

EXPLORING CHANGE AND INTERDEPENDENCE TO PROMOTE ETHICS EDUCATION IN SECULAR CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Buddha Dharma as Education

In this paper I explore how Buddha Dharma might inform the development of contemporary global education, with a particular focus on how Dharma practitioners who are people teacher educators and others concerned with the education of young people. In doing so we will look at some currents and convergences of eastern and western philosophical thought and education practices, and in so doing I hope to provide some provocations and potential ways in which the Dharma might, through skilful adaptation and visibility, improve the education outcomes of students both in the Australasian region and beyond.

The Buddha Dharma offers a path that can lead people from dissatisfaction and ignorance to full liberation. Hence, this path can rightly be considered a pedagogy of personal development. It is pedagogy in the sense that it presents both a theoretical framework in texts and treatises, and the imperative to practise, cultivate and actualise the tenets through strategic guidance for both teachers and students. The Dharma elucidates how the world we live in works and thus is predicated on

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three marks of existence: impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and soullessness (annata). This ontology provides the foundational justifications for moral and compassionate activity, and for the cultivation of wisdom through contemplation and meditation.

These marks of existence are deemed universal, and as such provide a good place to start as we explore how the Dharma might inform ‘what’ our young people are taught and ‘how’ they might be taught in ways that are relevant to them in today’s increasingly globalised and secular world.

The inevitability of change is irrefutable, regardless of culture and places in history. It can be readily understood by very young children while awareness of the inevitable transiency of all things provides a perspective that can promote resilience and perseverance throughout a lifetime of learning. Introducing young people to the concept of dissatisfaction presents something more of a challenge for educators, particularly in the western world where youth are bombarded with unabated avowals of dream fulfilment, material acquisition and social media fame. Yet young people deserve to not only know the ephemerality of these tropes, and they also deserve to be equipped with the tools of presence of mind and critical discernment to navigate these throes. The biggest, and arguably the most pressing, challenge for educators is to discern how the wisdom inherent in *annata* might translate into meaningful learning. The key here is to foreground the interconnectedness of phenomena, rather than a focus on a ‘self’ or Ī that exists inherently. This provides opportunities to look ever deeply into the subsequent effects that can arise from actions and means to encourage young people to explore the ethical imperatives that are concomitant with actions, and the cultivation of wisdom.

According The Dhammapada, Dhammananda (1988) writes in a helpful footnote to v. 258 that *panna* (wisdom or knowledge) is the right understanding of the world as described above in the three marks of existence. Furthermore:

Knowledge is of three kinds:

(i) *Suttamaya Panna* – knowledge acquired orally

(ii) *Cintamaya Panna* – knowledge acquired by thought. The practical scientific knowledge of the West is the direct outcome of this kind of knowledge.

(iii) *Bhavanamaya Panna* – superior kind of knowledge acquired by meditation and contemplation. It is through such meditation that one realises truths which are beyond logical reasoning.

Wisdom is the apex of Buddhism... It is wisdom that leads to purification and to final Deliverance.” (p.472)

Because knowledge is acquired through the practices of hearing, reflecting, and meditating, that supports the goal of cultivating wisdom, education informed by the Dharma is distinct from orthodox ‘western’ ways of acquiring knowledge, and while reflection, contemplation, mindful attention and, in recent times, bringing wisdom to the fore in education, Buddhist perspectives and experiences serve to enrich these fields. This is an ambitious task but current alignments with educational developments, and the expressed needs of students such as those described later, provide a fertile field for such endeavours.

1. 21ST CENTURY SKILLS AND GLOBAL COMPETENCIES

As Buddhist educators we are well placed to pursue this directions. The new building blocks for learning in a complex world with wide uptake in the Asia Pacific region are the 21st Century Skills and Global Competencies Frameworks. These map out the skills needed to survive and thrive in a complex and connected world. From Trilling and Fadel’s (2009) earlier work that set three main categories: learning and innovations skills; digital literacy skills; and life and career skills these have been refined and expanded to include the basic core subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic- but also emphasizes on global awareness, financial/economic literacy, and health issues.

