

Optimizing Intellectual Achievements by Introducing Buddhist Education

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Introduction

The purpose of this research paper is to highlight tools usable in implementing the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDG) which are targeted to be met by 2015. All the MDGs are interrelated to each other and as education plays a vital role in developing and accomplishing these goals, this paper attempts to introduce Buddhist Education in making a difference. This paper also tries to answer questions on good education and its impacts on development through the lens of Buddhism. Throughout the paper, Myanmar has been used as a country for case study in introducing the tools so as to optimize its intellectual achievements in stepping forward for further development and meeting MDGs.

UN's Initiative for Betterment of 21st Century

By and large, the UN has been successful in accomplishing its goals set for the 21st century known as Millennium Development Goals (MDG). These goals include: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;

Achieve universal primary education; Promote gender equality and empower women; Reduce child mortality; Improve maternal health; Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; Ensure environmental sustainability; and Develop a global partnership for development. The success in implementing these goals lies not only on the measures taken by UN and its partners, but also on the cooperation, commitment and willingness to make a difference by the state and its people of the target region. Many success stories across the globe can be found in the UN annual reports. Among them is Myanmar which has been undergoing a dramatic transformation in various sectors.

Why Intellectual Achievements?

From the first one to the last one, UN's MDGs are interrelated. It is universally accepted that both in theory and in practice, the most common catalyst for development is good education. In the UN context, education covers formal and informal as well as academic and non-academic education. Here, the emphasis is on formal, academic education. By making endowments in education and upgrading intellectual standards, a state or region has every potential to make certain sustainable developments. Good education enhances intellectual society, the entity which is needed the most in human society as a whole. In other words, the growth of intellectual society completely depends on how much good education a state can offer to its people. In light of this, intellectual achievement has become great concern to every state looking forward to the continuous development, especially the Third World countries. Again, sustainability of any development can be gained through intellectual achievements.

Myanmar Education in Brief

After having isolated itself from the rest of the world for several decades, Myanmar has undergone a great decline in quality and standard of its education system. There are three major factors that cause this decline. The use of centralized system in education, the shutdown of private schools and institutions, together with deterioration in country's economy that crippled both basic education system and the higher education system. Besides, national curriculum was revised and altered; all the private schools were nationalized; the teaching

methodology was totally changed to teacher centered; and the parrot learning was the only approach of learning from primary to high-school. Eventually, the country's education system lost its quality, the universities and institutions lost international recognition and the intellectual society suffered brain-drain.

In recent years, Myanmar has been undergoing democratization and internationalization in which government allows private sector to involve again in country's basic education sector from primary up to high-school. This initiative does not fulfill the real need of the country's education system as a whole. In fact, it is just a pathway for students who wish to pursue education abroad after high-school and the rest of the country still suffers from lower quality education. Again, Myanmar recognizes that human capital plays an important role in the development goals of the country. Thus it has made higher education system a national priority. With the help of international assistance, Myanmar sets short to long-term goals for higher education. In 2013, the government has increased the country's education budget from \$340 to \$740, more than a double of previous spending. Hence, it has begun to implement wide-ranging reforms¹.

How to Eradicate Root Causes

The question is whether an increase in government budget for education sector can solve the problem of Myanmar's degraded education standard. The answer depends on many factors and poses several questions on issues such as new education policy; political context; current lack of capacity to build international ties; the educational context and the centralization/decentralization of bureaucracy and higher education².

