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Part 6
Learning and religious and meaning systems
Buddhist theory of education

Caroline Brazier and David Brazier

Buddhism is a spiritual tradition founded by the Indian sage, Siddhartha Gotama in the fifth century BCE. It aims to enlighten the mind (Harvey, 1990). Buddhism is concerned, among other things, with character cultivation, both through gradual training and by the precipitation of sudden changes of heart or understanding that reorientate attitudes and behaviour. The creation of schools, colleges, universities and various forms of training community, both monastic and lay, has been a central part of the evolution of Buddhism as an institution.

The purpose of education is development of faculties of human beings … . It sharpens the intellect, improves the grasping power and develops the faculty of discrimination, and true education refines and strengthens the moral fibres and removes the passions and prejudices from one’s mind. It is a source of illumination and power, which transforms and ennobles our nature by the progressive and harmonious development of mental, intellectual and spiritual faculties.

(Barua, 1997; following Altekar, 1934)

The most important questions in the field of education are the ones devoted to helping man see clearly what he ought to be and how he ought to live. It is true that the pursuit of answers to these questions can produce effects of practical benefit, but such benefits remain side effects. At their best learning and education are not stimulated solely by the desire for practical benefits, nor do they adopt such benefits as their goals.

(Ikeda, in Toynbee and Ikeda, 1989: 64)

Elements of Buddhist educational theory

Buddhist education initially developed as a guru–disciple apprenticeship (Lanier, 2001) and then in monastic settings. As such, it had a strong ethical character. Large monasteries such as Nalanda, Valabhai, Vikramsi, Jagaddala and Odantapur were universities (Barua, 1997) and often there was little or no distinction between place of worship and place of education. Thus, Buddhism is a system of education as much as a religion.

‘Of the world’s great religious teachers, the Buddha was probably … the most emphatic in urging his followers to rely upon their own experience and on their own efforts’ (Macy, 1991: 141). For this reason,
a key element in Buddhist education is the quality of the teacher, who does not so much instruct, as inspire. The apprenticeship model has not disappeared. Book learning has its place, but:

...since liberation cannot be obtained by way of books or abstract knowledge but only through experience, the need for a human guru, or spiritual teacher, is of tremendous importance. Only with the help and guidance of another human being can one’s consciousness be awakened and real progress made. But this other human being must be ... far along the path. His conduct, his knowledge, the clarity of his mind, his wisdom and compassion must be such that he can serve not only as a teacher, but as a living example of the enlightened attitude. Gurus cannot transfer their wisdom to the disciples, but ... can touch and move the disciples when they are ready for the teaching.

(Moacanin, 1986: 56)

Here we can see several fundamental points. Education involves a motivational change in the student that is inspired, but not enforced. Timing of educational interventions is crucial. Much that is commonly called education might, from this perspective, be termed pre-education, its purpose being to prepare the student for the point where a truly educational intervention may have fullest impact. Further, much education is actually modelling. Students learn much by example or contagion. The whole process is, however, a spiral: whatever is realised by the student is a pre-education for the next stage. At the same time, nothing is pre-determined and learning is a function of the student’s own process, which can never be fully controlled by the educator.

The teacher

The quality of the teacher is important, but only effects change through the quality of the relationship with the student. Relationship, bridging the self–other divide, is a challenge to solipsism. It is not just an aid or support to learning, but is itself an arena of learning. The respect, self-disarmament, inspiration and dialogue that occur directly change the student.

Intentionality

The student may have to unlearn in order to learn anew. Intention (Keown, 2001: 219–20) or chetana (Sanskrit) is believed to have direct and powerful future effect. Experiences of failure or humiliation may have led people to make private vows or commitments which, though forgotten, impede subsequent learning. Education may need to undo this damage. Conversely, positive commitment creates long-term fruit. Thus, motivational interventions facilitate educational success. In Buddhism, intentionality is seen as the primary factor in creating karma (Watts, 2009), the residual impetus that conditions future activity. Fostering enthusiasm and commitment in the student not only conditions effective learning in the current situation, but also sows seeds for future educational experience.

