

Some Key Aspects of the Buddhist Philosophy of Education

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This paper aims to outline a few key issues that demand our attention if we are interested in developing a Buddhist philosophy of education. The paper begins with a plea for caution for those who are of the view that there is a ready-made theory of education, fully and explicitly articulated by the Buddha, in his teachings. What we have at the most is insights and examples that can be used in constructing a philosophy of education. In fact such a philosophy of education is possible on the teachings and on the practical examples of the Buddha. Two important issues to be studied deeply are subsequently introduced, the first being, whether or not there are absolutely incorrigible students according to the teaching of the Buddha. The same question may be asked: whether the Buddha was able to teach anyone and everyone with equal success or not? The next issue discussed is the nature of faith required in the teaching of the Buddha and the freedom that has been allowed for the students to examine not only the assertions made by the Buddha but his very behaviour itself. The paper, while not claiming comprehensiveness in any manner, only tries to highlight some philosophical and ethical difficulties and problems involved in dealing with these issues.

Key words : philosophy of education, teacher, the Buddha, incurable, faith, inquiry, determinism, and dependent co origination.

Introduction

In discussing Buddhist philosophy of education it is important at the very outset to clarify a possible misunderstanding, namely, that there is a specific viewpoint on education clearly developed and articulated by the Buddha or by any other early disciples of the Buddha. In fact, there is nothing of that nature which can be called 'the Buddhist philosophy of education' in a definitive sense. Nevertheless, whenever we start discussing a subject under a definitive term such as this, one tends to get the wrong idea that there is such a theme of study articulated by the Buddha, in the like manner that the Buddha has articulated his views on defilements or karma. This should not be understood, on the other hand, as that there is nothing about education said by the Buddha. There is so much the Buddha has said about matters of importance for education. But those things have been said not in the context of education per se but in the overall context of the Buddhist path for freedom from suffering.

When I say that there is nothing that the Buddha has said about education per se my intention is to make clear this essential contextual character of what the Buddha has said. In a well known statement, which occurs in more than one place in the discourses, the Buddha says that he teaches only suffering and its cessation¹⁾. Obviously this cannot be taken literally; what it lays emphasis on is the essential contextual character of the teaching of the Buddha, namely, that his teaching has to be understood in the context of its main purpose of providing a solution to the problem of suffering.

When we refer to Buddhist philosophy of education what we are doing is to extract from his teaching what is relevant to the concept and practice of education which was in fact what the Buddha was doing in the process of communicating his ideas to his listeners and guiding them according to such ideas. By picking up ideas and practices from the Buddha we are in a position to develop what may be called a 'philosophy of education'. But we have to remember that it is basically our own construction. This, however, does not mean that such a construction is unwarranted. In fact, it is an important and edifying effort to derive inspiration from the Buddha to enrich our own thinking on education. The warning is meant only as a reminder of limits of such reconstructions.

A substantial amount has been written on this subject. In particular, a lot has been discussed, for example, on the methods the Buddha adopted in teaching different people, his use of simile

1) Endnotes For reference see: Majjhima nikay 22: Alagaddupama sutta; For English translation see Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995 [n edition: 2001, p.234].

and metaphors and the like. In this discussion I am not going to spend time on these already well-known things though they are surely important. Instead I would rather focus on some issues which are not usually discussed explicitly or under-discussed in usual discussions on 'Buddhist education'.

The function and the limits of religious teacher

It is said that the Buddha, right after his Enlightenment, surveyed the world in order to see to whom he should teach what he had realized. The Buddha started his teaching from the five companions whom he had when he was practicing austerities. Subsequently the number of followers increased and there were sixty who realized enlightenment. At this juncture the Buddha instructed these enlightened followers to go in sixty different directions and teach the message. These events show how much teaching was significant for the Buddha.

