: “This institute will be named Nan Tien (“Paradise of the South”), students will learn from sages here; on the day Chinese and Australians exchange cultures, multi-ethnic groups will see peace.”⁷⁸ Besides

5. UN General Assembly, “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly: 55/2 United Nations Millennium Declaration.”

6. Venerable Master Hsing Yun, “University Presidents and Me 我與大學校長們,” in *Literature and Education 1* 文教 1, 1st ed., Buddhist Affinities Across 100 Years 百年佛緣 5 (Kaohsiung, Taiwan: Fo Guang Shan, 2013), 134.

7. 「大學命名為南天，青年在此學聖賢；中澳文化交流日，多元種族見太平」

8. Yun, “University Presidents and Me 我與大學校長們,” 162.

financing possibly over A\$60 million in infrastructural development alone, this step by Chinese Buddhists worldwide also forms a healthy foundation for mutual understanding and partnerships between two nations and cultures through education.

Nan Tien Institute was set up to “support and inspire learning through the pursuit of research and creative practice.”⁹ At this stage of its development, the Institute primarily taught postgraduate programs, but it endeavours to strike a balance between research and practice. Without losing sight of the world we live in, the Institute has as its mission the goal of educating students in a context informed by Buddhist wisdom and values. Core Buddhist values identified as relevant to its mission are compassion, creativity, adaptability, flexibility and morality. Cultural understanding and appreciation through the academic study of the arts, education, human welfare, religions and other disciplines will be guided by these core values. It is hoped that graduates will use these core values to steer them through successful and stimulating careers as well as live spiritually rich and mindful lives.

From Start-up to Execution: The Applied Buddhist Studies Program

The philosophy of the Institute, as given by its founder, consists of three parts: learning from sages, Chinese and Australians exchanging cultures as well as peace through mutual understanding and respect. The diagram below demonstrates how the vision and mission of NTI relate to these parts of the Institute’s philosophy, with one colour representing each of the three prongs.

With a vision of academic excellence grounded in practice, the Institute designed its first program, Applied Buddhist Studies, for postgraduate students and opened its doors to the first batch of students in 2011. In 2013, NTI enrolled its 100th student and congratulated its first Master of Arts graduate. Although this program deliberately draws on its Australian context, I shall demonstrate how some of the program’s learning outcomes may also contribute

9. Nan Tien Institute, “Vision and Mission.”

“This institute will be named Nan Tien (southern paradise), students learn how **sages** here; on the day **Australians Chinese and exchange cultures**, multi-ethnic groups will see peace”.

“NTI’s vision is to support and inspire learning and pursuit of **research and creative practice**. It is a place for the **exchange of arts and culture**. NTI contributes to the **advancement and integration of knowledge, culture and ethical understanding** for the benefit of humanity in an increasingly complex and globally interdependent world.”

“NTI’s mission is to educate students in a context **informed by Buddhist wisdom and values**. It facilitates **cultural understanding and appreciation** through the academic study of the arts, education, human welfare, religions, and other disciplines.”

Figure 1: Cascading Goals from Philosophy through Vision to Mission

positively towards the MDGs and the Millennium Declaration.

The Applied Buddhist Studies program offers three tiers of learning: from Graduate Certificate through Graduate Diploma to Master of Arts. The program learning outcomes are: acquisition of advanced knowledge and understanding of Buddhist beliefs and culture; command of analytical and critical skills to evaluate the influence of Buddhism from historical to modern times; application of knowledge to new situations critically, rigorously and independently; and exploration of the philosophy of life and ethical principles founded on Buddhist beliefs and applications.¹⁰ Subjects taught equip

10. Nan Tien Institute, “Applied Buddhist Studies Program,” *Nan Tien Institute*, 2013, <http://www.nantien.edu.au/study/applied-buddhist-studies-program>.

students with social, cultural and international sensitivities so as to enable students to explore ways to apply Buddhist philosophies and ethics towards life situations. The diagram below (Figure 2) uses the same colour coding as Figure 1 to illustrate the links of these learning outcomes to the mission and vision of the Institute.