The primacy of mind

Buddhist educational ideas rest upon a psychological and philosophical understanding of the person and the human situation. As Buddhism has come to the West over the past century and a half, and become popular during the last 50 years, Buddhist educational ideas have had fruitful cross-fertilisation with Western psychology, leading to creative developments in methodology in Buddhist psychology (Brazier C., 2003), as seen for example in mindfulness-based approaches (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and in approaches grounded in Buddhist mind theory (Lati and Napper, 1980), such as the Other-Centred Approach (Brazier C., 2009; Brazier D., 2009). Buddhist educational theory has a strongly psychological basis. 'Mind is the forerunner of
states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they' (Dhammapada, Ch. 1 v.1; see Narada, 1993: 1). The most powerful educator is reality, but reality is always filtered through the mind’s preconceptions.

**Achieving freedom from conditions**

Education is character cultivation: the progressive liberation of character from conditions. All states and changes rest upon ambient or prior conditions, but the range of possibility open to a subject in a given set of conditions is a result of mental cultivation. Perception and understanding are conditioned by past experience, expectations and present situational factors. Limited perception obstructs engagement with life in its raw reality and its higher meaning. Deeper and broader understanding through education gives a person a wider range of freedoms and higher aspirations, and achieving a more direct understanding of the world through embodied experience disrupts preconceptions and out-dated perspectives.

**The non-self perspective**

From the last two sections we see that varying degrees of solipsism – conceit, self-centredness or self-protection – stand as obstacles to learning. Education builds upon the natural curiosity of the child. Ordinary curiosity, however, is not disinterested. It serves personal needs. Buddhism aims to overcome this ipso-centric limitation. It thus comes close to education for its own sake. It not only seeks to minimise self-obsession in order to aid learning but also sees the widening of horizons that learning brings as a means to reduce self-obsession. Education is not so much a matter of drawing out knowledge from within the person, as of helping a person become liberated from their self-centred restrictions and perceive the world more sharply. In this, the relationship with the teacher, with other learners and with the subject matter of enquiry are all routes to transcending restrictive self-conditioned views (Brazier C., 2009c).

**Spiritual maturity**

Buddhism aims to develop the spiritual maturity of individuals and communities. Teachers and learners together cultivate presence and a quality of relating, based upon concentration, awareness and compassionate regard. Thus, the Buddhist community prepares members to function together or individually in altruistic ways that are useful in society (Hanh, 1993) and to seek the spiritual liberation of the group as well as the individual. Delivered in different settings depending on local culture, forms of Buddhist education vary, but the intention is generally both moral and spiritual, the former being seen as derivative from the latter: insight supports mind training, which supports right behaviour. Education lifts a person out of narrow-mindedness into wider horizons, out of defensiveness into altruism, and this change of mind manifests in behaviour. Above all, Buddhism aims toward liberation: the ability of the person to take personal responsibility and live an autonomously conscientious life. Whereas, all too often, ‘the effect of society is not only to funnel fictions into our consciousness, also to prevent the awareness of reality’ (Fromm et al., 1960: 98), the spiritually mature person sees for himself, decides objectively and acts courageously for the common good.

**Moral purpose**

In both the teacher–disciple relationship (Lanier, 2001) and the monastic situation (Barua, 1997) Buddhism manifests a strong ethical character, as demonstrated by the extensive corpus of writings on ethical instruction (Harvey, 2000), including monastic codes, the vinaya, and precepts for laity (Hanh, 1993). Buddhist precepts against killing, theft, sexual misconduct, wrong speech and intoxication are common to most denominations. While Buddhism respects value ethics, it recognises that the practical ethical life is dynamic and
situational and that codes need to be interpreted with wisdom and compassion (Nakasone, 1990). Buddhist ethics are concerned with reducing suffering, but are not narrowly utilitarian. In considering the greatest good of the greatest number, the term ‘good’ does not relate to the indulgence of individual desire, but to the ultimate spiritual liberation of all beings (Shantideva, 1997). These codes or precepts are seen as training devices, and may be taken for life or for limited periods of time. They both represent a model of the ethical life and an education in ethical decision making and recognition of human limitations.

