

## The Centrality of Buddhism and Education in Developing Gross National Happiness

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Over the last 25 years or so I have been working in India largely amongst people who converted to Buddhism in 1956 with the encouragement of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. These were formerly known and treated as untouchables in the Hindu caste system. Our work consisted firstly of Dharma activities, meditation classes, Dharma study, lectures and retreats. As a result of Dharma practice many people have radically transformed their minds and lives. Besides Dharma activities under the name of Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, a number of social activities were also started under the name of Bahujan Hitaya, recalling the words of the Buddha to his first disciples. Social activities include hostels and community projects in slums as well as relief and rehabilitation work in recent earthquakes. These activities are all run by young men and women most of whom have grown up with their families in one small room in appalling conditions in slum localities, with no sanitation, no running water, and numerous other disadvantages. Through Buddhist practice they have transformed their own lives, and now they are running projects to help others do likewise.

Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956 along with 500,000 followers (this has continued and estimates put the present population of new converts at over 20,000,000). He saw in Buddhism the possibility both of eradicating the deep psychological scars left by untouchability and developing highly positive individual and social attitudes. Dr. Ambedkar's own life is well worth looking at. Born an untouchable, through the help of socially progressive Indian princes, he was able to complete his education abroad, becoming one of the most highly educated men in India in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A highly qualified economist and lawyer, and an accomplished politician, he brought about considerable social changes for the benefit of his untouchable brethren and other socially disadvantaged groups. However he felt the ethical and psychological changes that Buddhism promised were even more important and would guarantee the social changes he had initiated. It was only through the most radical changes in individual and social attitudes that real social change would take place. In Kathmandu in November 1956 at a conference on Buddhism and Communism he said, "The greatest thing that the Buddha has done is to tell the world that the world cannot be reformed except by the reformation of the mind of man, and the mind of the world."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bhagawan Das ed., *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*, Volume four, p. 27, Ambedkar Sahitya Prakashan, 1980, Bangalore

This goes right to the heart of the subject matter of Gross National Happiness. If one follows Dr. Ambedkar's line of thinking, unless a society is morally and psychologically strong, the other more objective aspects of Gross National Happiness will be threatened. This is as pertinent as ever today in view of the power of the negative aspects of globalisation, consumerism, the internet, advertising and the international media, none of which are likely to subside in the foreseeable future. A recognition that this moral and psychological strength can come from Buddhism seems to be implicit in the approach the Royal Government of Bhutan has taken to the policy of Gross National Happiness.

While Buddhism as a path of self transformation has to be taken on consciously by each individual concerned, history shows us that it has had a very positive impact on the local culture and society wherever it has had a sustained presence. Today the great increase in population and globalisation makes this more difficult than in the past. New ways to communicate the values of the Buddha Dharma widely have to be found. Any discussion on values these days will centre on education including the public school system. We need to examine whether Buddhism can influence and permeate education in such a way that they help to prepare the individual more effectively for the conditions of the modern world, without in anyway restricting their freedom through one form of indoctrination or other biases. Besides looking at the relationship between Buddhism and education this involves questioning the way that Buddhism is presented in the modern world, especially to the young; it needs to be presented in a way that is does not insist on tradition, but is able to relate to their experience. Many young people go through a reaction to their local religious traditions when they come into contact with the modern world. Without discarding the great wealth of tradition, a more accessible approach to Buddhism needs to be developed for the young.

### **Happiness and Buddhism**

Before proceeding with these questions I want to take a brief look at the word happiness itself, and its meaning in Buddhism. Most people see happiness in terms of sense and ego gratification; happiness has to come from favourable conditions outside oneself, or one's mind. The mind that operates on this level is reactive, it does not respond out of its own inner fullness or creativity but reacts blindly, mechanically and repetitively to conditions outside of its control. The cat has to chase the mouse – it cannot stop and reflect whether chasing the mouse will in any way help it or the mouse. Being dependant for its satisfaction from outside stimuli the reactive mind is weak, easily influenced and swayed. It is prone to the grossest of sense stimuli especially sex and violence, which is why films that portray these vividly are usually very popular. Always being pulled in different directions by sense objects, it is fickle, and unable to settle for long. And due

to the ever changing nature of mind and objects, any happiness gained is short lived.

