

Characteristics of Buddhism and Buddhist Education

CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHISM AND BUDDHIST EDUCATION

By Thich Dong Tri – Doan, V. Thua, Ph.D.

“Buddhism is a religion that directly realizes enlightenment, in terms of its characteristics, that philosophy belongs to the philosophy of self-knowledge of wisdom.

Buddhist Education a major that contributes to the curriculum in Education. A valuable scholarly research paper, a consistent combination, and hypothesized to apply in practice: CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHISM AND BUDDHIST EDUCATION.

- Thich Giac Chinh, Chief Editor.

This paper describes my journey as changing myself for teaching Buddhism in a way that moves beyond traditional approaches of transmitting information to students. I describe learning, teaching activities, tools, and methodologies using critical and creative thinking that can be applicable to Buddhist education. I describe some changes towards more interactive mode of teaching and progresses in teaching I have made so far in my teaching for Sunday school for children, in public

teaching, and in giving instructions to groups for Buddhist people.

A Buddhist is not a blind follower, subservient to a super power, but should be a critical and creative person in believing, learning, practicing, and exchanging ideas with others. More than anyone else the teachers in Buddhist schools should be the inspiring agents in inheriting and transmitting the quintessence of Buddhism to help to produce qualified successors and spread the seeds of Wisdom, Compassion, Emancipation of Buddhism widely.

Buddhism has existed for more than 2550 years and spread all over the world. After his enlightenment, the Buddha constantly taught and converted the people to become good Buddhists. His great disciples and Buddhist patriarchs, generation after generation, continue illuminating the Buddha's teachings. Education plays an important role in the propagation of Buddhism, Buddhism is preserved and flourishes over time and space. Through education, the Buddhists understand the Dharma (Buddha's teachings), then practice the Dharma. Education is very essential for the Buddhists to exchanges ideas, inherit the

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Buddha's treasures, cultivate themselves and ultimately to become saints.

There are two kinds of Buddhist education: formal education in forms as learning and teaching Buddhism in schools, classes, academic degree programs, ... and informal education in forms as preachers give lectures to the public, and teach the people in groups or as individuals... In many Asian countries where Buddhism is a major religion there are two types of education: secular education and Buddhist education. In Buddhist system of education there are elementary Buddhist schools, secondary Buddhist schools, intermediate Buddhist schools, Buddhist colleges, Buddhist Institutes for preachers, and Buddhist Universities.

I have observed that there are still weaknesses in learning and teaching Buddhism, especially in Buddhist schools in Asia and Asian American Communities. Having experience with many Buddhist classes I attended, getting contact with some Buddhist schools now, and with Buddhist educators, I find that learning and teaching are not very well conducted in these schools.

In classes, many of the teachers just simply introduce the bibles and scriptures, and the students passively listen the instruction and are told to memorize and

worship the lessons. The teachers have good knowledge and rich experience in Buddhism—they are the experts in Buddhism, no question about that—but the problem is that many of them were not well trained in the field of education; they don't possess many good skills, techniques, methods of teaching. They just conduct one way—information transfer without much interaction in classes. The students are so passive and they are not led to engage in activities good for learning processes. The teachers just care for imparting information and don't care training the students how to think, how to learn. This causes many students to feel bored, tired, or even sleepy. Consequently, the students can't explore all the aspects of Buddhism; they can't get the quintessence of the Buddha's teachings, build up their thinking, and enhance their personal development fully.

A big concern of mine and of all Buddhists is how to learn and teach Buddhism effectively. Indeed, the Buddha was a great critical thinker and creative person. Buddhist followers, practitioners, and preachers should be critical thinkers and creative people to cultivate Buddhism, attain enlightenment, and spread Buddhism widely. The most striking characteristic about the Buddha's teaching is its crystal

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clarity. It combines the beauty of language, profound logic and the facts of lived experience. The Dharma begins with something that is very close to our lives with some similes easy to catch its deep meaning as in Lotus Sutra or in Dhammapada Sutta.

The Buddha carefully consider the hearers' particular backgrounds. He delivered his sermons suitable to the temperaments of his hearers, this method is called as 'upaya-kosalla,' i.e. expedient means. The current words in Indian philosophy and religions at that time were used by the Buddha creatively with new meanings. This is called by T.W.Rhys Davids—a Buddhist scholar and a member of Pali Text Society—as “pouring new wine into the old bottles.” In many cases he described his paths of liberation with analogy of the processes of production in the hearers' careers.