Karma

Karma is the habitual drama of one’s life. Education is an attempt to change habitual scripts and liberate the person from stale repetition into a more vibrant relationship with a world. ‘[C]onsciousness is only a collection of habit patterns . . . we can change and rearrange them’ (Tarthang, 1977: 81). In Buddhism, there is no divine judgement, simply more and less skilful ways to navigate life, transforming adverse circumstances into the spiritual path. The concept of karma underpins individual responsibility and consequential action. Karma is the habitual; in effect, the dead, mechanical aspect of the person. The aim of education is not simply to impart more ‘dead’ material but to so awaken the student that the karmic story becomes a resource rather than a destiny.

Karma is the process whereby action is seen to sow seeds which later ripen, creating a propensity to repetition. Repetition continues until the karmic seeds are exhausted. In other words, until the old pattern of response is averted or changed. Education is not merely additive, but also needs to be disruptive.

Karma builds through intentional action. Active methods are more powerful than thought alone in conditioning the mind. Behavioural processes as opposed to cognitive ones thus create more significant conditions for learning. Classroom activity is not simply a means to an end, but also leaves a karmic trace. Intellectual learning that is supported by practical activity is more karmically potent. The medium is the message (McLuhan, 1964).

Conditioning

The Buddhist theory of conditioning has little in common with the behaviourist theory of the same name. It simply asserts that all states arise in dependence upon conditions. They are dependently originated. Mental states arise when the conditions are appropriate. Education thus occurs when conducive conditions are provided. If conditions are altered, then the mentality will also change. This process is founded on probability and is not deterministic. In other words, we can create environments conducive to learning, but cannot entirely control what learning will occur. Eighteen different modes of mental conditioning are recognised in Buddhist literature and their benign and pernicious effects considered (Brazier D., 1995).

Ignoring the effect of conditions commonly results in inadvertent or unconscious abdication of responsibility. Recognition reveals that, although conditions are conducive to a given course of action, one remains free to choose or reject them. In education, understanding conditioning in this sense, both theoretically and experientially, is of paramount importance both for the student and for the pedagogue.

Environmental factors

In particular, conditioning theory supports an educational approach in which the learning environment itself is emphasised. The provision of stimulating resources and a safe but conducive physical space fosters the student’s interest and motivation in a way that a more outcome-focused approach may not. From a Buddhist perspective, a teacher offering a complexity of supportive conditions and protection from obvious sources of
anxiety would create an optimal setting for learning, since the mind responds to positive stimulation, but builds rigidity in response to afflictions.

In any educational programme, content is only one condition amongst many. Others include the setting, the student’s learning history, sequencing of learning experiences, the manner and character of the teacher and the student’s own mentality. Although this may seem obvious, it points towards an approach to learning in which contextual and interpersonal concerns can be as important as the content of what is being taught, and in which the aim is not so much to deliver a particular learning goal as to cultivate a more effective learner.

In particular, Buddhist theory emphasises how the senses are conditioned by the elements that constitute the environment. Each sense has its sense objects, sometimes described as ‘elements’: ‘the eye element, the form element, the eye-consciousness element, the ear element, the sound element …’ and so on, including the earth, air, fire, water, space and consciousness elements (see Bahudhatuka Sutta MN115, v.4.)

The educator uses visual imagery and colour, music or other sound, physical movement, natural and experimental stimuli and whatever is available, turning conditions to good account as they impact on different senses. Buddhist psychology also points out how complexes of learning and positive association cluster around iconic objects (rupa) that anchor them in the mind. Thus the Buddhist educator pays relatively more attention to the context and environment in which learning is expected to occur, and less to learning goals. If the context is good, all students will learn something useful, but they will not all necessarily learn the same thing.

**Personal awareness and learning process**

In addition to deliberately creating conditions for education, bringing awareness to the conditions supporting a person’s life orientation can itself be educational. People carry out their lives within a matrix of conditions, commonly reifying those conditions to an unrealistic degree, and remaining, therefore, confined to a narrow range of thought. Buddhist methods help the person break out of such narrowness by teaching the deconstructive analysis of conditions and encouraging more objective perspectives.