This form of happiness is illustrated by the third circle of the *Bhava Chakra* or Tibetan Wheel of Life, as it is commonly known in English. The shape itself communicates the ever changing but never progressing aspect of *samsara* or worldly life. The third circle from the centre illustrates the six realms of conditioned existence, which although traditionally representing different life possibilities, are equally relevant to our changing mental states in this life itself. Animals are shown enjoying the grossest of pleasures, food, sex and sleep. If these are satisfied the animals are happy, if not they can be aggressive and violent. Others, tied to the plough, spend their lives goaded on by the farmer, up and down their fields, and see no other possibility of existence. They represent the mental state of ignorance, ignorance of any higher significance or satisfaction to life. The *pretas* or hungry ghosts are depicted as having large bellies but long thin necks and very small mouths. They have enormous appetites, which can never be satisfied. To make matters worse, whenever they do get food or drink it turns into excrement or ashes. They represent the mental state of extreme dependency, neurotic craving; however much one gets, one is never satisfied and always craves more. This is the state of the addict, and indeed the consumer, a little pleasure only leading to more dependence. In the *asura* realm the king and the warlords are fighting the gods for the fruit of the tree of life, not realising that although the fruits fall in the realm of the gods, the roots of the tree are in the asura realm itself! The asuras think they can grab happiness by force and manipulation but they never succeed. The beings in the *deva loka* or realm of gods are depicted as having everything they want just by thinking of it. They are intoxicated by the most refined of pleasures, but the conditions for this pleasure are impermanent, and one day will change! The second circle from the centre consists of two halves, one white and one black. In the white half beings are moving up with happy countenances as a result of meritorious action. In the black half, beings are falling down upside down, with anguished painful looks on their faces, and each being chained to the one behind, thus pulling them down. This illustrates on the one hand the temporary nature of happiness gained from positive karma, and on the other the terrible effect on ourselves and others of negative karma. The centre of the wheel consists of three animals, the pig, the cock and the snake, each biting the tail of the one in front, showing how one leads inevitably to the other. The pig, being led by its nose and not eyes, represents ignorance or delusion. Ignorance consists in thinking that one cannot change. Happiness therefore has to come from outside, and hence the birth of greed represented by the cock. Happiness thwarted is pain, and again if we do not see that we can change, we try and eradicate the pain we experience with reference to the world outside of us, hence the birth of aversion and hatred. Hatred narrows our vision and so reinforces ignorance.

In terms of our subject Gross National Happiness, this level of mind and happiness is clearly unsatisfactory. Indeed this level of mind is the delight of the multinationals and the international media. Both depend on advertising, said to be the biggest industry in the world, firstly to sell their products and secondly to finance their programmes. Advertisers promise an immediate and attractive happiness through what they are trying to sell, appealing directly to the senses and the ego, and trying to by pass the rational mind. Because of the money they have they can use the most effective means available to do so in a way that “undeveloped” or “developing” societies find it hard to resist. Advertisers do not want to encourage objective thought (although as part of their ploy they may pretend to), but rather the opposite. And of course they want to create dependence which they do through encouraging greed, ignorance, jealousy, insecurity, and all their other ugly siblings. They thrive on weak, reactive and dependant mental states, trying to inculcate and perpetuate them. If negative mental states are encouraged and perpetuated, while positive ones are weakened, the social and cultural strengths that are required to maintain the other, more external aspects of Gross National Happiness will be eroded. This will inevitably contribute to the degradation of the environment, an increasing gap between rich and poor, a separation from cultural roots, and less responsive social attitudes on the part of the citizens, all of which will have an inevitable affect on governance. However positive the environment, economic well-being, culture and good governance may be, it will be extremely difficult for them to withstand this onslaught.

The happiness that is dependant on sense and ego gratification is not, according to Buddhist understanding happiness at all. While there may be some occasional enjoyment, there is much more suffering involved. A truer happiness arises from living an increasingly skilful and pure life, having a clear conscience, from generosity and helping others, from friendship, and from creative endeavour. There is the spiritual joy that comes from meditation and finally Enlightenment, the highest happiness man can achieve. The Buddhist life progresses from the realisation that conditioned existence is by its very nature unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) to the realisation of Nirvana, the state of being permanently free of *dukkha*. That state of realisation, Enlightenment, is spoken of as the supreme bliss, the state of peace, a state of unrestricted freedom from all bonds. This state remains unshaken no matter how unfavourable external conditions may be. The further one goes in this direction the less dependant one’s mind and happiness becomes on external conditions (Enlightenment itself is said to be unconditioned) and the stronger and more positive one’s attitudes become. The less likely one is to be drawn into that vortex that the forces of greed in the modern world would like to stimulate and the more one is enabled to take what is useful from developments in the modern world and to leave aside what is not.

It is the individual who understands and practises the Buddha Dharma. However this understanding and practise has significant implications and reverberations for the wider society. The way individual practice affects society is to be understood if we appreciate the centrality of Buddhism to Gross National Happiness, and examine ways in which to make this connection more effective.

