



## BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ANCIENT INDIA AND ITS RELEVANCE TO EDUCATION IN MODERN TIMES

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### Abstract:

Though Buddhism is often regarded as a religion, it represents a vast and rich intellectual tradition that contributed much to the ancient Indian educational system and continues to contribute to modern education across the globe. Relying on a historical-comparative and conceptual approach, the study explores the nature of Buddhist religious education and demonstrates its relevance to contemporary educational thought and practice. It examines how Buddhist monastic institutions functioned as pioneer learning centers combining spiritual training with intellectual inquiry. By analyzing the historical role and pedagogical methods of Buddhist education, the study searches for principles applicable to modern educational needs. This article argues that revisiting or re-discussing Buddhist educational systems can still offer meaningful insights for addressing present-day educational challenges. The findings suggest that though rooted in religious contexts, ancient Buddhist educational thoughts and ideas have much relevance to modern educational systems, which are trying hard to balance cognitive development and upliftment of morality, personality and social responsibility or accountability.

**Keywords:** Buddhist education, monastic institutions, ethical education, historical education system, modern educational relevance

### 1. Introduction

Buddhist religious education is one of the most ancient education systems of the Indian sub-continent. Education remained a key point in ancient Indian civilization and learning

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was deeply connected with religious, philosophical and ethical traditions. Among these traditions, Buddhism developed a remarkable educational system. This system combined moral training, intellectual inquiry, and spiritual upliftment. From its emergence in the sixth century BCE, Buddhism put emphasis on learning as a means to overcome ignorance and cultivate wisdom, making education an inseparable part of religious life (Gombrich, 2006). Though Buddhist education was a complex combination of Brahman education and culture, gradually it started assuming a separate and original identity of its own. This education was basically institutionalized through monastic establishments called 'viharas' and 'mahaviharas'. These 'viharas' and 'mahaviras' functioned as centers for monastic or religious discipline. They functioned as centers for higher learning as well. Historical accounts suggest that Buddhist monasteries gradually evolved into residential universities that attracted students from different regions of Asia (Basham, 1981). Education within these institutions extended beyond Buddhist scriptures and included subjects like logic, grammar, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy etc., reflecting a broad and inclusive curriculum (Altekar, 1965).

The most prominent example of Buddhist higher education in ancient India is Nalanda Mahavihara. It was founded around the fifth century CE and developed into an international seat for learning supported by royal patronage. According to the travel accounts of the Chinese monk Xuanzang, Nalanda hosted thousands of students and teachers engaged in rigorous intellectual activity and debate (Beal, 1884). Scholars state that the teaching methods in Nalanda Mahavihara were diverse and very fruitful. The methods emphasized discussion, reasoning and critical analysis rather than passive memorization, a feature that closely aligns with modern constructivist approaches to learning (Sharma, 2016).

Other important Buddhist educational institutions, such as Vikramashila, Valabhi, Takshashila, Saranath, Odantopuri, and Jagaddala, also contributed significantly to the intellectual life of ancient India. Vikramashila, which was established during the Pala period, specialised in advanced Buddhist philosophy and 'tantric' studies. Valabhi became famous for its instruction in secular discipline and administrative studies (Mukherjee, 1989). Takshahila earned much fame for its excellent quality of education. Subjects like medical sciences, law and military science were taught there. Three of the most famous learners of Takshahila were the grammarian Panini, the physician Zeevak and the economist Koutilya, who bore testimony to the academic excellence of this institution. As Athens was the centre of civilisation in Greece, so was Takshila of India, though Takshina was more ancient than Athens (Ghosh, 1964). The center was so famous for military science that 103 princes assembled here at the same time to learn it (Altekar, 1965). The fame of Nalanda Mahavihara spread through the whole Asia. It became the best center for teaching-learning strategies. A huge number of learned and famous professors were there, and the institution stood supreme for its organizational capabilities. Saranath, Odantopuri and Jagaddala monasteries also contributed much to Buddhist educational system. All these religious institutions formed a network of learning that shaped scholarly traditions across South and Southeast Asia. The social impact of

Buddhist education was equally significant. Buddhism emerged as a reaction to the rigid rules and regulations of Brahmanism and racism (Nalini, 1991). Lord Buddha presented his religion and religious activities in an easy way to the people. He did not keep religion and its teaching confined only to the Buddhists, but opened it for all people irrespective of caste and creed. Buddhist education challenged rigid social hierarchies in educational participation (Thapar, 2002). The central aims of the education were mental discipline, ethical training and reflective practice, and it put much emphasis on values like compassion, self-restraint and social responsibility.

Although many Buddhist institutions declined due to political instability and changing religious patronage after the 12<sup>th</sup> century, their educational philosophy did not disappear. Core Buddhist ideas related to moral education, mindfulness, teaching based on dialogues, and holistic development continue to attract attention in modern educational discourse (Noddings, 2013; Shah, 2018). In this context, examining Buddhist religious education in ancient India provides valuable insights for contemporary education systems that look for the integration of ethical formation with intellectual development.