The real needs for education reform should be addressed and discussed thoroughly. For this purpose, the root causes of the deterioration of Myanmar education should be clearly defined. As

1. Report on the IIE Myanmar Initiative, Institute of International Education, April 2013.

2. Report on the IIE Myanmar Initiative, Institute of International Education, April 2013.

mentioned above, there are three major factors that cause the decline of the quality of Myanmar Education. As for the first one, the use of centralized system, it can be tackled by policy measure, that is, simply by changing the country's backward going policy. Currently, the country education system is moving towards decentralized system and creating a positive scenario. Similarly, the second root cause is the shutting down of private schools, which resulted in lack of competition and reduced quality, the problem can be solved by a policy reform, that is, allowing private sector to open schools again. This reform has already taken place. However, the third root cause which is the deterioration of country's economy should be handled with tremendous care. It sounds simple but its implications are complicated and long-lasting. Being intertwined with the first root cause, it encourages corruption in the chain of the whole system. All the three parties: the administrators, the teachers and the students have lost their basic morals. They adhered to bad attitude. Bribery has become prominent. For instance, an authority from administrative body would insist a high-school Chemistry teacher to teach Mathematics in anticipation of a certain amount of money as a bribe. In the same way, a class teacher would pick on a student who doesn't take private tuition class with the teacher. All these things happen because of insufficient income and ever rising living costs. Even though government has raised salary of teachers, it cannot make any better changes.

Apart from conventional macroeconomic measures to solve and overcome such crucial problem, there is an alternative. The remedy should be in holistic approach because otherwise it will lead again to the never ending vicious circle.

Introducing Buddhist Education

Western educationists argue that the word education comes from Latin word "Educare" which means "to bring up" or "to raise". Some of them argue that it comes from Latin term "Educere" which means "to lead forth" or "to come out". All these meanings indicate that education seeks to nourish the good qualities in a man and draw out the best in every individual. Education seeks to develop the innate

inner capacities of man³. According to Aristotle, “Education” is the creation of a sound mind in a sound body. It develops man’s faculty, especially his mind so that he may be able to enjoy the contemplation of supreme truth, goodness and beauty of which perfect happiness consists of⁴. From a Buddhist point of view, all these definitions and explanations on education are relevant and suitable to the humankind in pursuit of happiness and freedom. The more efficient the education system, the better the people of the society in which the system is established.

When discussing Buddhist education, first of all it is needed to know the meaning of Buddhism itself. Buddhism simply means teachings of Buddha. In most simple terms, what Buddha has taught is to be learned and to be applied on daily basis so as to have better life now and then, and to have ultimate happiness. Buddhist Education is said to be educating people with teachings of Buddha. Teaching, learning, memorizing, analyzing, discussing, practicing and applying the teachings of Buddha refer to Buddhist Education. Introducing Buddhist Education would help people to develop intellectually, improving human development index (HDI) which then contributes in accomplishing Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

The Three Pillar Questions

While considering introduction of Buddhist Education, three pillar questions are needed to be taken into account which are similar to the three basic economic questions. These questions are:

1. What to educate?
2. How to educate?
3. Whom to educate?

Unlike any other disciplines such as science or social studies, Buddhist Education may encounter obstacle because it sounds like

3. <http://www.preservearticles.com/201105056299/meaning-and-definition-and-concept-of-education.html>

4. <http://www.preservearticles.com/201105056299/meaning-and-definition-and-concept-of-education.html>

religious study and many might misunderstand that this is such an endeavor to instill Buddhism compulsorily in schools. In fact, and in reality, this is just a misconception. It is not true. Teachings of Buddha are not confined to those who only believe in Buddha. Instead, the teachings are universal and can be learned and practiced by all who seek to enjoy peaceful, productive and prosperous life. However, Myanmar with different ethnic minorities with different faiths, every initiative should be taken carefully in order not to confuse people and not to mislead them into thinking that forced education system is repeated.

With regard to the first pillar question, 'What to educate?' the simplest answer would be Dharma. Dharma has many meanings and the underlying notion is of universal law which governs both the physical and moral order of the universe⁵.

In this respect, since Dharma is universal, it belongs to human race regardless of their faith or belief. Although we call it Buddha Dharma, it is not invented or created by the Buddha. The universal law is already there and Buddha is the one who discovered it. Dharma is very comprehensive. It covers all aspects of life. Living in accordance with Dharma and implementing its requirements is thought to lead to happiness, fulfillment and salvation⁶.