Buddhist practice is based on the understanding that our lives are inextricably bound up with others. *Sila*, or morality, the first of the three trainings or major stages of the Path, involves transforming behaviour and speech – both of which are directly concerned with others. *Samadhi*, or meditation, involves cultivating awareness and highly skilful attitudes towards others, such as loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. *Prajna*, or wisdom, involves seeing that ultimately there is no difference between oneself and others; this realisation gives rise to the higher or enlightened compassion.

Those people committed to this practice make up, at least in principle, the Sangha. Dr. Ambedkar saw the role of the Sangha (he did not exclude the possibility of Sangha including lay people) as central to the question of social transformation. Because of their systematic practice and cultivation of higher and more skilful mental states they would constitute a model society, setting an example to others how to live in the best way, and indeed showing that such a higher life was possible. Concerned as they were for others, they would also be able to work effectively for their uplift, both socially and through the Buddha Dharma. History has borne this out. Wherever Buddhism has travelled the Sangha has, through its own example, practice and work, given the wider population a higher dimension to life, drawing it upwards towards higher forms of happiness away from that based on the gross senses.

The social concern and implications were inherent in Buddhism from the very beginning. At the end of his first post Enlightenment rainy season retreat, the Buddha exhorted his first disciples to travel the roads and pathways of for the welfare and happiness of the many people (*bahujana hitaya, bahujana sukkhaya*). And he exhorted them to travel alone so that they would reach the largest number of people. His own example was not wanting in this respect; throughout the 35 years as the Buddha he was continually going out to those in different states of suffering. He frequently illustrated his teachings with examples from his past lives as a Bodhisattva, which eventually blossomed into the glorious Mahayana tradition.

While the Buddha did not say a great deal about social questions, perhaps because there was not a lot to say at the time, what he did say was full of significance. He was extremely critical of caste and a society where birth was given more importance than merit, and he set an example by making sure that the *bhikshu sangha* was free of caste and social divisions. One of the limbs of his most famous teaching, the Noble Eightfold Path, is Right Livelihood in which those livelihoods involving harming other beings

in any way are actively discouraged. The list he gave then was small, but today with the great proliferation of occupations, it would be very long indeed. Most pertinent in this context, he talked of the duties of the Dharmaraja, the king (or government) who practiced the Dharma. His duty was to uphold the moral precepts and encourage his subjects to practice them. If the moral precepts, which involve the cultivation of skilful behaviour and speech, are practiced on a wide scale, that society will be positive and responsible.

Although there are many blemishes in the name of Buddhism, on the whole where ever it has spread it has encouraged civilised values, peace and harmony, at least as far as religion is concerned, an appreciation of art and beauty, education, and action to help those suffering. In any given society, even where Buddhism is the predominant religion, only a relatively very small proportion of the population is likely to take the practice of the Buddha Dharma very seriously. However the activity and example of the Sangha and Dharmaraja (if such exists) can result in positive social attitudes and conditions as well as a general openness to higher and more skilful values. The Sangha will receive the support and appreciation of the wider society thus extending their influence.

In Bhutan, where the concept of Gross National Happiness originated, the principle of the Dharmaraja is very much alive, more than anywhere else in the world, through the support of the King and Government. Buddhism is a living tradition with enormous appreciation and respect from the society at large. His Excellency, the Prime Minister of Bhutan, emphasises the role that Buddhism plays in the approach of the Royal Government of Bhutan in the concept of Gross National Happiness and refers to enlightened education, education permeated by Buddhist values.<sup>2</sup> Although he does not go into details it will be very interesting and instructive for Buddhists in other parts of the world, and indeed for non-Buddhists interested in Gross National Happiness to see how Buddhism can influence the public education system. If positive values are not consciously introduced into the education system it is likely that the negative values of the modern world will seep in, especially as education throughout most of the world tends to be based on Western models aiming at fitting into a Westernised world, a world in which ethics and spirituality are not generally held in high regard.

Although mixing religion and education has a generally bad press in the liberal West, modern educational values and Buddhist values coincide in a number of ways. They agree on not trying to bias the students in any way, restrict them through indoctrination, or encourage superstitious attitudes. Buddhism stands for the cultivation of awareness at all levels, leading to freedom from all wrong views and has no room for dogmatism whatsoever. It has no place for psychological or other forms of conditioning

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<sup>2</sup> Lyonpo Jigme Y. Thinley, *Values and Development: Gross National Happiness in Gross National Happiness*, p. 17-18, Centre For Bhutan Studies, 1999, Thimpu

that close our minds rather than open them. This awareness has considerable ethical and social implications which extend to the overall environment. This openness of Buddhism is illustrated by the Buddha's exhortation to the Kalamas:

"Now, Kalamas, do not ye go by hearsay, nor by what is handed down by others, nor by what people say, nor by what is stated on the authority of your traditional teachings. Do not go by reasoning, nor by inferring, nor by argument as to method, nor from reflection on or approval of an opinion, nor out of respect thinking a recluse must be deferred to. But, Kalamas, when you know, of yourselves: 'These teachings are not good; they are blameworthy; they are condemned by the wise; these teachings, when followed out and put into practice, conduce to loss and suffering' - the reject them."<sup>3</sup>

Positive moral attitudes, especially non-violence, the significance of right livelihood, positive human communication skills, the essential equality of all human beings, respect for others, honouring their right to make up their own mind and live in the way they want to, appreciation of the environment, are all of the essence of Buddhist practice and can all be effectively communicated through education. The ideal teacher is the Kalyana mitra (which the Buddha spoke of as of the essence of the Buddhist spiritual life), the experienced and loving friend who is concerned above all else with the overall well-being of the other. Although they are Buddhist values, they can be communicated very effectively without reference to Buddhism as humanistic values and a number of prominent Buddhist teachers have made this connection over the last fifty years or so. At the same time Buddhist teachings have no conflict with science and rationality - Buddhism has encouraged logical thinking and generally encourages a critical approach to life. Buddhist education would also involve a critical appreciation of the best that civilisation has produced. It has no problem with positive developments in other religions. There should therefore be no fear of Buddhism having an adverse or limiting affect on education as there sometimes is of other religions

With all the research available there should be no doubt about the efficacy of education in helping to cultivate positive attitudes - or otherwise as history has shown. For it to be most effective it requires the best possible resources being put at its disposal. The best people need to be attracted to teach and manage the education system. The most appropriate teaching methods need to be fully researched, and then applied. The most suitable learning environments need to be developed. Classes need to be small. The curriculum needs to be suitably balanced. Children need to receive

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Transl. F. L. Woodward, Some Sayings of the Buddha, p 188, The Buddhist Society, 1974. London*

individual attention, not only in the learning process, but also in terms of the development of their personalities. Most of all Buddhist values need to permeate the whole syllabus and not be just a lesson themselves, for an hour or two a week. Obviously for such a programme to be successful there has to be both the will and the finance to make it a priority. But the individual and social rewards would be very great.

One question that will have to consciously taken on in communicating Buddhism through the education system, is that of finding ways of presentation that are accessible to those brought up with a scientific education and exposed to the forces of globalisation and the international media. In countries where Buddhism has a long history the modern world and Buddhist tradition do not seem to co-exist very easily. I have attended a number of Buddhist conferences in the East over the last 20 years in which the common refrain was "how can the youth be kept interested in Buddhism?". This concern is often felt to be regrettable, representing some sort of failure in the Buddha's teachings, with the result that the answers people come up with are very often superficial. But this process of finding new ways to communicate the Buddha Dharma in changing social, cultural and geographical conditions has been going on from the beginning of Buddhist history and the fact that it can and does take place is part of the inherent creativity of Buddhism. Here I am not going to suggest ways to communicate the Buddha Dharma in the modern world; that has to be done by those in each particular situation. Rather I shall look at areas of exploration and investigation that could be helpful in this process.

Buddhism in the last 50 years has spread to many Western countries, where all the major traditions are now represented. Besides the Eastern teachers who brought Buddhism to Western shores, there have been some great Western teachers like Sangharakshita and Lama Govinda, who were not only well acquainted with Western philosophical traditions and culture but also deeply steeped in the teachings of the different Buddhist teachings of Asia. Their approaches to the understanding and practice of the Buddha Dharma are well worth exploring and could be of relevance to the questions facing Asian Buddhists in the fast changing world. Besides such teachers there is now a vast field of experience build up from the practice of Western Buddhists in Western conditions. Indeed at present Buddhism is going through an interesting period of transition; Western Buddhists are grappling with how to approach the Dharma without depending on the charismatic Eastern teachers who established many of the initial Buddhist activities there. There is much that could be gained (both ways) from interaction with those from Western cultures, and yet who have found in Buddhism the answers to their spiritual quest – this is one of the benefits of the global village. How is it that such people, coming from cultures where multinational corporations and the sort of media we now see invading Asia dominate, commit themselves so wholeheartedly to Buddhist practice?