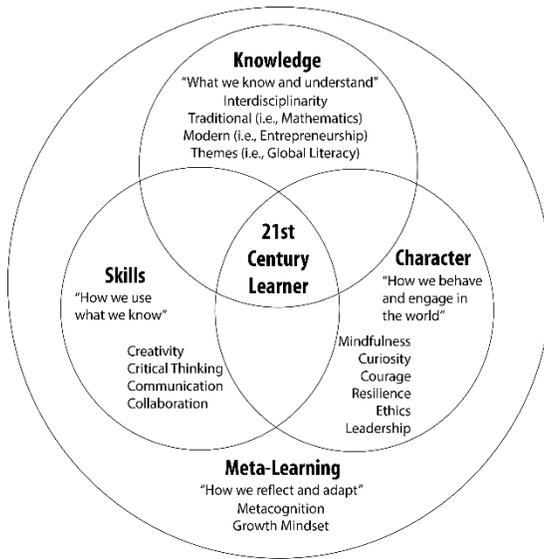


Figure 1. C21st Learner

In Figure 1 above the framing puts the student at the centre of the learning process, and while the overall thrust is to develop science and technology Lay and Kamisah (2017) draw attention to teaching strategies based on constructivist and constructionist learning theories: (1) engage students in discovery and problem-solving task through teamwork, (2) provide opportunities for communicating ideas, and (3) involve students in the process of design. These are the skills that our Buddhist teachers require, whether teaching the Dharma or other subjects.

Global Competencies, as presented below in Figure 2 are also guiding much of the education reform that is occurring in the region. The shift places the student at the centre of the learning process (as opposed to curriculum or assessment), core learnings such as literacy, numeracy and digital fluency are embedded in creative, inquiry-based learning activities – students are encouraged to question, imagine, experiment, with considered awareness of their own conduct and concern for others. Students are encouraged to collaborate, think critically, solve problems and communicate effectively. The teacher's role is to provide a learning environment that will engage the students and be responsive to their ideas, ongoing professional development is ideal, curriculum becomes dynamic

and assessment is formative, ongoing and not reliant on end-point summations. Student well-being, equity and achievement are the overarching principles. These Global Competencies provide both a common language for educators in the SE Asian and Asia Pacific regions to communicate and a framework from which Buddhist education can grow and become more visible.

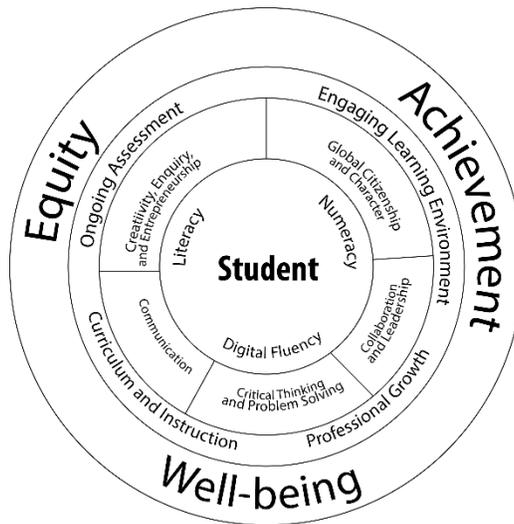


Figure 2: Global Competencies

These constructs set high standards, as Hilt, Riese and Søreide (2018) have noted. They present quite an idealised conception of a student – creative, responsible, cooperative, engaged, self-regulated and in complete control of herself, her learning and her future, and again, an imperative to revitalise our teacher education and professional development and equip our teachers with the skills to promote these types of learning.

We notice that in both Figs. 1 and 2, Character development is included. Mindfulness features in Fig.1. These are domains that are pertinent to Buddhist educators because the Dharma offers a systematic guide to the cultivation of these qualities. Character development and ethical thinking, also feature prominently in the Australian Curriculum alongside Social and Emotional Learning, and many teachers are using various permutations of mindfulness exercises with their students. However, the links between ethical

understanding and mindfulness, and indeed some clear articulation of ethics/ values / morals is at best ad hoc. Because the system and educational practices are student-centred, and because the system nominally separates public education from religion, there has also been a historical reluctance to purposefully teach ethics.

