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## **INTEGRAL EDUCATION IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITION**

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### **Abstract**

Western scholarship and culture usually ignore the contributions from other civilizations, in the field of education even more clearly than anywhere else. While the advocates of integral education, for instance, pay attention to the Western pedagogues only, there has been a profound educational philosophy in other contexts such as the Indian or the Buddhist. This paper tries to open the Western educational scenario to the Buddhist tradition in particular, outlining some achievements like the Buddhist university of Nalanda that can certainly inspire and enrich the educational world, in Asia or in the West. Hence, this introductory paper wishes to contribute to the needed intercultural dialogue in Western education and scholarship.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of Education; Comparative Education; Integral/Holistic Education; Buddhist Education; Buddhism; Buddhist Philosophy; Buddha; Buddhist Monasteries; Nalanda.

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### **1. Introduction**

#### **Prince Siddhartha and the middle path**

While ruling his kingdom at the foot of the Himalaya, King Suddhodana was especially concerned about the education of his fair son, Prince Siddhartha, who very soon appeared to be a very special boy. The King decided to over-protect his heir by avoiding any contact with the misery of the external world, so that the Prince would grow up cheerful surrounded by happiness only.

The wisdom of Buddhism presents an enthralling end to the story: one day, when the prince was already a young man, he happened to trespass the boundaries of his paternal over-protection, and he witnessed the miseries of the human condition: sickness, old age and death. The meeting of a monk would suggest the only path ahead: to investigate into the deepest causes of human suffering and to find the way out of it, which Prince Siddhartha would finally achieve after several years of research and self-inquiry, leading ultimately to Enlightenment, after which Prince Siddhartha would be the Buddha, the One who has Awakened.

There is a fundamental message about education in the legendary life of Lord Buddha. Let us examine it by opposing two extreme positions that still co-exist in our world.

- On the one hand, there are parents and educational institutes that over-protect their children –like King Suddhodana-, by prohibiting many things considered as harmful or negative and strictly eluding any contact of the youths with some realities of this world. This has typically been the more traditional approach, prevailing in Europe until IInd World War, and still common today in societies like India.
- On the other hand, from the decade of the sixties onwards, the Western World has sometimes fallen into the opposite extreme. Through some kind of reaction against the rigidity of the traditional patterns, many adults have given virtually unlimited freedom to children, who have come to the point of ruling not only themselves but even their elders. In the last years, a whole legion of children have grown up without proper limits, and also without a proper model offered by their elders, since adults have too often dismissed their pedagogic role. In this cultural background, children have soon been exposed to everything so that there was no more secret for them –even in the matters that were reserved to the adult society in the traditional patterns-.

As in any other field of human life, the wisdom of Buddhism suggests a middle path in education that avoids the extreme positions in which mankind easily falls. The Buddhist tradition also offers other treasures in terms of educational philosophy.

### **Lord Buddha And Pedagogics<sup>1</sup>**

The very teachings of Buddha can be seen as a pedagogy per se.  
In the words of ven. Master Chin Kung:

“Buddhism is Buddha Sakyamuni’s educational system (...) The goal of Buddhist education is to attain wisdom. (...) He further taught us that everyone has the potential to realize this state of ultimate wisdom, as it is an intrinsic part of our nature, not something one obtains externally.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf: - "The Living Thoughts of Gotama the Buddha", ed by Coomaraswamy, 2000  
- "The Gospel of Buddha", ed by P. Carus, 1997  
- "Buddhist Texts through the Ages", ed by Conze, Horner, 1964  
- "Buddhist Scriptures", ed by E. Conze, 1959  
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<sup>2</sup> Ven. Master Chin Kung, sd, P 4.

Quite obviously, this philosophy of education differs from modern mainstream schooling and its merely intellectual bookish learning from a materialistic and utilitarian world view. The issue of the world view or paradigm is fundamental to understand cultural diversity through history and geography. When a modern scholar or educator approaches Buddhist education, the first thing he or she must keep in mind is that in this context education is not only different from modern mainstream schooling, but more exactly it is different because it unfolds from a different world view.