The mind is conditioned by its objects. Identity is built upon perceptual processes. The mind is conditioned by, and reflective of, the world towards which it is orientated. It also distorts it. Appearances are based upon objects, but are not the objects themselves. Mind and its object world form a mutually reinforcing system (Brazier D., 1995). This means that complete knowledge is not available to ordinary beings – there is an inherent epistemological limit. That said, education may break the student out of narrow systems into more encompassing ones. Thus, there is also a mutually reinforcing interaction between learning, degrees of enlightenment and learning capacity. Also, behavioural change (learning) is a function of what is perceived. This fact permits methodologies of personal change (‘Other Centred Approaches’) based upon exploration of the object world (Brazier C., 2009c; Brazier D., 2009). Buddhism thus favours experiential and explorative learning, but not (see below) to the exclusion of rote, didactic or formal methods.

**Attention and intentionality**

Perception of objects is conditioned by attention and intention. Buddhist psychology offers a cyclical analysis of the dependent origination of mental formations. It provides a model of significant points in the conditioning process. This analysis yields a number of possibilities for defining educational interventions: (a) reactivity (vedana) is addressed by objectivity; (b) entrancement or habitual mindsets (samjna) may be transformed by diagnostic proficiency (prajna); (c) proliferation of mental formations (samskara) may be understood through observation; (d) intentionality may become positive aspiration, as in Action and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson, 2003); and (e) attention may be trained (Krech, 2002)
to focus on the realities of a situation. Buddhist mind training aims to generate self-reinforcing cycles of positive mental factors (Hanh, 1990).

Thus, the methodology of Buddhism relies heavily upon training the attention. The mind’s diet conditions the person. Attention is circumscribed both by pre-existing patterns of thought and interest and by environmental factors. Buddhist education is thus equally concerned with creating an environment conducive to learning and with teaching mental control. The two mutually reinforce. In the ideal, a cultivated person has a mind so liberated that she can be immune even to the potentially most corrupting influences, but the ordinary (i.e. less than totally educated) person is conditioned by environment, physical, moral and psychological.

Attention can be trained. In modern life many objects crowd the senses in quick succession, so the modern mind grasps at one thing after another, rather than remaining held by one object for a length of time. In contrast to this scenario, where focused attention is not particularly well supported, Buddhism teaches concentration both as an aid to learning and as an end in itself.

Methods

Buddhism views the existential dilemma of the human situation as both misfortune and opportunity, and education as the means to overcome the former and grasp the latter. The ubiquity of affliction (dukkha) is due to the impermanence (anitya) of the basic conditions of life. Much is beyond our control. Buddhist education aims not merely to equip a person with skills and knowledge, but also to facilitate spiritual maturation – good intention and ability to take initiative responsibly – within a framework of respect for tradition. Qualities such as faith, courage, self-restraint, generosity, vigour, inner calm and practical wisdom are deliberately cultivated. A basic philosophy of harmony of body and mind suggests the importance of both physical and mental cultivation. At the same time, opportunities to face adversity with courage and authenticity, and to respond positively to situations where the needs of others are at stake can be important in developing character. Education thus extends well beyond the classroom.

Establishing right intention

Intention to learn is crucially important. Intentionality is both broad and specific to the topic being studied. Right intention breeds curiosity that naturally drives a person to seek out relevant experience. Interest is engaged by objects that relate to the underlying intent. For example, where someone, say, engages in a visual arts course, once the intention to develop artistically has become established, the student will start to identify with the arts, noticing examples of artwork in each setting that she enters. She will be attracted to interesting shapes and colours in the natural or human environment and notice how they have been portrayed by others in images or other creative representations. She will still be learning even when going for a walk in the country. Right intention globalises and exponentially enhances the learning process. Commonly, a first step in this process is to establish relevance between the new learning materials and goals already held by the student; to establish the standing of the teacher; and to help the student develop a wishing mind that desires the relevant knowledge and experience.