Usually the founders of religions are considered to be saviours in the sense that they save those who keep faith in them. It is important to see in this respect that the Buddha did not pose himself as a saviour before his disciples. The Buddhist tradition has recognized extraordinary capacities of the Buddha as a teacher. Among the most cited nine sublime characteristics of the Buddha, his being 'the teacher of gods and human beings' (*sathhaa deva-manussaanam*) and 'incomparable guide to those who are to be disciplined' (*anuttaro purisadamma-saarathi*) highlight this characteristic²). That does not, however, mean that the Buddha was considered to be a saviour. It is important to note that the Buddha on his part never encouraged that type of attitude in his disciples. He seems to have noticed this possible danger. Consequently he always emphasized that he was only a guide or pointer of the path (*akkhaataaro tathaagataa*: *Dhammapada*). The difference between the Buddha and a follower is highlighted in the parable of the lost ancient path rediscovered³). In this story, the Buddha is compared to one who discovers an ancient path that leads to an ancient city. Having followed the path, this person enters the ancient city, enjoys observing it and comes back to his own village and tells others about his discovery. The others would follow the instructions given by him and discover the same ancient city by themselves and enjoy observing it. The Buddha's role as the teacher is compared to this pioneering man who discovers the path initially and walks on it all by

2) The nine qualities are referred to in numerous places in the discourses. For example see *Majjhimanikaya* 140 [bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi: pp.1087-1096]

3) *Samyuttanikaya* II. Pp.105-6 [English translation: Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000. p.603.

himself. The difference being, one is the pioneer whereas the others are followers. From the point of view of the city visited, however, there is no difference between one who visited first and others who visited later.

Could the Buddha teach everyone equally and successfully?

There is no doubt about the fact that the Buddha was a successful teacher. For example, when the Jaina follower Upali was to go to the Buddha to challenge him, another follower alerts the Jaina leader of the 'magical power of attraction' the Buddha was believed to have possessed⁴⁾. This shows how the contemporaries viewed the Buddha's ability as a teacher. Does this, however, mean that the Buddha could convince anybody and everybody?

The following situation has to be kept in mind. Even among the people who received instructions from the Buddha each individual's understanding was different, and this is quite understandable. It seems, very often, there were only a few, or one or two, who reached the point of full comprehension to the extent that they opted to follow the Buddha by being monastic members. For example, when the Buddha visited the village called Thullakotthita, many Brahmin householders came to listen to him. But it is only Ratthapala, the young and rich householder who reached that level of understanding⁵⁾. It is said that the Buddha taught those who came to listen to him in such a manner that it got deeper gradually starting from a very simple level of good and bad ethical behaviour and its corresponding results, and culminating in the analysis of deep psychological roots of samsaric⁶⁾ suffering. In such a gradual method of instruction which went deeper and deeper progressively, of those who came to listen to the Buddha, many of the audience might have left by the time he advanced into themes of samsaric suffering.

Apart from this general picture, there are several notable 'failures': for example, the Buddha met Upaka, who belonged to the Ajivika tradition, on his way to Benares to teach the five early companions; a conversation took place but Upaka was not convinced⁷⁾. This is a less

4) Majjhimanikay, Upali-sutta [56] [for the Pali version see p.375 Pali Text Society edition, vol. I; for the English translation see: Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995/2001, pp.477-492.

5) Refer to the Ratthapala sutta of the Majjhima nikay (82) [Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995 [n edition: 2001, pp.677-691].

6) 'Samsara' is the concept used in the Indian religious tradition in general and in the Buddhist tradition in particular to refer to the cycle of continued existence of beings by repeated birth and death.

7) See Vinay I introductory section for the full account

problematic case for there was no real teaching involved in this case. A more problematic case would be Devadatta who is considered as the most bad of all bad disciples. It is very clear that Devadatta never entered the Path which means that the teaching of the Buddha did not work in his case. The Buddha explicitly says that there is no any worth in Devadatta for him to mention for if there is even the smallest worth in him that he would not refrain from saying so⁸). Does this mean that there are 'totally dark' people according to the Buddhist analysis of personality?

The matters in connection with Devadatta basically occur in the Vinaya. Due to his wholly unacceptable and destructive behaviour the Buddha had predicted that he will be born in the 'hell' after his death. Subsequently there seems to have arisen some discussions on this matter among the monks. On being questioned by some of his followers on his statement regarding Devadatta, the Buddha produced an explanation which is contained in one of the discourses, referred to above. The discourse says that the Buddha is capable of penetrating one's mind and knowing one's faculties (*purisa-indriya-nana*) and how one generates phenomena in future (*aayati-dhamma-samuppaada*). The analysis classifies people into three main categories and three derivative categories from the point of view of their spiritual potential.