Illustrative approach was also an important and often used approach in his teachings. Analogies, similes, stories and examples drawn from ordinary life were used skillfully to make the sense of teachings clear. For example, in the following tale he described different levels of mankind as different lotuses in a pond:

“As in the case of a blue, red or white lotus pond, some lotuses are born in

*the water, grow in the water, remain immersed in the water, and thrive plunged in the water; some are born in the water, grow in the water and remain on the surface of the water; some others are born in the water, grow in the water and remain emerging out of the water, unstained by the water. Even so, as the Exalted One surveyed the world with His Buddha-Vision, He saw beings with little and much dust in their eyes, with keen and dull intellect, with good and bad characteristics, beings who are easy and difficult to be taught, and few others who, with fear, view evil and a life beyond.”*¹

The Analytical approach was the Buddha's favorite. Whenever he gave a sermon, he elaborated and analyzed all aspects of this sermon as in cases of Amitabha Sutra, Surangama Sutra. In assemblies with a very large audience, in groups of people, or face to face with a particular person, the Buddha taught in the way of having dialogues and conversations with them and helped them step by step

¹ Mahāthera, Venerable Nārada, 1988, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, p.41

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understand deep meanings of the Dharma. With great love, compassion, wisdom, and a variety of teaching skills, the Buddha easily taught and converted a great mass of people. He taught the ways to live the ways to realize and experience truth.

For all the above mentioned reasons, the Buddha has been recognized as one of the greatest Teacher that mankind has ever seen: *“There can be no doubt that the historical Buddha was a great teacher...Even from the viewpoint of present day pedagogy, the Buddha’s methods are interesting and still applicable in many situations”*². The Buddha gives people freedom to exercise their critical thinking and self-judgment. Buddhism allows the followers to observe Truth by themselves and denies blind faith. What can we say or categorize Buddhism not as a system of faith and worship, but rather as a Path to Supreme Enlightenment.

We often see that religions demand total faith and submission of the followers to the supreme authority of God, supernatural powers, and religious founders as an inspired apostle declares, *“And whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of*

*the Lord”*³ Religious followers must believe and act in accordance with God’s words, God’s commandments since God is an Absolute; he is Truth, the Creator: *“God has the right to tell us what to do because He is our Creator”*⁴, *“Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”*⁵

There have always been some conflicts between religion and science. The scientists use [objective approach](#) to measure, calculate, describe, explain, predict phenomena in the world while religious followers rely on beliefs, supernatural authority, revelation, personal experiences to approach the truth and goals. Religion relies on authority from book, tradition, Gods, saints while in science, the authority is in the evidence and reasoning, always opening to challenge. The differences of religion and science are described by Albert Einstein as

“Accordingly, a religious person is devout in the sense that he has no doubt of the significance and loftiness of those superpersonal objects and goals which neither require nor are capable of rational foundation. They exist with the same necessity and matter-of-factness as he himself. In

² Richard A. Gard 1962, New York, George Braziller, Inc, - 1962, p.63

³ [New Testament, Colossians](#), Chapter 3, 3: 17

⁴ Gen. 1:1, 26, 27; Acts 17:24-31

⁵ Ecclesiastes 12:13

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*this sense religion is the age-old endeavor of mankind to become clearly and completely conscious of these values and goals and constantly to strengthen and extend their effect. If one conceives of religion and science according to these definitions then a conflict between them appears impossible. For science can only ascertain what is, but not what should be, and outside of its domain value judgments of all kinds remain necessary. Religion, on the other hand, deals only with evaluations of human thought and action: it cannot justifiably speak of facts and relationships between facts.”*⁶

For these reasons, Peter Atkins (1998) , [Professor](#) of chemistry at Oxford University said: "Science is almost totally incompatible with religion." However, unlike other religions, Buddhism propounded by the Buddha lays emphasis on seeing Truth, on knowing it, and on understanding it, on practice and realization not on blind faith. The Buddhists come to

Buddhism as *Ehi-Passiko*, “come and see”, but not to “come and believe.”