Investigative learning and logic

Buddhism began as a reform movement that was critical of the social and religious status quo. As such, Buddhism has a long tradition of logical analysis, argument, rhetoric, debate and critical thought (Keown, 2001; Harvey, 2000). The injunction to test things for oneself is a core characteristic of Buddhist instruction, which, classically, encouraged the individual to deploy doubt in a constructive way, cultivating the ability to think divergently, and to observe from first principles. Doubt is not here opposed to faith. Faith and
confidence underpin learning. Conviction underpins faith and confidence. Conviction is a function both of experience and of clarity of thought, including constructive use of doubt. Buddhism has thus developed a high regard for logic and pioneered the development of formal logic in India (Potter, 2003); it has an attitude of what may be called introspective objectivity; and it questions received wisdom that cannot be verified through personal experimentation. The practitioner is encouraged to be ekatagata (willing to think and test for him/herself). However, this is not investigation from a tabula rasa situation. There have been both philosophies of deconstruction (e.g. Nagarjuna) and of pure idealism (Suzuki, 1930/1999), but these have not led to nihilism or relativism, but to faith in a more encompassing, if ineffable, ultimacy.

Education is tradition
Buddhist education is a tradition. It is the transmission not so much of knowledge as of savoir apprendre, from mind to mind, heart to heart. At its core is an experiential transmission grounded in a personal relationship between teacher and pupil, in which what is committed to memory is never merely academic, but also in the quality of the relationship itself and ‘beyond words’. Teachings are commonly prefaced by explanation of the merit involved and matters committed to heart are expected to bring about a long-term transformation in the character of the student. Such spiritual learning aims not just at personal benefit, but at the enhancement of the student’s capacity to help others in due course.

All learning is ultimately practical
It is said that all Buddha’s teaching is practical advice. Many of the sutras take the form of instructions for meditation exercises or other practical training methods. Such instructions are detailed and clear. They encourage the practitioner to ‘try it and see’ (ehipassiko). Instructive methods are common throughout the Buddhist world, where teachings are frequently given as formal or semi-formal presentations by masters, who guide their followers through particular practices or offer interpretation of core theory in terms of practical everyday application (e.g. Hanh, 1993). Didactic instruction and personal experimentation are thus integrated. Much teaching is thus in the form ‘Learn this, go try it out, and see for yourself what you discover’.

Slow release learning
In Buddhist educational theory, cognitive understanding commonly follows rather then precedes action. The pupil is given an activity to do, especially an activity that has a depth of symbolic significance, such as a liturgical procedure. Initially the pupil is told what to do, but not why, nor what the significance of the actions is. Only once the activity has become familiar to the body is the mind provided with explanations and, even then, these are not given all at once, and much of the learning is by discovery. Experience precedes understanding. This also means that cognitive learning is often organised around a core of practical skill or experiential experiment.

Rote learning
In Buddhist texts many teachings include repeated lists or passages in verse for recitation. Texts were transmitted as an oral tradition in early Buddhism. Written texts were originally regarded as less reliable than oral ones, teachings were learned by rote and it was a specialist activity to commit them to heart and give public renditions. As Buddhism spread internationally, oral transmission remained a major means of transporting texts, even over long distances. Chinese devotees, for example, would cross the Himalayas to learn from Indian teachers, then return to China having memorised texts and dictate them for translation.
Learning by rote has a number of purposes. It can be a method for transmitting knowledge, but also a religious activity. Committing texts to memory creates a foundation for future understanding even though understanding is not necessary to the original act of learning, rather in the way that learning times tables provides the child with resources which become useful when multiplication is necessary in mathematics. Traditionally, the learning and chanting of sutras is a devotional act. The process of repetition allows the text to be internalised as a spiritual resource as well as aiding cognitive understanding. The imagery and messages embedded in texts work upon the mentality, facilitating mental break-through and providing a cultural resource.

Story, allegory and art

‘Since the ultimate goal of Buddhism is the transcendence of this delusory world … it requires an art of highly idealized images, infinitely finer than those apparent in one’s mundane existence’ (Fisher, 1993: 8). Similarly, popular Buddhist scriptures, such as the Lotus Sutra and the Larger Pure Land Sutra contain many historical, allegorical, metaphorical and symbolic stories that convey complex spiritual messages in a memorable, appealing form, easily understood by people of a range of sophistication. In listening to such stories, some learning is cognitive, but much is subliminal. Reverence and worship is often not separable from the process of education. Religious practice is mind changing. Other texts, like the Therigata (Murcott, 1991), in describing the lives of key figures from the Buddha’s time, provide historical examples of piety, insight and the overcoming of adversity.