Of the three main categories: the first person has both kusala (wholesome/involving absence of attachment, aversion and delusion) and akusala (unwholesome/involving attachment, aversion and delusion) phenomena in him. Later his kusala phenomena are found to be disappeared and akusala phenomena found to have emerged. Nevertheless, he has the kusala roots undestroyed in him. Subsequently from those kusala roots kusala will arise in him. Such a person is will be of the nature of non decline in future. He is compared to a good seed placed on fertile soil, growing well for both the seed and the soil are good.

The second person too has both kusala and akusala phenomena, and later his akusala phenomena are found to have disappeared and kusala phenomena to have emerged. Nevertheless, he has akusala roots undestroyed in him. Subsequently from those akusala roots akusala will arise in him. Such a person will be of the nature of decline in the future. He is compared to a good seed placed on a slab of stone not growing for it does not have a good basis.

The third person too has both kusala and akusala phenomena. And subsequently he is found to be absolutely without any 'fair phenomena' but having only 'dark phenomena⁹'. Such a

8) *Anguttara-nikay* III, PTS edition, p.401.

9) Two terms used in the discourses to refer to wholesome and unwholesome [kusala and akusala] phenomena. This usage may have its origin going back to some kind of social distinction based on physical complexion

person will be bound to 'hell' after his death. This person is compared to a completely rotten seed placed on fertile soil but not sprouting owing to its rottenness.

In the derivative category: The first person has both kusala and akusala phenomena. He is subsequently found to have his kusala phenomena disappeared and akusala phenomena emerged. Whatever kusala roots he happens to have undestroyed in him too have been destroyed. Such a person will be of the nature of decline in the future. Such a person is compared to pieces of heated and burning charcoal that would not increase heat any further when put on a slab of stone. Knowing such a person's future is compared to one's knowledge that it will be dark when it is evening and Sun sets, and one's knowledge at the night meal time that darkness has set in.

The second person too has both kusala and akusala phenomena. He is subsequently found to have his akusala phenomena disappeared and kusala phenomena emerged. Whatever akusala roots he happens to have undestroyed in him too have been destroyed. Such a person will be of the nature of non-decline in future. Such a person is compared to pieces of burning and heated charcoal that would increase in heat when placed on dry leaves. Knowing such a person's future is compared to one's knowledge that darkness will disappear and that there will be light when Sun rises in the morning, and one's knowledge by the noon-meal time that darkness has disappeared and light has arisen.

The third person has both kusala and akusala phenomena present in him. Subsequently he is found to be absolutely without any akusala phenomena. Such a person attains parinirvana (=total freedom from suffering) in this life itself. He is compared to pieces of charcoal, completely extinguished and become cool, which would not generate fire even those were to be put among dry leaves.

The classification deserves careful study. One important factor to note is that all the six people classified have both kusala and akusala in them to begin with. Even the third person in the first category, one who is bound to be born in the hell, and the third person in the second category, one is to attain parinirvana (total freedom from suffering) in this life itself, have both aspects to begin with. So whatever happens to them seems to happen subsequently. With regard to the first person, kusala roots undestroyed are mentioned and with regard to the second person, akusala roots undestroyed are mentioned. From this we can surmise that both these persons have both types of roots. The difference being in one person kusala roots become more powerful and in the other akusala roots become more powerful. The curious thing is that with

regard to the third person there is no mention of roots. He is compared to a rotten seed which cannot have sprouted however much the other factors are conducive for growing. The other two persons are compared to good seeds, and the determining factor being one is put on a fertile soil whereas the other is on a bad soil.

In this classification the first and second persons do not pose a problem. But the difficulty is with the third person who is considered a rotten seed. In the case of Devadatta, he is compared to a rotten seed without any worth at all. The fourth and the fifth persons correspond to the first and second persons and the difference is, in the fourth person whatever undestroyed kusala roots are destroyed and in the fifth person undestroyed akusala roots are destroyed. Both are compared to heated charcoal, one dying due to lack of support and the other thriving due to presence of support. The sixth person, attaining arahant hood, is the opposite of the third person who is totally dark.

