

Why This? Why Now?

The history and reasoning for an international Buddhist educational model

By Noa Jones and Kristin Lhatso

All major religions of the world have systems of educating children in their traditions, beliefs, rituals, and values. There are *maktab* and *madrasas* for Muslims, Catholic schools, Jewish day schools, Sunday schools, Catechism classes, all kinds of afterschool programs, camps, and specialized schools meant to teach children to become the stewards of their respective religious traditions. Buddhist education for children has, for the most part, been offered to monastic communities and more recently through grassroots initiatives that are few and far between. Because Buddhism is not culture bound, there are few broadly accepted holidays, festivals and customs to introduce to children. Often, the transference of the Buddhist view happens in the home. Some Buddhist parents have independently created programs for children, but there is no generally accepted content or method for teaching the dharma to children.

In many ways, modern education systems work wonders. The innovations we have seen in this lifetime alone are phenomenal— artificial intelligence, networks, new media, breakthroughs in medicine, arts, robotics, space travel, and so much more. But what seems to be missing from these advances is a connection to the view of bodhicitta and dependent origination. Innovations that could be of inconceivable value to humanity and our natural world don't reach their fullest potential without this connection to wisdom and to a greater intention. Without the compass of altruistic intention, even the most creative inventions can be corrupted by materialism. When a society accepts materialist measures as the primary indicators of progress, it encourages imbalanced governance, fixation on consumption, and a degraded spiritual life, all of which threaten the well-being of people and society. The majority of current educational systems narrowly focus on these materialistic outcomes, cultivating a disconnected, imbalanced intelligence with an infatuation with a materialist worldview. This sort of education barely skims the surface of human potential.

Current neuroscience is now catching up with the extraordinary wisdom that Buddha Shakyamuni taught 2,500 years ago and that has been held in an unbroken lineage since: the wisdom of nonduality. Educators are realizing that rigid, dualistic thinking does not equip students to skillfully navigate the complexities of modern life. Innovation requires curiosity and open-minded thinking, traits that are now the focus of premiere institutions in the interest of generating "successful" graduates. Traditional Buddhist logic and wisdom are powerful means to suspend habitual thinking and support students in developing an innovative approach to being

in the world. But with the addition of bodhicitta, doing this for the benefit of others, these innovations become much more than just a means to get rich.

The need for a more wholesome education is trending these days. Education administrators around the world are becoming increasingly receptive to introducing various forms of ethics, morality and practices of self-knowledge in their systems. There have been encouraging signs of change in some schools, such as the introduction of individualized learning programs and mindfulness. Khyentse Foundation's *Global Survey of Buddhist Education* (2016), reported an abundance of activity in spiritual education worldwide. There is a growing trend of mindfulness and compassion in the classroom, encouraged by research that proves their effectiveness for well-being, development of executive function, and classroom management. However, public secular schools must be careful not to be seen as promoting any kind of organized religion, so these techniques and values are often taught untethered from the wisdom traditions from which they were taken.

In a way, I feel a lot of empathy for those who are uncomfortable with obedience to traditional forms. After all, we do need to employ skillful means to present and package our ancient Buddhist wisdom well for today's people and needs. On the other hand, there are huge dangers in separating those skillful means from their traditional roots and turning them into a type of New Age sect or hipster spirituality. — Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche

The outcome of this untethered approach is a whole array of spiritual educational products disconnected from lineage and delivered by teachers who are not always intimately familiar with the concepts and practices they are teaching. Buddhist beliefs and methods are isolated, adapted, blended, and repackaged using terms like "human values," "compassion education," "secular ethics," "social and moral enhancement," and "wellbeing programs." They may go so far as to use the word mindfulness, but stop short of teaching more complex concepts such as dependent arising, bodhicitta, impermanence, and karma. Though some of these initiatives are quite good, others are misguided due to the lack of direct experience with and precise connection to an authentic unbroken dharma lineage.

The hijacking of Buddhism by watered-down attempts to make it more modern, alluring and acceptable is happening before our very eyes. The contemporary mindfulness movement, for example, is rife with diluted Buddhism. To appeal to American obsessions with optimal health, some mindfulness teachers have been touting it as a mental fitness tool, and others as a self-help panacea for all existential ills, including dysfunctional relationships. If people don't know the original intent of mindfulness and vipassana, they will soon forget its true purpose and roots in Indian Buddhism. In the new and improved

versions of ancient wisdom, consumer-driven mindfulness training is geared to peak performance benefits, avoiding the inconvenient truths of suffering and emptiness. But vipassana, as a wisdom query into how things entangle, bind and delude us, does not necessarily lead to feel-good states. Of course, contemporary expectations are understandable. People are stressed, and desperate for something to hang on to. — Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche

Secular mindfulness programs have value, but when cut off from their source, they are at risk of being misperceived, watered down, and not serving students to the extent they could if unapologetically connected to lineage and the blessing line that lineage offers. Mindfulness programs connected to tradition will have a much deeper impact. Linking to tradition doesn't mean proselytizing, it simply means honoring the source, connecting to the unbroken wisdom lineage, and creating tendrils (auspicious coincidence or circumstance). This connection serves to protect against the inevitable obstacles students will encounter as they find their own way. Education connected to lineage helps remedy the “out on a limb” quality of modern life.

Guided by a number of Buddhist teachers and scholars, Middle Way Education is pioneering a model of Buddhist education with a comprehensive curriculum and teaching methodology that can be used to create new schools, redefine existing schools, and support children's programs around the world. In this model, the dharma is not taught as a separate course, segregated from traditional subjects like science and history. We take a Buddhist approach to all aspects of education, relying on the richness of the dharma to create a fully integrated, inquiry-driven, experience. This way, Buddhist study and practice comes alive in a very personal way for every student.

While the main purpose of Middle Way Education is to help students to benefit from the teachings of the Buddha, the approach is not dogmatic or limited to a specific Buddhist lineage. The model draws from the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions, not just in terms of content covered; the methodologies and the way students are encouraged to learn will also be informed by the abundant diversity of teachings within these traditions. How can the Buddhist view give rise to an inspiring and highly awake progressive modern education? What are the unique jewels that will serve students and teachers? These are the sorts of questions that will be explored as the educational model is designed and implemented at the Middle Way pilot school. Mindfulness is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of enriching student learning and outcomes. We are envisioning an educational model that brings immeasurable (and measurable) benefits by being fully steeped in the dharma. The experiment is to see what happens to education when it is completely permeated by Buddhist wisdom traditions.

Whether students choose to become practitioners, they will have a rich appreciation for all the different facets of Buddhist study and practice.

To be a Buddhist is not of utmost importance for Buddhists. There isn't one stanza in the entire Buddhist world that says, 'May all become Buddhist'. Instead we pray, may all become Buddha, awakened ones. — Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche

A Middle Way education will yield students who are connected, actively-involved, life-long learners, who can speak articulately about Buddhist history and practice from the perspective of different lineages and traditions, who understand the fundamental Buddhist view, and have a facility in meditation and contemplation, whether or not they choose to practice or to label themselves as Buddhists. In short, we want students to experience an education that gives them enormous freedom and capacity to manifest for the benefit of themselves and others.

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