



Professor Chandima Wijebandara

Symposium Session 2:
Contribution of Buddhist Sangha for
Education and Humanity
Speaker

Brief bio-data

Chandima Wijebandara holds a first class honours degree in Buddhist Civilization and Pali (1968 University of Ceylon, Peradeniya) and a Ph.D in Religious Studies (1973 University of Lancaster, U.K).. He also holds a Diploma in Psychological Counselling (Sri Jayewardenepura University) and Proficiency Certificate in English (University of Cambridge).

He has taught in Universities of Colombo, Kelaniya and Sri Jayewardenepura as Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies and time to time functioned in the posts of head of Departments and Dean, Faculty of Arts. Before his retirement he served as the Vice Chancellor of Sri Jayewardenepura University.

Professor Wijebandara had been an advisor to the Ministries of Education and Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka. For several decades he was a presenter of Radio and TV programmes as well. He has published more than 15 books and contributed articles to many magazines and journals.

Presently he is teaching in Singapore as the resident Professor of Buddhist Studies at the Buddhist Library Graduate School.



Professor Chandima Wijebandara
Pedagogical Insights from the Buddhist Sangha.

Buddhists might have been the first, if not the only, religious organisation to give significant emphasis on educational values like student rights, unconditional freedom of enquiry, and comparative learning completely devoid of dogmatism. The emphasis given in Buddhist soteriology to critical and intellectual approach is extra-ordinary for a religion. Learning and systematic methodical thinking were regarded as avenues that provide initial insight through acquired knowledge and generated knowledge.

The Buddha himself was a teacher *par excellence*, and the four-fold following was his student body (listeners). He expected his followers also to be teachers holding to the same high values of education that he cherished. The Buddhist spiritual culture is comprised of three branches, viz., learning, practice and realisation.

Adoption of rain retreat and the beginning of monastic life were significant milestones in the development of academic tradition in the Buddhist Sangha. The leisure time provided in consequence to settled life was devoted for educational pursuits.

Providing a sound knowledge and training for novices made the senior monks assume the role of formal teachers. When the monks started functioning as educators, the study bedrooms they lived became class rooms and the monastery a school. Some of the monasteries became Maha Viharas developing to be the world's first Universities.

A teaching monk is expected to be thorough in his knowledge of the subject (Dhamma), modest, moral and confident of his ability to train pupils. Moreover, he is supposed to gauge the student as to their dispositions, tendencies and abilities.

Buddhist monks functioned as teachers and promulgators of knowledge in all Buddhist countries. The language policy employed by them was exemplary. They did not believe in a sacred language. Wherever they went they learned the local languages and taught Buddhism in the languages of people.

Methodology of learning practiced in monasteries consists of careful listening and registering what is learned in mind as the initial steps. Next comes reciting frequently and mastering thoroughly, coupled with comprehending well. Then one should set himself on practising what one has learned to become a real knower of the teaching. Knowledge is not just for the sake of knowledge. Practicing what is learned is essential. However the students are encouraged to be non-dogmatic. Freedom of thought was always guaranteed. Students could challenge and even correct the teacher when and if necessary. Buddhist monastic teachers were against only to the distorting of the original message of the Buddha.

Buddhist monks developed a sound hermeneutical tradition to interpret the word of the Buddha and an advanced system of Logic to defend it. They have given the world an example of perfect and sophisticated system of pedagogy.



International Conference and Celebration of the United Nations Day of Vesak 2013 /2556 B.E.

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Every religious system needs to have some form of teaching-learning practice to disseminate the doctrines. In Buddhism this task is undertaken mainly by the Sangha. The pedagogical culture developed by the Buddhist Sangha comprises many valuable insights even the modern educationists would consider exemplary. **Buddhists might have been the first, if not the only religious organisation to give impressive emphasis on educational values like student rights, unconditional freedom of enquiry, and comparative learning completely devoid of dogmatism.** Observes Richard A. Gard: “The discriminating methods of preaching and teaching adopted by the Buddha, with the individual care taken of the hearers, also go a great way towards the success of teaching methods, and even from the view point of present day pedagogy, they are interesting and still applicable in many situations”¹

It is of high significance that the Buddha himself referred to education as the miracle. (anusāsani pātihāriya) he preferred