One important question that arises from this discussion is the deterministic character implicit in the predictions involved with the persons under scrutiny. The very question that prompts the discussion of the Buddha, according to the Discourse, was whether or not the Buddha made the initial pronouncement on Devadatta's future destiny having comprehensively surveyed. The Buddha admits to have done so, and subsequently classifies persons into six groups according to the evolution of their behavior. In particular, with regard to the fourth and fifth persons, who respectively are down-wards bound and upwards-bound, knowing their future has been compared to knowing that it will be dark when the Sun sets and knowing that there will be light once the Sun rises, respectively. In order to determine whether this analysis entails a kind of strong determinism I propose to study two matters in this context, namely, study the nature of the simile used and also study the concept of omniscience accepted in the early Buddhist tradition.

First I will discuss the simile of sun setting and Sun rising and resultant falling of darkness and appearance of day-light. It is well known that the phenomenon of dependent co origination, which is the Buddhist understanding of working of reality, is perceived as operating in five different areas, namely, natural seasonal changes (which is called *utuniyaama* or the principle of season), plant life (which is *bijja-niyaama* or the principle plant life), moral action (which is *kamma-niyama* or the principle of action), nature of things (which is *dhamma-niyaama* or the principle of nature) and the working of mind (which is *citta-niyaama* or the principle of mind). The simile used in the Discourse falls into the first area mentioned here, namely, operation of the seasons. The idea emphasized by taking operations of seasons as dependently co-arisen is that in the presence of necessary causes and conditions seasonal changes take place as a natural

process independent of any agent. Once the causes and conditions are met the resultant process is understood to be sure and guaranteed. To that extent, one may say, there is determinism here. The Buddhist tradition articulates this certainty in the nature of things not as involving determinism but as involving some four characteristics, namely, real-ness [objectivity] (tathataa), not-unreal-ness [necessity] (avitathataa), not-otherwise-ness [invariability] (anannathataa) and conditionality (idappaccayataa)¹⁰⁾, which guarantee the regularity and the factuality of the process.

The broader understanding behind this explanation is that when causes and conditions necessary for a particular phenomenon to take place have come together that particular thing has to happen. In a different context the Buddha explains the same procedure in the following words:

It is in the nature of things that a person in the state of (meditative) concentration knows and sees what really is. A person who knows and sees what really is, does not need to make an effort of will to feel disinterested and renounce. It is in the nature of things that a person who knows and sees as it really is, feels disinterested and renounces. One who has felt disinterested and renounced does not need an effort of will to realize the knowledge and insight of emancipation. It is in the nature of things that one who has felt disinterested and renounced, realizes the knowledge and insight of emancipation¹¹⁾.

What is described here is the working of the mind in the specific field of meditative development. It is confirmed by this explanation that human mind too, as we found in the above list of five areas, works in accordance with the larger principle of dependent co-origination. Now, judging from this evidence we can safely say that what is said about the persons classified and about Devadatta in particular is not any kind of strict deterministic pronouncement but what can be predicted in accordance with dependently co-originated character of such people's behaviour.

The next question is how could the Buddha see the workings of the mind of Devadatta? Or how can the Buddha see the future workings of anyone's mind? If we accept our conclusion in the previous paragraph, namely, that human mind works in accordance with the broader natural

10) Samyutta-nikay II. p.25

11) As quoted by Jayatilleke (1963/1980) pp.420-21 (from the Anguttaranikay V. p.3 of the Pali Text Society edition).

principles such as dependent co-origination judging anyone's future psychological behavior is no different from predicting any other natural phenomena such as seasonal changes or weather. How can the Buddha know others' minds?—this is not an issue so long as we accept the Buddhist soteriology according to which it is an ability not only the Buddha, even any other liberated person may possess with due meditative developments¹²). In fact, it is not necessary for us to go into the problem of alleged omniscience of the Buddha if we are comfortable with these two conclusions.