I frame this type of education below:

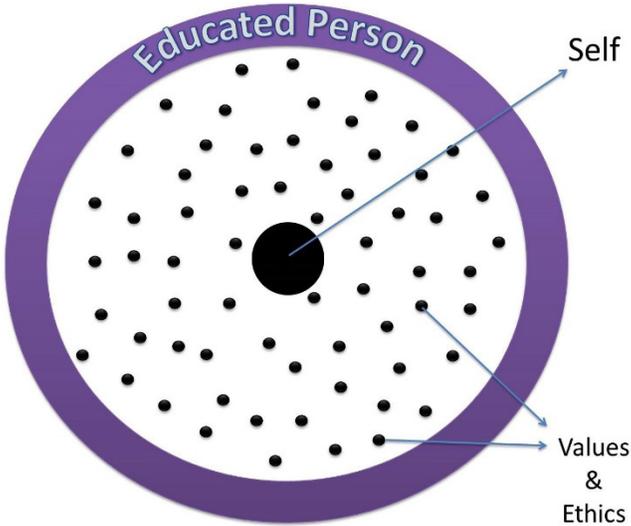


Figure 3. Individualised self and ad hoc ethics education (Smith, 2014)

2. THE EDUCATED PERSON

The ethical imperatives of education, and societal expectations that an educated person will be an ethical and engaged citizen are universal, and have a long history in liberal democratic systems, most noticeably via Dewey's (1916) democratisation of education and the seeds he planted for experiential child-centred learning. In the work of the influential education philosopher R.S. Peters we can find agreement between Buddhist aspirations and public education. For Peters, education is much more than skills acquisition. It is about doing something worthwhile and for human betterment, which necessarily includes an ethical imperative:

“Educational practices are those in which people try to pass on what is worthwhile as well as those in which they actually succeed in doing so. Success might be marked by general virtues such as a

sense of relevance, precision, and the power to concentrate and by more specific virtues such as courage, sensitivity to others, and a sense of style” (Peters, 1970, p. 26).

The notion of an educated person is developed by Peters in a later publication where he creates further distance between what education can and should be, and instruction and indoctrination. By enabling students to transform knowledge by understanding the reasons for things, rather than simply react, Peters links education to understanding connections and consequences, the inclusion of multiple perspectives and subsequent moral reasoning:

“Any moral judgement, for instance, presupposes beliefs about people’s behaviour and many moral judgements involve assessments of the consequences of behaviour. An educated person, therefore, will not rely on crude, unsophisticated interpretations of the behaviour of others when making moral judgements; he will not neglect generalizations from social sciences, in so far as they exist, about the probable consequences of types of behaviour” (Peters, 1973, p. 240).

At a time in Australia when character and values education had fleeting prominence Lovat and Toomey (2007) drew special attention to the essential role of the teacher as an ethical role model and companion guide. The role of the teacher, *guru* in Sanskrit, is central in the Buddhist tradition and remains a worthy pursuit for Buddhist pedagogues to critically examine practices in light of Guru Shakyamuni’s example – teaching to the needs of the disciple/ student.

In the Australian Curriculum, shown in Fig.3 we can see how child-centred framing is individual and separate. With this type of individuation, as opposed to the child who is taught to understand themselves as an inter-relational being, the impetus to act ethically is diminished – more so where ethics education has little visibility. Here lies a gap in education and teacher education that Buddhist educators can work to fill.

Byker (2013) calls for a global cosmopolitan view. We do not necessarily all expect our children to be Buddhist, but we nevertheless hold responsibility to guide them towards being happy individuals and good global citizens.). Moreover, as Byker,

Erik and Marquardt (2016) argue this is an imperative. Globally religion is politically charged. Hurd (2018) delineates what is effectively three religions (expert, lived, and governed) and it is incumbent upon Buddhist educators to be mindful of these three domains of influence.

3. GLOBAL YOUTH

The student as centre of the education endeavour, and educators are having to respond to their wellbeing, resilience and happiness through democratic and child-centred pedagogies have been themes throughout this discussion. Hence it becomes obvious that as educators we must know our students.

Much of what is known is alarming.

In Australia: Around one in 35 young Australians aged 4-17 experience a depressive disorder; one in 20 (5%) of young people aged 12-17 years had experienced a major depressive disorder between 2013-14; one in fourteen young Australians (6.9%) aged 4-17 experienced an anxiety disorder in 2015; one in four young Australians currently has a mental health condition. Suicide is the biggest killer of young Australians and accounts for the deaths of more young people than car accidents (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/media/statistics>)

These trends are echoed around the world. Even in high performing education sectors in Asia such as in Japan, Korea and Singapore policies that include initiatives such as the 'exam-free' semester, character building and violence-free schools, that aim to increase the happiness and well-being among learners are being adopted to redress the pandemic of youth stress and is increasingly being viewed as a vital factor for effective learning.