In countries where there is a long Buddhist tradition, it is often hard to distinguish between Buddhism and the local culture, so much have they grown together. But in a fast changing world anything identified with the past culture, however noble, as Buddhism is very often, may be seen as not relevant to the modern world. Not only Buddhism's contribution to local culture but Buddhism as a spiritual path will be obscured if not rejected. It may therefore be necessary to simplify the way the Buddha Dharma is taught and practiced and try and raise it out of its traditional cultural context. Many Eastern Buddhist teachers have gone to the West and have had to do just that – communicate the Buddha Dharma out of the traditional cultural context in which they themselves learnt it. They have had to distinguish themselves between what is the Dharma and what are cultural accretions, however positive they may be. Interaction with such teachers who have taught for a long time in the West could be of immense value to those traditional Buddhist cultures finding difficulties with modern developments.

A number of interesting developments have come out of interaction between Western and Eastern Buddhists in recent years, three of which I shall mention. Firstly there is the loosely termed "socially engaged Buddhist movement". Socially engaged Buddhists try to apply Buddhist principles proactively to social questions such as the environment, human rights, poverty, inequality, exploitation, communal violence. Eastern Buddhist teachers have had a very positive influence on some Western social activists many of whom can no longer accept the guidance of the Christian churches. At the same time this has helped to re-stimulate such activism in the Buddhist East. Secondly there is the whole area of academic study and translation, much of it these days conducted by Buddhist practitioners, as was only rarely the case until very recently. Texts of all major Buddhist traditions are now widely available in translation throughout the world, so that many more can benefit from the teaching in them. The critical assessment of these texts has also been helpful to Buddhist practitioners and students. An example of Buddhism in the East being stimulated by Buddhist developments in the West is increasing interest in meditation. Although most "Buddhist countries" meditation have a long unbroken tradition of meditation practice, part of the resurgence of interest in these countries is no doubt because of its popularity in the West. While initial interest in the West may be due to seeking psychological peace of mind and freedom from stress, it often leads to a serious interest in the other aspects of the Buddha Dharma, and this seems to be happening also in the Buddhist East.

Another area that I and some other Western Buddhists have found useful is the approach of Dr. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, but more important, the one by whose efforts Buddhism was effectively returned to India, the land of its birth. One of the major factors that helped him decide to convert to Buddhism was that he felt it spoke

more to the modern man and women than any other religion. This was important not just for himself, educated as he was in the Western liberal tradition, but also for his untouchable brethren whom he wanted above all else to join the modern world. He had to have a religion that did not in any way compromise his most cherished values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Indeed so convinced was he that these were implicit in Buddhism that he declared that he learnt them not from the French Revolution but from the Buddha. He wanted his people to be able to communicate with the rest of humanity, a chance they had never had as untouchables. For this to be possible the religion he chose for them also had to be the most relevant to men and women throughout the modern world. He wrote:

“(The Buddha) taught as part of his religion, social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom. He taught equality, equality not between man and man only but between man and woman. It would be difficult to find a religious teacher to compare with the Buddha whose teaching embraced so many aspects of the social life of a people and whose doctrines are so modern and whose main concern was to give salvation to man in his life and not to promise it to him in heaven after he is dead.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Dr. Ambedkar was not able to write a great deal on Buddhism and although he was of necessity preoccupied with the eradication of caste and untouchability in the Indian situation, these should not discourage us from examining his work. He obviously thought extremely deeply about Buddhism in the modern world, and his ideas, if fully examined, may stimulate us in our quest to practice and communicate the Dharma effectively in the global village.

Buddhism has always had a profound influence on the societies it has had a sustained presence in. More recently Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, the policy of Gross National Happiness of the Royal Government of Bhutan, and the interest and development of Buddhism in the West all illustrate how socially alive and creative the Buddha Dharma is still today, 2,500 years after it was first taught. Investigating ways in which Buddhist principles can be applied to the education system will help it to be even more efficacious in generating positive social attitudes that enable more to make use of the best that the modern world has to offer while leaving aside what is not helpful, but also enable one to make best uses of other resources such as the environment and good governance. It is not that education was not influenced by the Dharma in Buddhist countries in the past, it was. However until recent times education was restricted to certain sections of the population. Today because the principle of universal education is accepted almost everywhere the potential benefits of the

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in D.C. Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar on Buddhism*, p 27-8, Peoples' Education Society, 1982, Bombay

influence of Buddhism on education are so much greater. Added to this considerable progress has been made in understanding the learning process.

Basic Buddhist principles are not only relevant to the Buddhist world; in as much they can be communicated in secular and humanitarian terms they can be of use to the wider world where there is so much moral uncertainty in education. As in so much else, example is the best means to encourage others. It is to be hoped that those countries with a long tradition of Buddhism will appreciate their great wealth, examine ways to enrich the education system with Buddhist principles, and prioritise education in terms of the resources at their disposal.