According to W. Wisadavet:

“Buddhism has as its ultimate goal the transcendent (lokuttara dhamma), which is a state that each individual must experience personally.”<sup>3</sup>

In the holy scriptures known as “sutras” or “suttas”, Buddha gives a series of teachings often in the form of dialogue that disclose a profound pedagogic method. Not surprisingly, Buddha’s pedagogy in the “sutras”/ “suttas” could be regarded as deeply Socratic: through the dialogue between master and disciple, the former brings the latter to experience by himself and reach his own conclusions, which constitutes the underlying spirit of any genuine humanistic pedagogy.

- In the Kalama-Sutta (Anguttara-Nikaya),<sup>4</sup> Buddha requests us not to be subdued to any religious text, authority or tradition, neither by logical arguments nor by the finest speculation.
- In the Canki-Sutta (Majjhima-Nikaya),<sup>5</sup> the master expresses the positive side of the previous request: instead of following anything outside us, we must verify by ourselves. He even exhorts us to examine by ourselves the teachings given by our spiritual master – instead of blindly believing what he has taught-.
- Especially interesting from an educational point of view would be the Assalayana-Sutta (Majjhima-Nikaya),<sup>6</sup> where a young Brahmin, Assalayana, encounters Buddha to defend the cast system that the master has questioned. This beautiful dialogue constitutes a masterpiece of Socratic education. Whenever the young Brahmin presents the traditional brahmanic point of view, the master replies with a fact or a reflection that questions the doctrine and manifests its lack of proper foundation. It is important to realize how Buddha deconstructs the casts’ ideology: instead of frontally attacking the discourse or the person behind it, he brings the young Brahmin to ponder over it and realize by himself.
- The Uttiya-Sutta (Anguttara-Nikaya)<sup>7</sup> conveys more insights into Buddha’s pedagogy. This Sutta presents Uttiya, a “paribbajaka” who comes to see Buddha. The “paribbajakas” were young mendicants from Brahmin origin with scholarly knowledge and metaphysical

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Cf also Manish Meshram (2013) “ROLE OF BUDDHIST EDUCATION IN ANCIENT INDIA”, “International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature”, vol. I, Issue 3, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Wisadavet W. (2003) “THE BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION. APPROACHES AND PROBLEMS “, “The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies”, vol. 2, No 2, 2003, pag. 5

<sup>4</sup> Cf Anguttara-Nikaya, I, 187/ 191.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Majjhima-Nikaya, II, 164/ 177.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Majjhima-Nikaya, II, 147/ 157.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Anguttara-Nikaya, V, 193-195.

curiosity. Uttiya asks Buddha some metaphysical questions, in front of which the master replies with ambiguity, which means that Buddha is reluctant to provide a doctrine about the ultimate truth that would obviously be translated into a system of beliefs by the ordinary human mind. Instead, the master brings the human mind –Uttiya- towards self-inquiry – the cornerstone of integral education-. Before the metaphysical questions of the young Uttiya that seek for clear answers, doctrines and systems of beliefs, the master replies with silence –the silence of Buddha, which is the deepest pedagogy, an invitation to shift from doctrines to self-inquiry, from outer beliefs to the inner experience of oneself, and ultimately, from alienation to freedom.

### **Vihara/ Sangha: Buddhist Education Through 25 Centuries<sup>8</sup>**

- According to the Buddhist tradition, Jetavana, near Sravasti, was the first Buddhist monastery, arranged by the merchant Anathapindada to welcome the master. We can presume that during Buddha's life monasteries already spread in North India. The number of disciples, both religious and lay, was rapidly increasing, and monasteries – “viharas”-

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<sup>8</sup> Cf; - Bechert, Gombrich ed. (1984) "THE WORLD OF BUDDHISM. BUDDHIST MONKS AND NUNS IN SOCIETY AND CULTURE", Thames and Hudson, London  
- Bechert H. (1970) "THERAVADA BUDDHIST SANGHA", "Journal of Asian Studies", n° 29, 1970  
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were created to host the new communities of monks –“sangha”-. During the dry season monks would spread the teachings –Dharma-, but during the rainy season travelling would be more difficult, for which monasteries were gradually set up in a number of locations.