The use of metaphor in the Buddhist texts can be a powerful means of transmitting ideas and concepts. For example, in Alagaddupama Sutta (MN22) the raft metaphor describes how teaching has transitional value and should not be seen as the end itself. A raft is useless when one reaches the other side of the river. In the same sutta the snake simile likens teaching to something that is healing but potentially dangerous. Venom was used as medicine, but snakes bite if handled the wrong way.

Apprenticeship

The Buddha apprenticed junior disciples to senior ones. The tradition of student–teacher or disciple–guru relationships has grown into monastic establishments, where trainees follow daily routines and prescribed roles and practices in order to develop their capacities, mature spiritually and achieve insight. Within such training systems, learning takes place through instruction, through modelling and through lifestyle conditions. Trainees experience challenging circumstances and new tasks, often with a pressure of time or required outcome, being forced to discover new resources; to face and transcend their habitual limits. Such education thus seeks to immerse a person in a wholesome environment governed by a wholesome ethos and therein to give them progressively graded responsibilities or studies in which to learn to exercise skills, knowledge and authority in ways that are non-self-centric. Buddhist education thus extends to all aspects of life and is not limited to the academy.

Emulating ideal types while appreciating ordinariness

The term generally translated as ‘disciple’ is shravaka, which literally means ‘listener’. The first duty of the student is to learn to listen, a discipline which involves some self-abnegation and willingness. Buddhism offers three ideal types: the bodhisattva, literally one who has the courage of their vision; the arhant, one who has overcome obstacles; and, in the Japanese tradition, a myokonin, a person who shines with simple confidence. These ideal types provide inspirational role models. At the same time, in Buddhism the student may experience the teacher as a learning companion as well as an example. Teacher and student engage together in relating to a topic, often in the context of a community of learners. The teacher can thus be simply viewed as an advanced learner.
Celebrating difference

The Buddha’s disciples were a varied group of people noted for their different and often complementary capacities. Buddhism is said to offer 84,000 teachings. In the spiritual life many different paths are recognised. Teacher and disciple approach learning in their own ways. Although learning is considered a transmission from teacher to learner, there is no expectation that the learners will thereby become clones of the teacher. Rather, they become equally skilled learners.

Conclusions and general principles

A person engaging in Buddhist practice gradually moves from self-serving intentionality towards higher, more altruistic aspirations. The model provided by the teacher is important and the material taught should inspire. Education is not simply about acquiring knowledge and skill, it is immersion in a particular human and physical environment, every dimension of which has effect. However, inspiration often comes from the particular and the exceptional, rather than a standardised process. A charismatic element is, therefore, required.

Identity is a core concern of Buddhist theory (Brazier C., 2003). Most people have a number of identities that each depend upon different object worlds. For example, a student may have one identity as a son or daughter which depends on the home environment and parental presence, another identity as a young person in the context of a peer group and leisure environment, and a third as a student, conditioned by the college classroom and contact with tutors. These identities have overlapping qualities, but may have big areas of incompatibility. Some identities are clearly more conducive to learning than others, so a teacher may seek to support positive identities that are orientated towards learning and to address negative identities that prevent it. Identity consists of the self and the self world.

To induce positive identification with learning it will generally be found that the self-world is more amenable to manipulation. Educators should therefore be skilled in creating situations that challenge and attract in suitable ways. The environment needs to provide a psychological bridge between the student and the subject, offering images or elements that support the student in a self-image which is both comfortable and learning orientated. New environments and new experiences may help to change rigid aspects of identity, but they need to appeal to the identity that is interested in learning.

The Buddhist theory of education integrates what are commonly seen as opposing progressive and traditional approaches. Rote learning and the careful following of prescribed procedure precipitates the student into situations where experiential learning becomes inevitable. Internalised nostrums are found to play out in idiosyncratic divergent discovery learning. Hierarchical teaching situations are used to create the conditions in which the students experience the exercise of authority and thus develop leadership skills and a sense of responsibility and interdependence. Learning breaks the shell of solipsism in which the unenlightened person is imprisoned, and the task of the skilled educator is to aid this process by the creation of conducive conditions.

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