¹ Richard A. Gard *Buddhism* p.63 The Buddha stated that he had rightful claim to teach because he started teaching only when he had full comprehension (*abhinnaya*), explained teachings establishing causal connections (*sanidanam*) and taught only meaningful things (*sappatihariyam*). (A.I.276)



to other types of miracles. However, one might make an initial objection to this, arguing that Enlightenment is not an academic pursuit and spiritual insights are beyond logic and reason. On the other hand, it has to be emphasised that intellectual maturity was considered an essential prerequisite to understand Buddhism, which is an against-the-current philosophy. Moreover, the Buddha has shown reluctance in joining in dialogue with people who are dull, dogmatic and rather backward in critical thinking.² The path to enlightenment in Buddhist soteriology starts with straightening one's philosophy, world-outlook etc., which is called *Sammā diṭṭhi*. **Two main means of generating *Sammā diṭṭhi* are *Paratoghosa* (learning from others) and *Yoniso manasikāra* (methodical thinking). These are the avenues for two types of initial knowledges called *sutamaya paññā* (acquired knowledge) and *cintāmayā paññā* (generated knowledge).** One who is poor in learning (appassuta) is said to be like a bull that grows only in flesh.³ Learning, therefore, is emphasised as one of the necessary stepping stones to progress⁴

The vision behind the pedagogical culture of the Buddhist Sangha was conceived undoubtedly by the Buddha himself. The Buddha was a teacher *par excellence*, and his four-fold following was his student body ('*savaka*' literally, listeners). He expected his followers also to be teachers holding to the same high values of education that he cherished. Among the duties the Buddha stipulated for monks, we find, teaching laymen what they do not know and explaining in detail what they have already learned.⁵

The Buddhist spiritual culture is described as comprising of three branches, viz., *Pariyatti* (Learning), *Patipatti* (Practice) and *Pativedha* (Realisation). The entire discipline is also sometimes explained as a process of educational training (*sikkha*). It is clear, then, the Buddhist education is not limited to theoretical academic learning. It necessitates the practice which should lead to results. In contradistinction to general Indian practice the Buddha advocated not keeping a teacher's fist (*ācariya muṭṭhi*). He said "Let an intelligent person come to me, sincere, straight forward and honest; I shall instruct him in the doctrine so that on my instruction he could practise by himself in such a way that before long he would himself know and realise himself..."⁶ This openness is seen all throughout the Buddhist monastic tradition.

Adoption of rain retreat and the beginning of monastic life were significant milestones in the development of academic tradition in the Buddhist Sangha. Lay devotees offered reasonably permanent buildings as dwelling places, and the monks were inclined to continue to be residents in them even when the rainy season was over. And the laymen started bringing alms to the monastery. Now that they need not go on alms begging the monks found more free time in the monastery. **The leisure time so availed**

² Cf. S.IV.400 Vacchagotta incident

³ *Appassutayam puriso balivaddova jirati Dhammapada* 11. 7 (verse152).

⁴ *Bahusaccanca sippanca vinayo ca susikkhito* – Mangala Sutta

⁵ D.III.191

⁶ M.II.44 Addressing the monks, the Buddha said; "What should be done by a teacher for his disciples, seeking their good, out of compassion, that has been done by me for you ... concentrate on it and be not careless." (M.II.22, A.III.87)



was used for educational activities like discussions on Dhamma and Vinaya. Such discussions are referred to in the Pali canon as *Abhidhamma kathā* and *Abhivinaya kathā*.⁷

Emphasis on education resulted in creating specialist groups among the monks.

There are references to three such groups of monks who were specialists in Dhamma (*Dhammadhara*), Vinaya (*Vinayadhara*) and Matika (*Matikadhara*).⁸ Many scholars consider matika as main themes collected for discussions which later developed into Abhidhamma. Analysis, enumeration, classification and categorisation were major characteristics of the Buddha's teaching. Recognising this analytical character, most probably, the senior disciples thought collecting salient themes and discussing them hermeneutically.

From the beginning the Buddhist monastery was an educational institute and the monks were educators. No monk has to be without a teacher. Higher ordination is not conferred upon a monk if not introduced by a teacher who needs to certify that the candidate has completed necessary basic education and moral training. Every novice has two teachers to look after him as if he were his own son. Even after the higher ordination the pupil will continue further his learning and training under the teachers. Normally the monks are supposed to be life-long learners.