- The Buddhist monastic community offers two ways of access according to the age of the candidate. Boys can join after 7/ 8 through the minor ordination – “pabbajja”-; through it, the boy becomes a novice – “samanera”-. Buddha’s son, Rahula, would be the first novice in Buddhist history. After 20/ 21, men can join through the major ordination – “upasampada”-; through it, the man becomes a monk – “bhikkhu”-. With the support of Ananda, the Master’s cousin and most beloved disciple, Buddha would also allow women to become nuns; his own auntie, Mahaprajapati or Prajapati Gautami, would be the first nun – “bhikkhuni”-.
- From the very beginning, the Buddhist monastic community –Sangha- was very keen on education, probably due to the fact that the monasteries had many elder children or adolescents as novices. We can get a lot of information about Buddhist education in the monasteries through the chronicles of several Chinese pilgrims who travelled throughout India, which means that at that time –end of the Ancient world/ beginning of the Middle Ages- Buddhist monasteries in India had become important cultural and educational spots whose prestige was irradiating through the whole of Asia till China. One of these Chinese pilgrims, Fa-Hien, visited India between 399 and 414. Hiuan-Tsang came to the subcontinent between 629 and 645. Another famous Chinese pilgrim would be Yi-Tsing, who stayed in India between 671 and 695.
- According to the chronicles left by the Chinese pilgrims, the Buddhist Viharas not only taught the Buddhist scriptures but also general knowledge through a diversity of academic subjects, which means that both religious and lay students were welcome in the monasteries. Buddhist Viharas also promoted some kind of basic instruction for local children living in the surroundings of the monastery. From this point of view, we can say that Buddhist monasteries in India and Asia developed a schooling function together with a university vocation and the transmission of the Dharma. In conclusion, they became important cultural and educational hubs for many centuries.

### **Buddhist Universities. The Example of Nalanda<sup>9</sup>**

- The most famous Buddhist educational centres in India would be Kanchipura, Kashmira, Odantapuri, Vikramashila and Nalanda. These were large monasteries with a high number of teachers and students, both monks/ novices and lay persons, teaching not only the Buddhist Dharma but also a general scope of academic subjects.
- Among these, Nalanda would probably be the most famous Buddhist “university”. Two Chinese pilgrims, Hiuan-Tsang and Yi-Tsing visited this reputed educational hub. The

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<sup>9</sup> Cf: - Keay F.E. (1992) “ANCIENT EDUCATION IN INDIA”, Cosmo, New Delhi  
-Chaube A. and S.P. (1999) “EDUCATION IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL INDIA”, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi  
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- Giles H.A. (1923) "THE TRAVELS OF FA-HSIEN (399-414). OR RECORD OF THE BUDDHIST KINGDOMS", Cambridge University Press.

location has been identified with modern Baragaon in Bihar. The famous philosopher Nagarjuna praised this university, and the kings of Magadha granted to it a special recognition and status, so that some alumni would always be offered a good job in the royal administration.

- Nalanda comprised six big monasteries with a huge library; the architecture was grand and fine, with elaborate Buddhist carvings in the buildings. The number of monks, novices and lay students amounted to several thousands.
- In terms of age, this mythical university would welcome not only young men but also teenagers and probably elder children, for which it would be considered today as both a higher secondary school and college/ university. We must remember that medieval universities in Europe also accepted boys from fourteen onwards. Students could be religious or lay. Many rich or influential families would send their sons to Nalanda due to its prestige that irradiated beyond the Himalaya to Central Asia and China. However, it was not easy to get an admission to Nalanda, due to its fame and high number of candidates; the exams for admission were severe, and many candidates failed.
- The most important facet of this famous Buddhist university would be its pedagogic spirit, totally akin to modern holistic education –and today, a source of inspiration in India itself in order to transform the predominant robotic system towards conceptual and integral education-.
- For the vast majority of children, the present educational system of India consists of blind rote memorizing without proper understanding. This mass of undigested and excessive information is just poured down into mechanical tests that do not leave any space for real education; both teachers and students only have time to prepare the tests, and both the educational institutes and the parents only take into account the number of marks, even if the student does not remember anything after coming out of the exam hall. The example of the Buddhist university of Nalanda, which was a product of the Indian genius, can help many people in India today realize the aberration of the present robotic system and radically change it for better.
- The example of Nalanda can also remind many Westerners that other civilizations such as India have made highly valuable contributions to the history of education. Nalanda can still echo with all the fundamental principles of humanistic and integral education. It stands as a brilliant achievement showing how the deepest philosophy of education can become a living reality in this world.