According to the scholars such as KN Jayatilleke, who have studied this issue deeply, the later Buddhist traditions including the Theravada has attributed to the Buddha an all encompassing omniscience through which the Buddha is capable of seeing anything belonging to the past, present and the future. One important reason why, in particular, being able to see the future is problematic is, that doing so anticipates a deterministic universe in which things are determined beforehand. In so far as the early discourses are concerned, what the Buddha actually claimed is not omniscience but only the knowledge of three 'science' (*vijjā*), namely, the knowledge of recollecting one's own past births (*pubbe-nivāsa-ānassati-nāna*), knowledge of how others depart and are born (*cutuupapaata nāna*), and the knowledge of destruction of defilements (*aasava-khaya-nāna*)¹³). In the present context, we do not need to pursue this line of analysis any further for neither the working of the mind is determined nor the Buddha has claimed any ability to know future precisely due to that very reason. This, however, does not rule out the possibility of knowing the future as dependently co-arisen phenomenon. Such knowledge, as KNJ rightly says, is not certain but probable¹⁴). The Buddha's prediction on Devadatta in this context has to be understood purely as what is warranted by the Buddha's understanding of the dependently co-arisen character of former's mind.

A question of educational import that arises from this discussion is whether there are any 'students' who can never be corrected. In the above discourse Devadatta has been described as 'incurable' (*atekiccha*). But does this ultimately mean a 'temporary' situation or does this mean

12) For example, refer to the Samannaphala-sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya for the standard exposition of the Path as culminating in the three forms of knowledge including the knowledge of knowing others' minds.

13) For a complete discussion on this issue, see *Tevijja Vacchagotta-sutta* [To Vacchagotta on the Threefold Knowledge] of the Majjhima-nikāya (71), where the Buddha says that those who say that the Buddha claimed to be omniscient and all-seeing, and to have complete knowledge and vision while walking, standing or asleep or awake, misrepresent him, and those who say that he has the threefold knowledge are representing him correctly.

14) Jayatilleke 1963/1980 p.454.

that he can never be cured under any circumstances? The discourse does not give an answer to this question. No does the Commentary of the Buddhaghosa give an answer, although it says that Devadatta's akusala behaviour is capable of retaining him in the hell for a kalpa (unit of longest duration of time). What happens to him after a kalpa is not discussed in the Discourse or in the Commentary. But it is clear from the generally non-absolutist character of his teaching that the Buddha did not talk about any person as absolutely 'incurable'. It is a well-known fact that Buddhism does not maintain that heaven and hell are everlasting. In this sense, neither there are eternally damned nor eternally blessed people according to Buddhism. An Arahant is not considered as one who is born in the heaven and such a person is not covered by this characterization of heaven.

Educationally speaking, this means that the Buddhist tradition does not believe that totally incurable people are there. In Devadatta's case, however, it is clear that he has been considered as incurable in that particular birth. Whether or not this should be understood as saying that there are incurable students in a more mundane or ordinary sense remains open. My personal view is that this particular story pertains not to ordinary situations such as one comes across in a class-room but to much deeper existential situations. The point to be stressed is that even Devadatta, who turned out to be a rotten seed, started with both good and bad. How he became rotten has, to my knowledge, not been discussed in the texts although texts refer to King Ajatasattu as been misguided by Devadatta¹⁵⁾. The story of Devadatta as a whole may be understood as indicating the magnitude of some persons' limitations even to defy the Buddha's incomparable ability to penetrate other people's minds and teach accordingly.

Faith in and Inquiry of the Buddha

How should a student develop faith in a teacher is an important element in the process education. In a usual academic setting it is important that students are satisfied with the academic credentials of their teachers. In case of a religious teacher, whose role goes far beyond usual act of imparting of knowledge, it is crucial that students are satisfied with the teacher's higher inner states. In the Buddhist tradition, it is particularly emphasized that there cannot be any discrepancy or contradiction between what one says and what one does. This has been articulated in the well-known phrase: "doing what one says and saying what one does" (yathaa-vaadi tathaa-kaari; yathaa-kaari tathaa-vaadi¹⁶⁾). -

15) Refer to the commentary to the Samannaphala sutta of the Digha-nikay, Sumangala vilasin by Buddhaghosa.

