INTRODUCTION

I am pleased that I was asked to write about education and learning from a Buddhist perspective rather than ‘A Buddhist Philosophy of Education’. How could one person encapsulate the entire Buddhist canon and history and its many different paths into one definitive statement on education? This author could not, so a more modest and less presumptuous title is appropriate.

One could structure this article in a host of different ways and part of the challenge in taking on a task such as this is to find a way in which thoughts can be marshaled into some semblance of order which makes sense to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. I have chosen to identify two key concepts: citta which translates as ‘heart or mind’; and the four ‘divine abiding’ or mental states - the Brahma Viharas – which many Buddhists try to develop and which are a very important part of my own practice. These two concepts present one way, a ‘skilful means’, by which this large and difficult question can be addressed. There are, no doubt, many others.

Citta

I think it was on the fact that in English we talk about ‘learning by heart’. We don’t talk about ‘learning by mind’ or ‘learning by brain’, but ‘by heart’. It points to a very significant fact about learning and therefore about education as a whole. Real learning is transformative and it changes us as people, deep inside our hearts and minds, and this is why the Pali word citta is so important in considering a Buddhist approach to education. It lies somewhere between ‘mind’ and ‘heart’ and thus combines what we have sometimes called in educational jargon the ‘cognitive’ and the ‘affective’. No such dichotomy exists within Buddhist thinking: there is rather something which is whole and complete and which does not give primacy to one rather than the other. The primacy of mind and reason has dominated western thinking since the (European) Enlightenment, resulting in the relegation of the heart and emotions to a lower order. It is not so and we know it! The Buddha was perhaps the original post-modernist who provides a model for education in which the heart and mind are rightly inextricably joined. It is the basis for a truly holistic philosophy of education.

If we put this into practice in our schools the acquisition of knowledge and skills would not be more important that the development of attitudes and values, they would have equal status. Then areas of scientific learning would not be separated from the ethical questions they raise; historical facts would not be acquired without full consideration of their impact and their
continuing significance on our lives and our culture; there would be time for reflection right across the curriculum and ultimate questions would no longer be the preserve of the RE (and perhaps the English) department. There would be a deep understanding of the ‘wholeness’ of the child and emotional and spiritual intelligence would be rated as highly as good SATs results. The joy of teaching in such an environment!

The Buddhist path is about the cultivation of the mind –bhavana - and, as the Dhammapada says in its opening verses: ‘Your life is the creation of your mind’. The development of wisdom (one of the three parts of the Noble Eightfold Path) is the intended outcome of Buddhist practice and it is nurtured through mindfulness, that paying of bare, non-judgemental attention to what the mind is doing. Concentration (the second of the three parts) and mindfulness are the basis of meditation practice, the purpose of which is the development of wisdom – thus the Noble Eightfold path perpetually nurtures and reinforces itself, combined as it is with the third part, morality (of which more later).

It is, I hope, self-evident that all of this – mind and wisdom - is the philosophical basis from which a Buddhist view of education can be articulated. Mindfulness and wisdom enable insight and understanding of the true nature of reality which means that gradually delusion begins to fade. From a Buddhist perspective the nature of reality is summed up in the three essential elements of all contingent existence: unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), impermanence (anicca) and insubstantiality or non-self (anatta). Children and young people – and their teachers – know plenty about unsatisfactoriness and impermanence; what is harder is understanding insubstantiality but, again, from a Buddhsit perspective, this is not merely cognitive; it is, rather, a deepening understanding of one’s own mental formations that comes through the practice of meditation.

This brings us back to the key concept of ‘mental cultivation’ - bhavana. Buddhism is quite clear that for all human beings there is the possibility of self-transformation through mental development and that resonates clearly and profoundly with what educationists believe about the power and significance of the learning process.

The Brahma Viharas - mental states

There are four mental states which Buddhists try to develop through their practice. They are known as the brahma viharas and they are: metta or loving kindness; karuna or compassion; mudita or sympathetic joy; and upekkha or equanimity. Each of these, it seems to me, has something important to say about the purpose and meaning of education and the principles that should underpin that process, wherever it is practised.

Metta – loving kindness

Loving kindness is the fundamental attitude that underpins all behavior, speech and thought in Buddhist teaching and stands diametrically opposite to anger. This is not just loving kindness towards one’s fellow human beings but, importantly, towards oneself – how that would raise our pupils’ self-esteem! – and towards all living beings. It implications and applications are endless: it is about our relationships, our responsibilities towards others and since, in Buddhist teaching, everything is interconnected, our relationship with the whole of the natural world.
Practicing loving kindness towards others entails behaving morally and the five precepts of Buddhism give simple guidance on what how this can be done:

- Avoidance of destroying living creatures
- Not taking that which is not given
- Avoidance of sexual misconduct
- Not using incorrect speech
- Abstaining from drugs and alcohol

These are not commandments but ‘rules of training’ to develop one’s practice further. Morality (sila) is at the heart of Buddhist practice and it is, therefore, also at the heart of any philosophy of education that stems from it. The combination of morality and loving kindness is immensely powerful and is potentially transformative in the ways in which we structure our schools and the relationships and ethos that exist within them.