According to the Indian scholar Manish Meshram:

“The main aim of Buddhist education is to make a free man, an intelligent man, a wise, moral, talented, non-violent and secular man.”<sup>10</sup>

- Sanskrit grammar was fundamental in Nalanda’s syllabus. Other important subjects were composition –prose and verse-, Buddhist history and scriptures, logics and metaphysics/ philosophy; medicine was also offered on an optional basis. India had a great mathematical and philosophical tradition, certainly evolved by the “Hindu” Gurukulas but also by Buddhist universities like Nalanda.

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<sup>10</sup> Manish Meshram (2013,) pag. 8.

- The humanities were equally promoted, and together with the schools of debate, Nalanda encouraged poetry and literary activities and contests. Even more significant, this University appreciated the value of music, and chanting constituted another valued co-curricular activity very present in the campus life.
- Even physical exercise was highly praised, and the practice of long walks beyond the monastic compound became a fundamental part of Nalanda's daily life.
- The major teaching method was oral, like in the Hindu/ Brahmanic Gurukula –although Nalanda had one of the best libraries of India at that time-. The educational practice certainly incorporated the memorization of scriptures, but this was totally different from the present robotic system, since Buddhist universities like Gurukulas encouraged conceptual understanding, discussion and freedom of thought.
- Needless to say, this Buddhist university included the practice of meditation and inner work; the student was brought from the second to the third eye of knowledge, from understanding to experience, from the outer to the inner world, from the surface to deeper layers of consciousness and reality. It is well-known that the Buddhist tradition offers a very rich spectrum of meditative techniques and instruments of inner work.
- In Nalanda and other Buddhist universities, the educational process was two-fold, comprising both lectures and tuitions/ tutorials, which means that an individualized attention was given to students through some kind of child-centred pedagogy. In fact, the core of Nalanda's pedagogy was not the lecture in the auditorium but the personalized human relationship between master and disciple in the line of the Vedantic Gurukula.
- Another striking feature of Nalanda would be the community spirit in spite of the diversity of opinions and schools in an atmosphere of freedom of thought. Nalanda was so open-minded that it welcomed not only Buddhist students but people coming from other religious traditions. Hence, the population was not homogeneous at all, but still there was a profound respect for everyone and through this diversity a profound sense of unity arose in harmony.
- The dialectical or discussion method was implemented in parallel to what would be termed today intercultural or interreligious dialogue. But the foundation for this culture of dialogue and respect was the human quality or the human relationship, genuine bonds of affection between students and between students and teachers, and the depth of real community life.
- For all these reasons, Nalanda became a major open forum of India, a genuine “vivarium” in a spirit of dialogue, freedom of thought and unity through diversity. Few times in history the world has had such a cultural and educational jewel, still a lighthouse for the present educational scenario, darkened by the robotic system, over-discipline and competition in India and Asia, and by an academic/ rationalistic reductionism in the West that overlooks other dimensions of humanity and reality.
- In conclusion, Nalanda offered all the major features of what today would be considered an integral education. Not only the syllabus was comprehensive and global, covering all the domains of humanity; but also, it was a child-centred and value-based pedagogy directed towards freedom of thought and self-inquiry, where relation, dialogue and community life were equally fundamental.
- To sum up, a genuine experiment of integral education in the transition from the Ancient world to the Middle Ages in the Indian subcontinent and within the spirit of Buddhist philosophy.

## 2. Conclusion

Prof. R. Panikkar strove throughout his academic and intellectual career after intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, convinced that Western culture still carries along a deep silent inertia of cultural imperialism.<sup>11</sup> In spite of some rhetoric and discourses, most of the general textbooks and syllabi are not intercultural yet, and we can easily realize that Indian or Buddhist education are usually absent from academic teaching and publication.

If we consider integral education for instance, we must acknowledge that the Western world only takes into account the renowned Western educationists, such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Steiner, Montessori, Dewey or Kilpatrick, while the major educationists of India are usually ignored. However, they are very present in Indian life, and they can offer invaluable insights to the Western public too. The educational philosophy of Indian sages and educationists such as Vivekananda, R. Tagore, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Sathya Sai Baba, etc, is as important as the contributions from the Western pedagogues mentioned above, but Western culture only examines the Western authors while it easily overlooks what comes from other civilizations.