These program learning outcomes are manifested in subject learning outcomes. The most relevant outcomes for the purpose of

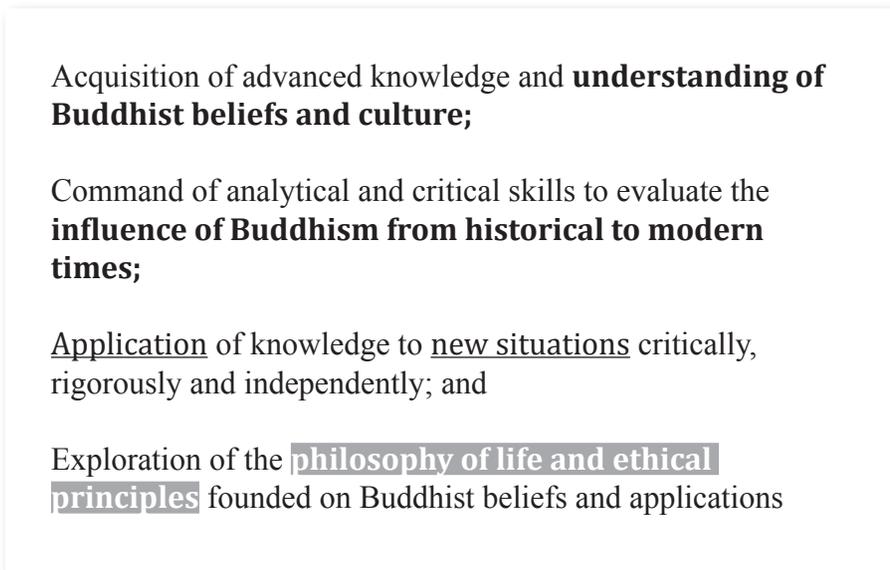


Figure 2: Program Learning Outcomes mapped against the Cascading Goals

this paper relate to the application of knowledge acquired in class to new situations and exploration of ethical principles so that peace can be attained for the benefit of humanity. Chade-Meng Tan in *Search Inside Yourself* claimed that the foundation of world peace was in a world where most people could be happy, at peace and compassionate and that the method for doing so came from contemplative practices such as meditation.¹¹ Interestingly, one of the most popular subjects in the Applied Buddhist Studies program is “Mindfulness: Theory and Practice.” According to the learning outcomes for this subject,

11. Chade-Meng Tan, *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 230–231.

students apply meditation/mindfulness knowledge and skills to contemporary issues and their lives.¹² This was confirmed by at least one student, an emeritus professor, who commented that the class enabled him to realise that “minimising greed and aversion as well as being more compassionate and more concerned about others and less concerned about self”¹³ were what he would take back to his life. I reviewed twelve video clips of students commenting on this subject and found some striking similarity in their feedback. Students indicated that this course helped them both personally and professionally. This class has proven its value towards both inner and external peace building.

In addition to heightened awareness, students in the “Buddhist Ethics” class critically analyse fundamental issues involved in the application of Buddhist ethical principles. Contemporary contexts under discussion include euthanasia, suicide, abortion, war, welfare, conservation, social responsibility, gender issues, and terrorism.¹⁴ These dialogues contribute towards the Millennium Declaration’s efforts against international terrorism, world drug problem, transnational crime,¹⁵ as well as its support for empowerment of women, respect for human rights and sustainable development.¹⁶ Another class that allows for in-depth exploration of similar issues is the “Tradition and Change: Buddhism from its early beginnings to the 21st Century” subject. This comprehensive survey of the spread of Buddhism includes deliberations in diverse topics such as politics, gender issues, society and environment.¹⁷ In both classes, students

12. Nan Tien Institute, “Mindfulness - Theory and Practice (Feb-Mar),” *Nan Tien Institute*, 2013, <http://www.nantien.edu.au/courses/mindfulness-theory-and-practice-feb-mar>.

13. Nan Tien Institute, “Emeritus Professor William Lovegrove,” *Nan Tien Institute*, 2013, http://nantien.edu.au/nti_profiles/emeritus-professor-william-lovegrove.

14. Nan Tien Institute, “Buddhist Ethics,” *Nan Tien Institute*, 2013, <http://www.nantien.edu.au/courses/buddhist-ethics>.

15. UN General Assembly, “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly: 55/2 United Nations Millennium Declaration,” 3.

16. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

17. Nan Tien Institute, “Tradition and Change,” *Nan Tien Institute*, 2013,

acquire a critical understanding of the beliefs, worldviews and practices pertaining to contemporary issues using age-old wisdom. Cultural and historical appreciation also enables students to adopt interdisciplinary perspectives to critically think through these and other contemporary issues for peaceful resolution.

The preceding subjects are only a sample of over twenty on offer in this program. This portfolio reinforces the Institute's vision of integration of knowledge, culture and ethical understanding in the spirit of harmonious east-west exchange. Students have expressed overwhelming accolades for the subjects they attended, from the quality of lecturers to actual benefit derived from the class sessions. In the following sections, I shall highlight some factors that may have led to the success of the program and some remaining challenges ahead.

An Engaged and Engaging Curriculum

Nan Tien Institute's Applied Buddhist Studies curriculum is both engaging and engaged because it applies academic rigour to the study of contemporary issues from a Buddhist perspective. The program is engaging because it encourages the use of contemplative methods for self-education, employs subject coordinators who have field experience in both the east and west, and attracts students from a variety of backgrounds. The program is engaged in nature as subjects chosen are those that combine academic study and relevance to expanding students' philosophy of life and ethical understanding. These aspects align well with the Millennium Declaration and MDGs.

One obvious characteristic of this program lies in its emphasis on contemplative methods such as meditation. Perhaps propelled by an increasing interest in meditation and eastern thought by scientists and healthcare professionals over the past thirty years,¹⁸ many NTI students have requested meditation sessions as part of the class experience. Situated in the serene grounds of Nan Tien Temple, NTI enjoys a distinguishing advantage of a tranquil learning environment

<http://www.nantien.edu.au/courses/tradition-and-change>.

18. Deane H. Shapiro, *Meditation: Self-Regulation Strategy and Altered State of Consciousness* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 3.

suitable for contemplative study. Without losing academic rigour, NTI classes have helped students become more mindful and have enriched their understanding of Buddhism by promoting meditation as a means for self-discovery and self-education (borne out by student feedback available online at <http://www.nantien.edu.au/nti-student-experience>). An experienced high school teacher pursuing the Master of Arts program found the “academic, meditation and environment as the three most attractive parts of the NTI learning environment.”

Subject coordinators (or lecturers) in the Applied Buddhist Studies program are handpicked for their field experiences in both the east and the west. Hence, they are well-equipped to facilitate the exchange and discussion of cultural understanding and appreciation through academic study. Seeing their subject coordinators “walk the talk” was an important reason for students to return to studying in NTI in spite of busy professional and monastic schedules.

The diversity of students and the congregation of like-minded individuals on a quest for a better world, starting from the individual’s mind are another asset of NTI. Students come from a multitude of professional background, from academics, business consultants, IT engineers, therapists, teachers to monastics. They have found the interaction during and after class to be among the best parts of the program.¹⁹ Instead of being in a class restricted to doctors or businessmen discussing Buddhist ethics, NTI allows these doctors and businessmen to meet others from a range of backgrounds to discuss their ideas in a multidisciplinary context. This expands the learning of individuals in a positive manner and encourages graduates to consider interdisciplinary resolutions of real world issues.

The curriculum is highly engaged in nature. Students may choose classes ranging from “Healing Traditions: Buddhism and Psychotherapy,” “Buddhist Art and Contemporary Practice,” “Interfaith Seminar: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue” to “Buddhism and Modern Society,” just to name a few. Many concerned with the future

19. Nan Tien Institute, “Alex Amies,” *Nan Tien Institute*, 2013, http://www.nantien.edu.au/nti_profiles/alex-amies.

of education have lamented the apparent deficiency in encouraging students to reflect deeply on moral values. As a result, manipulative governments, denial of human rights, racism, sexism and child abuse, just to name a few, become worrying global issues.²⁰ To address this problem, the Institute emphasises values, tools and skills to develop knowledge through a process of self-discovery so that students can grow spiritually, emotionally and professionally throughout their lives. Whether health practitioners, psychologists, counsellors, academics, teachers, publishers, librarians, international diplomats, people involved in international aid programs, or Buddhist adherents, students will be able to acquire new perspectives on many pertinent issues in the world, not least living with compassion and wisdom.