Looking from this perspective, the Buddha seems to be far ahead of all hitherto known religious teachers. He has allowed his followers to inquire into his behaviour and ask any question on his behaviour before they finally make up their mind that he is a fit teacher for him to follow. The best example in this regard is the *Vimamsaka-sutta* (Discourse on Inquiry) [Majjhima nikaya:47¹⁷], in which the Buddha encourages his disciples to inquire about his external [verbal and physical] behaviour if they cannot read his mind and know for sure that he does not have any defilements overt or covert.

The procedure recommended is as follows: One should start by inquiring whether or not there are any defiled states in the Buddha cognizable through the eye or through the ear, and not finding any such state, next he should inquire whether or not there are any mixed states both defiled and undefiled. Not finding such states subsequently he should investigate for positive cleansed states in the Buddha. Finding such states in him, subsequently he should inquire whether he has attained these positive states recently or has he had such states for a long time. Discovering that the Buddha has had these states in him for a long time, next he should inquire whether the Buddha has the dangers associated with acquiring renown and fame due to these good qualities. Finding that he does not have dangers associated with renown and fame although he has achieved renown and fame, next the follower should inquire whether or not the Buddha keeps away from defilements out of fear or due to his genuine absence of lust etc. and finds that he is away from the defiled states not out of fear but due to his genuinely undefiled nature itself. Once one goes through this process of investigation, the final test remains is to question the Buddha directly on the seemingly absent defiled states and seemingly present cleansed states. It is only when one gets confirmation from the Buddha himself that one should come to the conclusion that “the awakened One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Awakened One, the Sangha is practicing the right path”. The faith one gains by following this process has been described by the Buddha himself in the following words:

When anyone's faith has been planted, rooted, and established in the Tathagata [the Buddha] through these reasons, terms, and phrases, his faith is said to be supported by reasons, rooted in vision, firm; it is invincible by any recluse or Brahmin or god or Mara or Brahma or by anyone in the world¹⁸).

16) Anguttarnikay II.p 24

17) hikkhu anamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995/200. pp.415-8

18) Translation from Bhikkhu Nanmoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995/2001 p.418.

The kind of faith spoken here is what is called 'rational faith' [aakaaravati-saddha] and is contrasted with what is called 'root-less faith' [amuulikaa-saddhaa], articulated in the context of discussing the assertions made by some religious groups without any experiential basis. In discussing the brahmins' claim that their scripture has truly been revealed by Brahma himself, the Buddha questions his interlocutor Canki, the young and learned brahmin, whether there is any one single brahmin, even up to the seventh generation, who can claim that he has personally experienced this god. Upon admitting that it is not so the Buddha concludes:

It seems that among the brahmins there is not even a single brahmin who says thus: "I know this, I see this: only this is true, anything else is wrong". And among the brahmins there is not even a single teacher or single teacher's teacher back to the seventh generation of teachers, who says thus: "I know this, I see this, only this is true, anything else is wrong." ...Suppose there was a file of blind men each in touch with the next; the first does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. So too, in regard to their statement the brahmins seem to be like a file of blind men; the first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. What do you think, that being so, does not the faith of the brahmins turn out to be groundless?¹⁹⁾

What the Buddha highlights here is the need for one's faith to be based on valid and rational reasons. It is clear that the Buddha accepts that faith has a role to play in the process of learning. It is something of the following nature: one has to begin with faith; such process ultimately will lead to a point at which faith will gradually be replaced by knowledge. Faith, however, has to be rational and not groundless. The story of the young brahmin Uttara, who followed the Buddha, like a "shadow that is inseparable", for seven months and finally confessed that he could not see any defect in the behaviour of the Buddha, testifies to the fact that at least some people took the Buddha's challenge seriously and did actually experimented with this scrutiny.

19) Translation from Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995/2001 pp.779-780.

Conclusion

The above outline should show that the Buddha's life as a teacher and his discourses contain many valuable examples and ideas based on which we are able to develop a philosophy of education. Although the Buddha may have not spoken directly on education as we understand the subject today, his very practice as a teacher and his philosophical analysis of human situation and his deep insights into human psychology are invaluable sources for such an endeavour.

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