The cultural phenomenon described here also applies to the Buddhist tradition. There are virtually no books in our bookstalls or libraries about Buddhist education. Almost all the handbooks or essays presenting Buddhism as a religion or philosophy do not even contemplate that there might be a Buddhist pedagogy. This paper tries to show to the Western public that there has been a Buddhist educational philosophy that can be undoubtedly enriching for us. The same reflection would be valid for the whole of India as suggested above. Most of the books about Indian philosophy or Hinduism forget the educational philosophy of this major tradition and civilization. Through this introductory paper we try to open the academic and cultural scenario of the Western world to the depth and beauty of other pedagogic traditions, the Buddhist for instance –in other papers we do the same with the Indian/ Hindu tradition-. Let us hope that all the efforts undergone by Prof. Panikkar will be fruitful, and that the Western world will be more open in the future to a real intercultural dialogue –also in the field of education-. This paper constitutes a humble contribution in this direction.

W. Wisadavet explores the possibilities of developing an educational system based upon Buddhist philosophy that may be truly considered as Buddhist education. The author makes it clear how complex it can be to develop a genuine Buddhist education today in the post-modern world even in Buddhist countries such as Thailand, that have obviously been modernized and Westernized.<sup>12</sup> Precisely for this reason it is even more important to come back to the very spirit of Buddhist education, not mere theoretical teaching of Dhamma in the very frame of modern mainstream schooling, but the genuine philosophy of education of Buddha Himself and the Buddhist tradition following Him as exemplified in its educational institutions. This certainly requires to be aware of the crucial issue of the paradigm as emphasized above. Buddhist philosophy of education implies another world view or paradigm as compared to modern mainstream schooling. If we are not aware

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<sup>11</sup> Cf for instance Panikkar R. (1978) "THE INTRARELIGIOUS DIALOGUE", Paulist Press, New York, and (1999) "RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND PLURALISM", in Sharma and Dugan, ed., "A Dome of Many Colors", Trinity Press International, Harrisburg (Pennsylvania).

<sup>12</sup> Cf Wisadavet W. (2003).

of this fundamental matter we may overlook the main points and we will undoubtedly distort or misunderstand Buddhist philosophy of education.

This is what this paper tries to offer to the contemporary reader, hoping that he or she might awaken an interest to do further research into the genuine educational philosophy of this great master of humanity and this great tradition of human history –by the way, the author is not a Buddhist but a Christian, however trained in intercultural and inter-religious dialogue by Prof. Raimon Panikkar.

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes a sound reflection on parallel lines from the Buddhist Publication Society:

“One major reason for this sad state of affairs (mainstream schooling) is a loss of vision regarding the proper aims of education. (...)

Such a conception of the aim of education (in the modern world) is quite different from that consistent with Buddhist principles. (...)

Above all an educational policy guided by Buddhist principles must aim to instil values as much as to impart information. It must be directed, not merely towards developing social and commercial skills, but towards nurturing in the students the seeds of spiritual nobility.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi ven. (1997) "AIMS OF BUDDHIST EDUCATION", "Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter", no 35, 1997, pag. 1-2.

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## About Author

Prof. Dr. Albert Ferrer (Ph.D.) was educated at the French School of Barcelona and later in some of the oldest universities of Europe: Barcelona, Paris-Sorbonne and Cambridge. After this

European education, he visited schools of integral education of India, and pursued post-doctoral research in Vedantic ashrams of India and in Buddhist monasteries of Myanmar under the guidance of Prof. Raimon Panikkar.

After being a Lecturer at the University of Barcelona, Asia House (Ministry of Foreign Affairs/ Government of Spain) and several Departments of the Government of Catalonia (Religious Affairs, etc), he became Visiting Professor in Sri Sathya Sai University (South India), where he elaborated a project for integral value-based education from an international perspective, blending the best from the West and the East towards the unity of mankind and a paradigm shift. In his home town, he has been appointed as Consultant for Education to the Government of Catalonia.

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