Challenges

The Applied Buddhist Studies program has only three years of exposure in Australia. It is too early to tell if graduates can indeed be inspired to contribute towards the MDGs in direct or indirect ways. The program faces several obstacles, namely the unpopularity of value-based education, the inability of an academic program to prove transformation and the lack of relevant projects.

In 1980, the then President of John Hopkins University, Steven Muller, said that higher education's biggest failure was inadequate exposure of students to values.²¹ Many people seek a postgraduate education in order to increase skill levels for the job market. Enrichment has been equated with economic prosperity²² and Buddhist Studies is not likely to be considered a high priority for career prospects. Civic responsibility is also undervalued. Unlike ancient universities that were mostly set up to promote reflective engagement between scholars and contemporary cultures, religions or professions,²³ today's universities do not place as much emphasis on the cultural infrastructure. Instead,

20. Dennis L. Thomson, *Moral Values and Higher Education* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), 12.

21. *Ibid.*, 2.

22. Gordon Graham, *The Institution of Intellectual Values: Realism and Idealism in Higher Education* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2005), 252.

23. *Ibid.*

governments see meeting the needs of the labour market through quality education as the primary goal of higher education, as can be seen from the Australian National Goals for Higher Education.²⁴ The Applied Buddhist Studies program has to position its value-based education against the general educational agenda of the nation.

While there are Australian postgraduate courses in Applied Linguistics (University of Queensland or University of Melbourne), Applied Psychology (Victoria University), Applied Economics (Australian National University) and Applied Statistics (Australian National University or University of Western Australia), there are no other programs in applied Buddhist Studies. To Glatthorn and Jailall, an applied curriculum means making the academic content more career-relevant.²⁵ In this case, it may mean being more industry-oriented than purely academic disciplines. In the case of NTI's Applied Buddhist Studies program, the intention is for students to apply knowledge and skills in life situations, work or personal, and develop a more open attitude. It is difficult to prove to employers that NTI graduates make better employees. However, the Institute can be a meeting point for like-minded people. Based on a study of five American Catholic colleges and universities, the authors found that the majority of staff and students sought out institution whose values fit theirs.²⁶ It is hoped that as the student population gathers critical mass, the Applied Buddhist Studies program can highlight the possibilities of social change that motivated Master Hsing Yun to build universities in the first place.

As a relatively young institute, NTI has not undertaken many

24. The national goals that the Institute aligns itself towards are (1) advancing knowledge and understanding; (2) enabling individuals to learn throughout their lives; (3) meeting the needs of the labour market through quality education; (4) equipping the community with social, cultural and international knowledge, skills and attitudes; (5) contributing to a democratic, equitable and civilised society; and (6) contributing to an improved national economy through high level skills, knowledge and research.

25. Allan A. Glatthorn and Jerry M. Jailall, *The Principal as Curriculum Leader: Shaping What Is Taught and Tested* (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 2008), 14.

26. J. Patrick Murphy, *Visions and Values in Catholic Higher Education* (Kansas City, MO: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 188.

research projects that relate to national and international agendas. Perhaps, NTI can collaborate with its existing partners in the Fo Guang University Consortium or universities in Malaysia, the Philippines and nationally with whom it has signed partnership agreements. Alternatively, it may consider collaboration with well-established and complementary institutions such as Canberra's Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics (CAPPE), a research centre reviewed by the Australian Research Council and affiliated with the University of Melbourne and Charles Stuart University.²⁷ Embarking on projects relating to contemporary issues but using the wisdom of Buddhist sages in solving similar problems in history may be a unique contribution of NTI students.

Conclusion

Piyushi Kotecha, CEO of the Southern African Regional Universities Association, concluded an address on "Interrogating the Role of Higher Education in the Delivery of the MDGs" with an observation that "commitment to the pursuit of the MDGs is essentially a moral imperative that requires a transformative and collaborative mindset." Education can provide that transformative mindset and is vital to the continual support of the less fortunate, even beyond 2015 when the Millennium Development Goals should have materialised. A university curriculum based on Buddhist wisdom and values to nurture responsible and caring global citizens can help to bridge academia and the "real world," so as to inspire its students to seek a purpose larger than the Self and build a "more peaceful, prosperous and just world."

27. "CAPPE. Centre For Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics," *Centre For Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics*, accessed January 19, 2014, <http://www.cappe.edu.au/index.htm>.

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