UNESCO has a robust history of championing important causes, some of which have grown to become independent entities, such as the Open Education Consortium. Something similar could grow from the UNESCO 2016 report - Happy Schools! A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia-Pacific. The report highlighted a number of external and internal factors that are undermining learner happiness and influence the way that we view not only the

quality of life but also the quality of education, such as increasing inequality, growing intolerance and the rise of violent extremism. Technological advancement has also become rife with competition and ‘information overload’, leading increasingly to a focus on ‘the numbers’ as educational outcomes. The report cautions that those elements that are recognized as contributing to enhancing happiness, whether in schools, life or work, are rarely counted as part of the equation.

The report includes mindfulness is a key strategy, and recognises the Buddhist roots of the practice. This will be discussed late in this paper, but for now we will keep the focus on what we can learn from our youth.

These are post-secular times (Harris and Lam, 2018) and young (Buddhist) people, who overwhelmingly remain altruistic are seeking ethical guidance in ways that are relevant and practical. Traditional structures have changed dramatically and are continuing to do so. Changes to the education of lay children, that has traditionally been a family and community concern, have also occurred:

“The impetus to teach children to be aware of what they think, say and do and act with kindness has been an assumed and informal component of Buddhist parenting and teaching.... [C]hildren absorbed Buddhist teachings by learning from their parents’ modelling, by developing relationships with village temple monastics, and through moral lessons in scriptures and stories” (Loundon, Kim, & Liow, 2006, p. 338). With globalisation these structures are less robust than in more localised and traditional times.

Recent work on minority Buddhist youth in Australia has suggested that these young people draw on their spirituality to engage positively in civic life (Harris and Lam, 2018; Lam, 2018). In other words, their spirituality is relevant *because* they can be active in the their society.

My own research (Smith, Suryaratri and Adil, 2016; Smith 2018) with minority, Buddhist pre-service teachers in Indonesia I found Indonesia paints a slightly different picture in that their system of education is different.

The curriculum at the college currently holds a hybrid identity, being a combination of monastery style learning e.g. Abhidharma, suttas and rote teaching methods, Pancasila, and streams of English and Information Technology and the college's English Language Centre. One year it staged a theatrical production of *The Little Mermaid* complete with gamelan orchestra, Javanese costumes, and acting that echoed the comedy and stylized movement of Wayang puppetry. This was Javanese Disney. Other students were adamant that the curriculum should include Javanese culture and language and the English Language Centre actively seeks to bridge these divides.

The students perceived the tensions in the directions of the curriculum and the need for more practical applications of both need Buddhist and teaching theories was highlighted.

A high level of theory not applicable in the working world. The teaching methods are old fashioned and their language is too high. They do not have interesting and practical teaching strategies.

Through modernization and globalization traditional paradigms are changing, not just in Indonesia but the world over. The pressing challenge for contemporary Buddhist communities is to a) discern the most useful texts to teach and b) provide learning opportunities that have relevance to the lives of their Dharma learning communities.

4. ALIGNING BUDDHISM WITH CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

We know that centres, institutes, temples, pagodas, gompas, wats and viharas are all places for teaching and learning that serves a deeper curriculum aimed to develop wisdom, compassion, awareness and responsibility. These institutions sit within broader societal frameworks where traditional roles are being challenged and even eroded. Wadia (1948) made the prescient observation that Western education had profoundly affected the religious outlook of the educated youth in India. Theism was being challenged, agnosticism was an option, and spiritual values were under the pressure of materialistic thought. He surmised that Buddhism could provide a satisfying substitute.

From the ontology outlined at the beginning of this paper we have seen that Dharma shares foundational principles with the human sciences, and over the past forty years especially Buddhists have sought to articulate their spirituality in terms of mainstream education. Buddhist scholars such as Buddhadasa (1988), Conze, (1980), Nyanatiloka (1982), Sivaraksa (1994), Batchelor (1989) and other scholars such as Smullyan (1977) and Sternberg (1990) have seen benefit from drawing on Buddhist philosophy to reshape education. Erricker furthers these arguments by proposing that education inspired by Buddhist philosophy is both radically democratic and child-centred” (Erricker, 2009, p.87). These scholars find agreement with Batchelor (1989) who deem that a hallmark feature of such pedagogy will be where students learn how to think, and not what to think. This sits neatly with the child-centred inquiry based and experiential approaches already reviewed. The field has advanced considerably with the proliferation of mindfulness exercises both in lay populations, clinical applications and, as is our focus here, education.