Dharma comes in many volumes as can be found in Buddhist Scriptures. Among them, the core essence of Dharma constitutes Sīla (Morality), Samādhi (Concentration) and Pāññā (Wisdom) and these should be taken into consideration when thinking about what to educate or what to teach both for the basic and higher education.

First of all, people should be taught to undertake Sīla (Morality) since childhood. Basically, there are five fundamental Sīla also known as the Five Precepts. These Five Precepts are:

5. Damien Keown, *Buddhist Ethics, A very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2005

6. Damien Keown, *Buddhist Ethics, A very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

- To refrain from killing or harming living creatures,
- To refrain from stealing or taking what has not been given,
- To refrain from sexual misconducts,
- To refrain from telling lies and speaking falsely, and
- To refrain from taking intoxicants.

If one is aware of these Sīla and the consequences of breaking them, and then finally observes these Sīla in daily life, the courts in every town shall have to close their doors. These are the very basic of human discipline and they also teach how to live responsibly to become a better person or a better citizen. The expected outcome is that there would be elimination of corruption. The practice of cheating in exams and plagiarism by many students would also be removed. Secondly, cultivating Samādhi (Concentration) should be considered as vital ingredient next to Sīla. There are several ways to cultivate Samādhi, and that shall be discussed when dealing with the second pillar question. The expected outcome for teaching how to cultivate Samādhi is to help people in order to have innovative mind and help them to develop creativity. Thirdly and lastly, Pāññā (Wisdom) should be developed at all levels of students. Again the approach shall be discussed under the next heading. The expected outcome is to create a sustainable development in individual as well as in the society as whole. The following diagram shows the relationship between the core essence of Dharma and its expected outcomes.

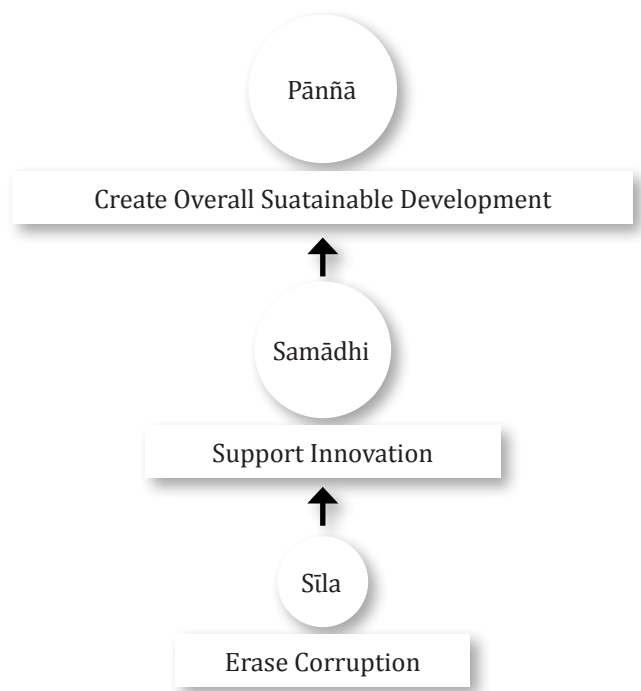


Figure 1. The essence of Dharma and expected outcomes

The next question is ‘How to educate?’ The answer to this question shall focus on the approach in delivering the Dharma. Here, the Noble Eightfold Path and its Three Divisions are to be used as tools for the approach. The Noble Eightfold Path is another crucial fundamental in Buddhist teaching. It is included in the first sermon of the Buddha after His enlightenment. As it is called path, the eight factors lead to nirvana as its ultimate goal. These eight factors are: Right View; Right Thinking; Right Speech; Right Action; Right Livelihood; Right Effort; Right Mindfulness; and Right Meditation.

These eight factors can be categorized into three divisions namely Sīla (Morality), Samādhi (Concentration) and Pāṇṇā (Wisdom). The third, fourth, and the fifth factors such as right speech, right action and right livelihood fall in the first category Sīla (Morality) and they are directly linked to the Five Precepts. Teaching, understanding and applying the Five Precepts would accomplish right speech, right action and right livelihood and vice-versa. Again, the sixth, the seventh and the eighth factors such as right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation fall in the second category, Samādhi (Concentration).