Karuna – compassion

It is well known that the recognition of unsatisfactoriness or suffering was the catalyst that inspired Siddhartha Gotama to begin the search that led ultimately to his enlightenment and thus to the formation of the religion we now know as Buddhism. In Buddhism the appropriate response to suffering is compassion, which is without limit or condition. The causes of suffering are greed or desire, hatred or anger and delusion – none of us is free from these (unless we have already achieved enlightenment) and thus we are all on the same continuum. This is not a fixed state - we all move along that continuum perpetually as we make appropriate or inappropriate responses to our circumstances. A simplistic dualism of good and evil is entirely absent from Buddhism; there is rather a recognition that all beings are engaged in a difficult struggle, and easy judgments’ of others’ behaviour are inappropriate. It might seem that the outcome of this would be to adopt an indiscriminating, relativistic toleration of anything and everything but this is not the case in Buddhist thinking, for, as I have already said, morality is the heart of the practice. Here there is another immensely powerful combination of morality with compassion; its opposite is hardness of heart.

This can form the foundation of exploration of issues that arise across the curriculum: in Citizenship, in political education, in global education, in RE and PSHE and in the questions that are raised through studying history and literature. At an individual level it is also the basis for counseling and listening to pupils.

Mudita – sympathetic joy

Mudita is about our ability to enjoy the achievements of others, their talents, theirs skills and their qualities; its opposite is jealousy. It is about everyone within a school participating in and celebrating the well-being of each other and it applies to all areas of school life. A school that practises mudita would be a school where collaboration, rather than competition, is central to activities and where praise for some does not alienate others. At the heart of mudita is love and that should be at the heart of education. It isn’t always easy to love one’s pupils (or one’s colleagues) but that is the ideal and a school where pupils are genuinely loved and affirmed is always successful. It is also happy - and what is more important than that?
Upekkha – equanimity

It is with this mental state that Buddhism is perhaps more recognisably on home territory. The development of equanimity is a long and complex process for most people and develops from an understanding of the true nature of reality, including its impermanence and its insubstantiality. It requires silence and space for its growth and is often linked in schools to spiritual development and stilling exercises. However, we do not need equanimity when we are comfortable and calm and still. We already have it. We need equanimity in the face of criticism and pain and loss and grief – the dark side of spiritual experience that is all too often forgotten in a quietist and pietistic view of ‘the spiritual’. Equanimity is not uncaring or escapist; it is rather the ability not to be swept hither and thither by the forces of life. The still, calm mind has depth and strength and, crucially, awareness of the true nature of what is taking place around itself; its opposite is agitation. Enabling pupils (and ourselves) to develop such equanimity would, I believe, have huge impact on the nature of schools – their rush and bustle and frenetic activity being replaced by a more reflective and quieter way of being. That is not to say that there wouldn’t be fun and laughter and friendship and all those other vital elements of daily life but there would be a recognition that they too are as they are – just in that moment, impermanent and insubstantial.

A Buddhist Philosophy of Education

A Buddhist philosophy of education is based on a Buddhist social philosophy. No society will manage education without associating it with beliefs in regard to justice, freedom and equality. The system of education will be one of the systems relying on the social systems.

Buddhism and Education

- Buddhist education should teach people to be good people and abandon any animal instincts and bad behaviors. Moreover, it teaches people the path to attain mental freedom.
- One of the ways to carry out Buddhist education is to establish the Buddha as the primary philosophy and to derive an educational philosophy from that. The other way is to teach Buddhism in schools and institutions so as to enrich the youth with Buddhist teachings. This is a good way to train the youth to be good person and purify their mind with moral merits. But it doesn’t mean that we will make Buddhism as the basis of the system of education, but to reinforce the existing education system.

The Goal of Buddhist Education

- The critical goal of Buddhist education is to attain wisdom. Buddhism believes that the ultimate of wisdom is inherent in each person’s nature, stating that everyone has the potential to achieve wisdom. However, the majority are distracted by misunderstanding and misconceptions, therefore, are incapable of being aware of this kind of potential. In this sense, Buddhism aims to teach us recognize the intrinsic part of human nature.
- Buddhist wisdom varies from individual to individual. It is related to the degree to which one’s delusion is and there is no inherent difference among all human beings. Buddhism helps us remove delusion and regain the wisdom to remove confusions of individual potential and achieve happiness.
Buddhism considers deep meditation and concentration as the crucial factors in order to attain wisdom. Buddhism teaches the way of meditation and the mindfulness of concentration.

Conclusion

Now, you might feel that all this is pie-in-the-sky philosophy that has no place in the ‘real’ world. But defining the real world is Buddhist practice and living with equanimity and joy in the real world is what this is all about. I am convinced that the key concepts outlined above can provide a sound base from which a more humane, spiritual and effective education can be developed and sustained. But, I hear you ask, what about my SATs or GCSE results? What about league tables? Well, what about them? Of course every responsible professional working in education is going to enable their pupils to learn and achieve but what is more important is to recognize a deeper and higher purpose in learning that goes beyond the utilitarian and the measurable to something that is life-long and life-enhancing in the fullest sense of the word. Buddhism helpfully recognizes conventional truth, that there are ways of doing things that have to be done while recognizing simultaneously that there is a higher truth that is there to be perceived.

Look back on your own education and what do you remember and treasure? The tables you learned in arithmetic? The spelling tests on Friday mornings? Or the nature table and the Beethoven symphony and the poetry of the First World War? I know which I remember and I know which have utilitarian value and which improve the quality of my life, then and now. An education that genuinely embraces a whole concept of the child and that has at its heart loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity is an education that can transform the lives of the children and young people in its care and ultimately increase the sum of human happiness. It might just help the professionals as well.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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