During 49 years of teaching, the Buddha always stressed that all the hearers question, challenge him until they themselves understand and realize the Truth. He himself already tested the doctrines, teachings as human beings and in turns these were for the followers to test for themselves. The Buddha left a great part for the Buddhists to think, act and discharge their responsibilities as he often encouraged: "You yourself must make an effort. The Tathagatas (Buddhas) are only preachers"⁷

They can't totally rely on the Buddha. A Buddhist is not a slave to anything, he learns and practices to be the Master of himself as

“A Buddhist is not a slave to a book or to any person. Nor does he sacrifice his freedom of thought by becoming a follower of the Buddha. He can exercise his own free will and develop his knowledge even to the extent of attaining Buddhahood himself, for all are potential Buddhas “⁸

⁶ Einstein, Albert (1940), "On Science and Religion", Nature, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, p 41

⁷ Dge Dun Chos Phel, 1985, *Dhammapada: Essential Teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha*, India: Dharma Publishing. Chapter XX

⁸ Sri Dhammananda, Venerable K. 1998, *Buddhism in the Eyes of the Intellectuals*, Taiwan: The

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Actually in a strict sense, Buddhism is not a religion. It provides ways of analyzing and solving problems of life, breaking the circle of rebirth and attaining eternal peace and happiness. As Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda remarks: *“Buddhism is the only great religion of the world that is consciously and frankly based on a systematic rational analysis of the problems of life and of the way to its solution.”*⁹ When the Buddha met a person, he gave all teachings particularly necessary for that person to overcome all his own problems, to cultivate in the right Path and perfect himself.

Buddhism has the power to survive the modern challenges posed by scientific progress, the spirit of rational enquiry, and humanistic and atheistic philosophies. The Buddhists are free to investigate into all matters with senses and intellect. We have rights to reject or accept them with logic, analysis and living experience.

To know how the Buddhists establish right belief, we should read Anguttara

Nikaya, Tika Nipata, Mahavagga, Sutta No. 65, [Kalama Sutta](#), the discourse of the Buddha described as *“the Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry.”* This discourse encourages free inquiry that is exempt from blind faith, dogmatism, and intolerance. The story read as follows:

The Buddha once visited a small town called Kesaputta in the kingdom of Kosala. The inhabitants of this town were known by the common name Kalama. When they heard that the Buddha was in their town, the Kalamas paid him a visit, and told him:

‘Sir, there are some recluses and brahmanas who visit Kesaputta. They explain and illumine only their own doctrines, and despise, condemn and spurn others' doctrines. Then come other recluses and brahmanas, and they, too, in their turn, explain and illumine only their own doctrines, and despise and condemn and spurn others' doctrines. But, for us, Sir, we have always doubt and perplexity as to who among these venerable recluses and brahmanas spoke the truth and who spoke falsehood.’

Then the Buddha gave them this advice, unique in the history of religions:

Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, p.21

⁹ Sri Dhammananda, Venerable K. 1998, *Buddhism in the Eyes of the Intellectuals*, Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, p.4

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'Yes, Kalamas, it is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful. Now, look you Kalamas, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea; "this is our teacher". But, O Kalamas, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome (akusala), and wrong, and bad, then give them up... And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome (kusala) and good, then accept them and follow them.'

The Buddha went even further. He allowed his disciples to examine even the Buddha, himself, until the disciples are convinced by the true value of their Master

In Buddhism, we should not accept things because of external authorities, but we must judge them with our reasons. We have a human mind to think, but some people, because of their weaknesses and extreme respect for some external authority,

do not give a chance for that mind to think without bias. The Buddhists are even allowed to examine the Buddha and his words to find the truth and to accept what they consider fit, reasonable and beneficial to them. The Buddha once said that, *"those who believe me but don't understand me spoil me."* The Buddhists believe the Buddha, not because of the authority or out of respect for the Buddha, but because of the justification of his words.

The Buddha often encourages all the people and his followers to listen, then think about his teachings and feel free to question him. There is much room for creation and flexibility in Buddhism. They should accept what they understand, and apply them into their lives fruitfully. So, the way the Buddhists learn and practice Buddhism (dealing with problems of life) is similar to that of the scientists dealing with scientific matters. Sir Edwin Arnold (author of *The Light Of Asia*) stated: *"I have often said, and shall say again and again, that between Buddhism and modern science there exists a close intellectual bond"* (cited in Quotations 2010). Albert Einstein said that:

"The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend personal God and avoid dogma and theology. Covering both the natural and the

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*spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things natural and spiritual as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. If there is any religion that could cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism”*¹⁰