5. MINDFULNESS

Research evidence suggesting that mindfulness improves learning environments through social and emotional competence (Jennings et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Brown et al., 2012), and the promotion of general wellbeing in schools (Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Rocco, 2012; Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012) continues to grow. Worldwide there exists some 700 mindfulness apps, although a review by Mani, Kavanagh, Hides, & Stoyanov (2015) concluded that there is scant evidence that these actually develop mindfulness. Often these apps are used in classrooms, and teachers might be learning and practising mindfulness with their students. This can be good, but from a Buddhist perspective we know that it could be better.

Best practice dictates that teachers of mindfulness need to be proficient in the practice themselves (Hassed and Chambers, 2014; Jennings, 2015) agree that teachers need to cultivate their personal mindfulness practices before teaching it to their students. Crane,

Kuyken, Hastings, Rothwell and Williams (2010) caution a crucial difference between practicing mindfulness and teaching mindfulness, particularly when pertaining to youth, and here Buddhist educators are very well placed to assert leadership in the field.

The field of mindfulness education is slowly broadening to include mindful self-compassion where initial work also reveals that self-compassion is positively correlated with reflective and affective wisdom (ability to see reality as it is and develop insight), personal growth initiative (making changes needed for a fulfilling life), conscientiousness, and curiosity (Barnard and Curry, 2011).

“Mindfulness is the foundation for self-compassion” (Neff and Germer, 2018) with compassion for the self, other and environment also considered to be a critical component in the majority of mindfulness programs (author reference withheld, 2014; 2016: [20]. The prominence and receptivity of mindfulness in the Western world has helped fuel the contemporary interest in the construct of self-compassion (Kyeong, 2013). The additional element of the focus on self-compassion over just mindfulness is that there is an intentional effort to be compassionate towards any mindfulness of suffering; it is the deliberate act of self-compassion that encourages the self-soothing elements of healing.

The interest and attention self-compassion as a modern construct derived from mindfulness derived predominately from two research articles that defined and measured self-compassion – the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) by Neff (2003,a). She conceptualised self-compassion of consisting of three main elements: kindness, common humanity and mindfulness

1) Self-kindness - extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh judgment and self-criticism

2) Common humanity - seeing one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating, and

3) Mindfulness - holding one’s painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003,b).

Neff has continued to lead research in this field (Neff, 2011) and has recently produced a workbook (Neff and Germer, 2018).

Smaller studies have affirmed that the compassionate element added to mindfulness supports undergraduate students resilience and retention in their studies (Smeets, Neff, Alberts and Peters, 2014; Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts and Chen, 2009; Jokic, Albrecht and Smith, 2019).

These practices can easily be integrated into higher education institutions, and especially into teacher education courses where teachers can practise mindfulness and learn ways in which to teach mindfulness.

Buddhist universities and colleges are particularly well placed. To explore and research the four foundations of mindfulness practice as expounded in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, and also research the practice (Dorjee, 2010; Silānanda, Nandisena and Silanda, 2009).

From a Buddhist point of view the potential in education for mindfulness, that goes on to include mindfulness of mind and all phenomena is yet to be tapped.

6. WISDOM AND SKILFUL MEANS

Wisdom per se is embedded in education discourse but latterly is resurfacing as a discrete and vital topic amongst educators. Reyes (2012) has added wisdom to western mindfulness discourses. Wisdom acknowledges the internal experience; the suffering, ruminations and illusions just as they are and more importantly, exhorts skilful actions that can help to transform the suffering.

The place of wisdom in western discourse inevitably leads to the ancient Greeks. In a collection of essays edited by Lehrer (1996) the educational applicability of the wisdom teachings from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are discussed. For Aristotle virtues are interdependent, and happiness (*eudemonia*) requires all the virtues, and that more of a virtue is not always better than less – a position that accords with a Buddhist perspective. that Aristotlean ‘practical wisdom’ has an executive function that uses discretion to temper the exercise of other values and virtues.

Biesta, G. (2012) takes up the importance of practical wisdom in the teaching profession and raises questions about the future of teacher education, backgrounded by policy developments that not only frame teacher education predominantly in terms of competencies and scientific evidence, but that also do so within a language that focuses predominantly on learning. Education always needs to engage with questions of purpose, content and relationships. The question of purpose, he deems, has to be understood in a multidimensional way, which requires that teachers are able to make situated judgements about what is educationally desirable. He suggests that the capacity for such judgements should not be seen as a competence nor as something that can or ought to be replaced by scientific evidence. The capacity for educational judgement should be seen as a quality of the person. Hence, the key question for teacher education is not how to become competent or skilled in the application of scientific evidence but how to become educationally wise and outlines three parameters for the future of teacher education: a focus on the formation of the whole person towards educational wisdom; a focus on a holistic approach in which educational judgement is a central element from the very start; and a focus on learning from the virtuosity of other teachers.