As the monk functioned as an educator, the study bedroom he lived, called *Parivena*, gradually became a class room and then the entire monastery came to be known as a school. Maha Vihara seems to be a title used for larger monasteries which later became Universities. Nalanda, Wickramashila and many such Mahaviharas have to be recognised as the world's first Universities. In these urban centres of learning many subjects like grammar, medicine, philosophy, logic metaphysics, arts and crafts were taught.⁹ They attracted students from foreign lands and were not much different from the structure and the practice of modern Universities. The eminent monks of these Universities produced a vast number of academic treatises. However, only a limited number of them have survived in original Sanskrit as the libraries of these universities were burnt down by non Buddhists.

Buddhist monks functioned as teachers and promulgators of knowledge in all Buddhist countries. They, taught subjects like astrology and medicine as well, even though were not interested in practising them. Until the governments took over the responsibility of educating children, the temple was the school where children learned arts and crafts.

A monk must have sound qualifications to become a good teacher. He should be a listener (*sotā*) willing to listen and a drawer of attention of others to listen (*sāvetā*). He is supposed to be a learner (*uggahetā*) too, which, no doubt, meant life-long learning.

⁷ D.III.267 *Abhidhammecca Abhivinayeca pamojjam.*, M.I.472 (Gulissani Sutta) *Abhidhamma Abhivinaye yoga*, Vinaya IV.144, M.I.212 Maha Gosinga Sutta *Abhidhamma Katham kathenti*, M.II.238 Kinti Sutta *Abhidhamme Nanavada*

⁸ Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 33

⁹ Prabhu, Joseph, 'Educational Institutions and Philosophies' Traditional and Modern' *Encyclopedia of India* (Vol 2) Edited by Stanley Wolpert, (2006) p24-25



He should assist the listeners to remember (dhāretā). He should be equipped with sufficient knowledge (viññātā) and be an expounder (viññāpetā). He needs to be discriminative of what is wholesome and unwholesome (kusalo sahitā'sahitassa) He should never be quarrelling (na ca kalahakārī)¹⁰ These expectations may definitely make the monastic teacher thorough in his the subject (Dhamma), modest, moral and confident of his ability to train pupils.

A monastic teacher needs to gauge his students as to the dispositions, tendencies and abilities to decide the best approach to teaching. Buddha has provided detailed analysis on personal differences of people categorising them in many ways. A good teacher has to analyse the student, adjust the lessons accordingly and compassionately teach the subject. The Buddha is reported to have possessed extra-sensory abilities to gauge students this way; but how can an ordinary monk have such information? **They could get such information 1) from others, 2) by observing external signs, 3) by observing their way of thinking and reflecting, and, 4) comparing them with others and carefully observing how the mental dispositions are placed in the minds of particular individuals.**¹¹ So the student centeredness in the teaching methodology is maintained.

The language policy adopted by the monks is also exemplary. The Buddha maintained that language should not be a barrier to learn Dhamma by people of different countries. He has permitted people to learn his teachings in their own languages (*sakāya niruttiyā*).¹² **The monks wherever they went learned local languages and taught Buddhism in the languages of people. They did not believe in a sacred language.** When they went to China with merchants the first thing they did was to begin translating Agama books to Chinese. In Korea they produced a Korean Tripitaka. In Sri Lanka a monk called Maha Dhammakathi translated Suttas to Sinhala. There were commentaries to entire Tipitaka written in Sinhala. Venerable Buddhaghosa made a universal edition of commentaries in Pali and after that Sinhala commentaries were no longer of use and lost for ever. Yet as they were satisfactorily incorporated into the new universal Pali edition it was not much of a problem. However, Theravada monks in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand preserved the original scripture in Pali which was an academically sound procedure.

Methodology of learning practiced in monasteries is described in many suttas. It starts with careful listening (*suta*) and registering in the mind (*dhata*). Then one has to familiarise himself by frequent reciting (*vācāya paricitā*) and thoroughly comprehend it (*manasā suppatividdhā*). Then one should set himself on practising what one has learned to become a real knower of the teaching (*Dhammaññu*). Sometimes this process is summed up in three words *sunātha* (listen) *dhāretha* (learn) *carātha* (practise). To continue this practice it was important to preserve the word of the Buddha faithfully.