In order to establish Samādhi, it is needed to train people to be able to put right effort. In educational context, the simplest example would be for students to exert their efforts in relevant studies rather than on irrelevant activities. Students should be mindful on their studies so as to engage in right mindfulness and right meditation means to contemplate on what they have studied in order to apply correctly and appropriately.

Lastly, the first and the second factors of the eightfold path, Right View and Right Thinking fall in the category of Pāññā (Wisdom). To develop Pāññā, there are eight steps to be accomplished: to learn carefully; to contemplate and reflect what has been learned; to ask questions; to discuss; to analyze; to note carefully; to apply; and to learn by-heart. These steps combined with tools of the above mentioned three divisions would help both young and adult students not only to accomplish their studies but also to reach intellectual achievements. The following figure shows the grouping of the factors of Noble Eightfold Path into the three fundamentals, Sīla, Samādhi and Pāññā.

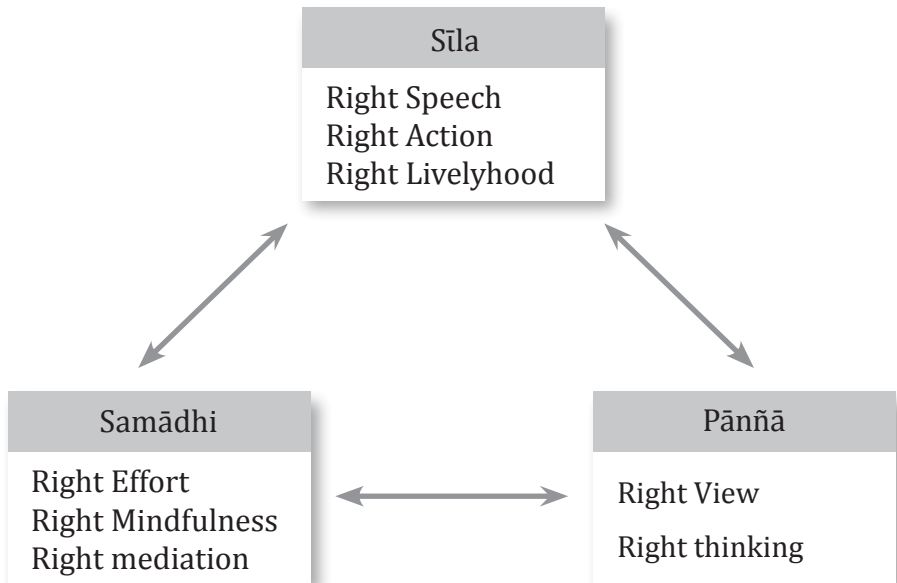


Figure 2, The grouping of the factors of Noble Eightfold Path in association with Sīla, Samādhi and Pāññā.

Regarding the last question, ‘Whom to educate?’; the answer shall be, both Basic Education (Primary and Secondary) and Higher Education (Colleges and Universities). For more than half a century many people at all levels, especially in the public sector, are terribly corrupted. Myanmar, by any means, cannot afford to let this happen to its new generations if it really wants genuine development. The whole population of the country should be made aware of the need and the importance of upgrading intellectual skills and how important it is for the tools in question to be observed and applied.

Conclusion

Optimizing intellectual achievement is one way to meet the goals set for the whole human race by the United Nations. Through Buddhist Education, this optimization process can be smooth, viable and succeeded. With regard to the implementation of UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDG), most target countries are in need of upgrading both physical infrastructure and mental infrastructure. Applying the means of Buddhist Education would make it possible for upgrading the two types of infrastructures simultaneously as discussed throughout this paper. Last but not the least, it is advisable not to confuse Buddhist Education as purely a tool for development and not for converting faith of people from different religions.