Before entering into Nibbana (great demise), the Buddha left some last words: “some of minor precepts formulated by me can be ignored” (Sutta Nikaya, Vol III, No.2, 23-8-83). This opens up a great extent of flexibility and adaptability in Buddhism. After the Buddha’s Nibbana, Buddhism evolved into many sects of which there are two major ones: the Theravada sect, orthodox sect and the Mahayana sect, liberal sect. A Buddhist can select teachings and precepts best suited to him among a vast treasure left by the Buddha. A monk community must decide to keep certain precepts and ignore other precepts while living in a certain circumstance and environment. A preacher decides how to teach and what to teach to the people in a certain region or country. There are some fundamental things that all the Buddhists

must follow, but there are still many changes and variations in Buddhism during the course of time while it spreads far and wide all over the world.

There are special characteristics of Buddhism in different countries and different ways of teaching and practicing of Buddhism in different countries. The Buddhists bring the spirit of Buddhism into life and develop it to adapt certain living circumstances as D. T. Suzuki rightly remarks:

“It is great mistake to think that any existent religious system was handed down to posterity by its founder as the fully matured product of his mind, and, therefore, that what followers had to do with their religious founder and his teaching was to embrace both the founder and his teaching as sacred heritage—a treasure not to be profaned by the content of their individual spiritual experience. For this view fails to take into consideration what our spiritual life is and petrifies religion to its very core. This static conservatism, however, is always opposed by a progressive party which looks at a religious system from a dynamic point of view... religion is a living

¹⁰ Dukas, Helen and Banesh Hoffman (eds.), 1954, *Albert Einstein, The Human Side*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 21

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force; for they gradually bring it to light the hidden implications of the original faith and enrich it in a manner undreamed of in the beginning.”¹¹

So, Buddhism was found by the Buddha—a great critical and creative Master. This is shown through every thought, word and action of his life. Buddhist patriarchs, from generation to generation, have developed his teachings and introduced them to people from East to West in many different ways. A Buddhist is not a blind follower, subservient to a super power, but should be a critical and creative person in believing, learning, practicing, and exchanging ideas to others. Every Buddhist learns and practices Buddhism creatively according to his own capacity, working and living environment. More than anyone else, the teachers in Buddhist schools should be the inspiring agents in inheriting and transmitting the quintessence of Buddhism that help to produce qualified successors and spread the seeds of Wisdom, Compassion, and Emancipation of Buddhism widely.

Some Significant Definitions of Education

Learning and teaching are very important and continuous processes of a person from birth to death. Therefore, investigation and investment on learning and teaching shall produce the best profits in our lives. Especially, a teacher must know how important his career is, and in order to carry out teaching task satisfactorily, he must be trained in pedagogy and understand the nature, aim and methods of education, learning and teaching.

Of all beings, mankind is the most evolved being. Man is primarily distinguishable from the lower animals because of his educability, intelligence; desire to be active, energetic, original, moving ahead. Education is an important factor deciding progress, achievement, success. Through education man acquires necessary knowledge, skills, promotes his intelligence, and ensures his progress.

The word education is derived from the Latin word “educare” which means “to bring forth.” It was the Latin author Varro who said. “*Educit obstetrix, educat, nutrix, instituit, paedagogus, docet magister*” which means, “*the mid-wife brings forth, the nurse bring up, the*

¹¹ Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, 1973, *Studies in Zen*. Edited by Christmas. Humphreys. New York: Philosophical Library, p 42

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tutor trains, and the master teachers”¹².

Accordingly, education doesn’t merely mean the acquisition of knowledge or experience, but “*it means the development of habits, attributes and skill which help a man to lead a full and worthwhile life*”¹³

Buddhist Education has many great aims: to help people learn about Buddha’s teachings, understand about themselves and the world, perfect themselves, make the best use of life, make themselves the most useful to the society and others, establish good relationship with others, build up an ideal paradise on earth, end all kinds of suffering, guard people living in peace and happiness, realize Buddha’s nature inside themselves, and become Buddhas. Every Buddhist, through many ways, should have good Buddhist education and training to fulfill his religious purposes and make his best living.

(to be continued...)

¹² Panurge, W.A., 2007, *Notes on the Meaning of Education*, April 27, 2007, Victoria, BC, Canada: Calliope Learning, p 47

¹³ Taneja, V.R., 1974, *Educational Thought and Practice*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, [The Clinton Administration Education Program, U.S. Government Document, Goals 2000](#), p. 5.