Yes, wisdom is practical, and yes, wisdom is never isolated from compassion in a Buddhist approach. The latter resonates closely with educators such as Almond (2007), Barton (1999) and Kekes (1995) and the philosophic thought from Midgley (1981; 1989a, 1989b) and Gilligan (1989) who define wisdom to include expressions of care, empathy and subsequent moral conduct.

However, where public educators have been reticent to incorporate ethics into learning, they have been even more reticent about wisdom. Again, the Buddha Dharma provides clarity. Ma Rhea (2018) has forged into this field by incorporating the wisdom of morality, concentration and insight understanding onto her teacher education courses. She delineates between 'Higher' wisdom and 'worldly' wisdom, and she encourages her students to practice meditation and reflection. Ma Rhea also concedes that this pursuit of wisdom challenges the educators capacity to act skilfully, and, that this field is in its nascence.

My own work draws on the Mahayana that foregrounds particular values and ethics in the *paramitas* (Sanskrit) that are practised on the path of awakening mind. These are variously ten or six perfections. In Sanskrit these are: *dana* generosity, *sila* morality, *ksanti* insight, patience and forbearance, *virya* vigour, *dhyana* focused contemplation, *prajna* wisdom and insight. Loving kindness, compassion and equanimity are also assumed within these.

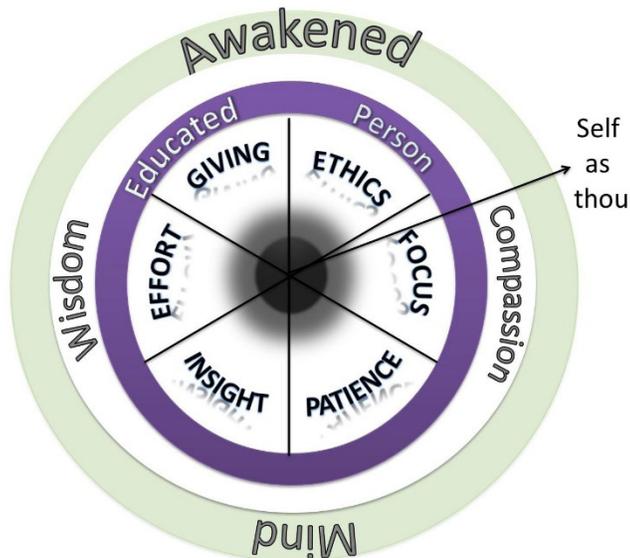


Figure 4: a Buddhist conceptualisation of education (Smith, 2014)

In Figure 4 above I have attempted to synthesise a Buddhist conceptualisation of education. The Self is constructed as a more mutable 'thou' (Buber, 1958) that recognises interdependence and change as marks of identity. The 'other' oriented conception of self is promoted through cultivation of charity (giving), morality (ethics), concentration (focused attention), patience, joyful endeavour (effort) and reflection (insight) form what is a curriculum for 'awakening mind' i.e. Buddhahood. This soundly befits what might be an educated person, and indeed a wise person.

Certainly wisdom, ethical conduct and contemplation are not the sole preserve of Buddhists, but rather, more universal features that can be found in spiritual, cultural and educational traditions. The degrees and the ways in which these are expressed certainly

vary according to various dispositions and heritages. However, wisdom, ethics and kindness that the Dharma spirituality embraces, are universal concerns, made all the more compelling if education systems are to proactively progress how young people are to be educated to be well, resilient and good citizens.

It is timely therefore that Buddhist educators respond to these in terms of their pedagogical practices, particularly placing the needs and capabilities of the student central, as did Gautama Buddha. We Buddhist educators are particularly well-placed to teach mindfulness meditations to our students, and teach in an authentic way that includes the transcendent potentialities of ethics and wisdom. We are also very well placed to contribute to global education imperatives. May Buddhist education institutions provide places to refine our practices, teach skilfully knowing how and what to teach to promote the well-being of individuals and communities, harmony and peace.

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