¹⁰ A.IV.198

¹¹ D.I.212, A.I.170

¹² V.II.139 Commentator Buddhaghosa thought sakaya niruttiya meant the Buddha's language, which was Magadha. He perhaps wanted to preserve original texts in Magadha and so interpreted it in this manner. Yet the Buddha has clearly said Janapada niruttim nabhiniveseyya. For a critical treatment vide., Kalupahana, David J, *Buddhist Philosophy: Continuity and Discontinuities* (Hawaii) p.60ff



The Buddhist councils were conducted with this goal in mind and the Theravada conservatism did not allow any compromise in this pursuit even at the risk of sectarianism.

Education in the monasteries was always practice oriented. Students are not encouraged to pursue knowledge just for the sake of knowledge. What one learn and consider beneficial should be practised. Learning just one statement and practising it is considered much better than learning entire religion by heart but not practising it. It is said to be equal to looking after cattle of other people for a small pay. This, perhaps, was the reason why they rehearsed Vinaya first at the first council claiming ‘As long as the vinaya remains the Order will remain’. Knowledge and conduct must go together and they make one an ideal person. Opines Butr-Indr: “intelligence combined with discipline may be conceived as the motto, the motive, the purport and the standard of the Buddhist educational ideal. To overcome ignorance and to subdue bad conduct, a learner makes earnest efforts to acquire knowledge and good behaviour in their proper perfection.”¹³

However the monks never gave up the Buddhist value of not encourage dogmatism or blind faith. They were only against the distorting of the original message of the Buddha. Monastic education encouraged students to challenge and even correct the teacher’s interpretations when necessary. The teacher would admit if he is convinced that he had gone wrong. In Sri Lanka, a student called Chulanaga challenged the teacher’s interpretation of ekayana magga in Satipatthana. The teacher thought of it seriously and when he was convinced that the student was right he confessed his error at a public assembly.¹⁴ The Buddha’s willingness to change his stand at the problem of initiating Bhikkhuni order accepting Ananda’s reasoning might have set an example to Sangha. And at the Buddhist Universities the teachings of various schools were made available to students encouraging them to exercise their freedom of enquiry.

Buddhist monks developed a highly refined hermeneutical tradition to interpret the words of the Buddha. In India they developed two texts, namely, Petakopadesa and Nettippakarana, to assist methodical interpretation. The interpretational techniques so perfected were ascribed to Maha Kaccayana, as his eminence in providing commentarial interpretations to short statements made by the Buddha was well known.¹⁵ In fact there were occasions that other senior followers like Sariputta,¹⁶ Ananda,¹⁷ and Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna¹⁸ and Bhikkhuni Khema¹⁹ also offered explanations of commentarial in nature to the short sermons of the Buddha.

¹³ Siddhi Butr-Indr, *The Social Philosophy of Buddhism* p.180

¹⁴ D.A.III.744f, M.A.I.187, The teacher said it meant missaka magga, while the student said pubbabhaga satipatthana magga.

¹⁵ e.g. M.I.108, S.IV.115

¹⁶ D.III.207, D.III.272, M.III.248, M.I.282

¹⁷ D.I.204, M.I.349, M.II.112, S.IV.113

¹⁸ M.I.299

¹⁹ S.IV.374



Scholastic tradition that developed in the Buddhist monasteries has left to the world a well developed system of Logic as well. It started with works like Milinda's questions and Kathāvatthu but later in the hands of logicians like Dharmakeerti, Dignaga and Nagarjuna a more systematic tradition came into existence. They developed syllogistic and dialectic logic to face the challenge of revived Hindu philosophers. They had to involve in establishing their stand even against the contending Buddhist schools as well. A continuation of the tradition of presenting arguments for justification of Buddhist teachings was found in China with a different emphasis. The monks in China had to develop an apologetic literature to appease objecting local Confucian opponents by offering acceptable justifications.

Continuing the great pedagogical insights so gained from the Buddha and practiced during two millenniums the Buddhist monks are found jubilantly engaged in furthering the meanderings of the wheel of Dhamma all over the world even in the 21st century.