## **2. Methodology**

This study relies on a historical-comparative and conceptual approach to examine Buddhist religious education in ancient India. Primary sources like Buddhist scriptures and historical travel accounts (e.g., Xuanzang's *Si-Yu-Ki*) were analyzed side by side with secondary scholarly literature on Indian education, monastic institutions and pedagogical practices (Altekar, 1965; Sharma, 2016; Thapar, 2002). The analysis focused on identifying educational principles, institutional structures and pedagogical procedures and explored their relevance to present-day educational theory and practice. The study emphasized critical synthesis of historical and philosophical sources, combining descriptive and analytical perspectives. This helped connect past practices with modern educational challenges. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the historical context and its contemporary implications.

## **3. Education in Buddhism**

The ancient Buddhist education system was unique and notable for its innovative and praiseworthy characteristics. The aim of Buddhist education is to prepare for a good and moral life. Emphasis is given to spiritual elevation and development of personality, which includes physical, moral, mental and intellectual upliftment, building of moral character following right conduct, integrity, morality, piety, humanity and other virtues. Religious education gets top priority, and through religious education and practice, achieving salvation or 'Nirvana' is the main goal of Buddhist education, unlike education systems that emphasize only the gathering of information. Buddhist education priorities inner transformation, ethical standards and the cultivation of wisdom. Education is

viewed as a disciplined process through which individuals develop moral character, mental clarity and insight into the nature of reality (Gombrich, 2006). The 'Threefold' Training lies at the center of Buddhist educational thought. These three phases of education, called 'Tisikkha', consist of 'Sila' or moral discipline, 'Samadhi' or mental concentration and 'Panna' or the foundation of Buddhist learning. Thus, education is not separated from ethical practice but is inseparably connected with moral responsibility and self-awareness (Harvey, 2013).

Buddhism puts much importance on learning through experience and reflection. Buddha encouraged his followers to question, examine, and verify teachings rather than accept them blindly. This attitude is reflected in the 'Kalama Sutta' where independent reasoning and personal experience are presented as valid bases for knowledge. Such an approach fosters critical thinking and intellectual autonomy, values which are central to contemporary educational theory (Rahula, 1974).

The teacher-student relationship occupies a very important place in Buddhist education. There was a very good mutual understanding between the teachers and the students. Their relation was like father and son. They had deep respect and love for each other. The teacher was regarded as the intellectual father of the students. The teachers called 'Acharyas' and 'Upaddhayas' were very much respected and given much importance in the society. It was the ardent duty of the disciples to obey the teachers and serve them with profound veneration. Teachers not only transmitted knowledge, but also served as moral exemplars. Students lived in close contact with their teachers, learned through observation, dialogue and guided practice. This relational model of education promoted personal mentorship and holistic development rather than impersonal instruction (Altekar, 1965). Buddhist education was very much inclusive. Historical studies suggest that Buddhist monastic education allowed entry to learners from diverse social backgrounds. So it had to challenge rigid caste and distinctions that were prevalent in ancient Indian society. This openness contributed to the spread of Buddhist learning across regions and cultures.

Another most important feature of Buddhist education is to balance intellectual development with emotional and ethical growth. Meditation, mindfulness and self-reflection were integrated into educational life, and these practices enabled learners to develop attention, emotional regulation and compassion. Modern scholars have increasingly drawn connections between these practices and contemporary discussions on social-emotional learning and well-being in education (Shah, 2018).

In short, it is seen that in Buddhist education, learning is a transformative and lifelong process. Its aim is to make human beings knowledgeable and equip them with morality and responsibility. This complete vision continues to offer valuable insights for modern education. Today's educational systems strive to ensure excellence in learning and make learners strong ethically and emotionally.

#### 4. Buddhist Monastic Institutions and Their Academic Excellence

Buddhist education in India developed gradually with the expansion of the Buddhist monastic community called 'Sangha'. Initially, the monasteries were simple residential learning centers and in course of time they became highly organized institutions for higher learning.

Takshashila was the most ancient monastery of Buddhist education. The historians mentioned about this great monastery or university to be in existence in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This institution earned much fame for its excellent quality of education. Students from different parts of the country came here in pursuit of learning. Subjects like medical sciences, law and military science were taught there.

Nalanda Mahavihara was the most famous among the universities of ancient India. Its fame spread through the whole Asia. It became the best center for learning, with its teaching-learning processes, the presence of many scholarly professors and organizational capabilities. It was a very big university whose length was about one mile and breadth half a mile. Seven very large hall rooms and at least 300 small classrooms were found in the excavated areas (Ghosh, 1965). One of the praiseworthy features of Nalanda was its free education system. Besides this, students were supplied with food, clothing, residence and medical treatment free of cost. Academic and administrative responsibilities of the center was distributed among different officials. Getting admission to Nalanda was very tough. A candidate had to face tests and questions and satisfy the professors with their answers and intelligence. Seven to eight candidates out of ten had to go back failing in the admission test (Beal, 1888). The curriculum was not limited only to Buddhist religious education; Hindu religious education was also taught there. Other subjects were Mahayana and Hinayana theories, theoretical Buddhism, Logic, Grammar and Linguistics, Yoga, Astronomy, etc. It maintained standard hierarchy and emphasized rigorous scholarly training, particularly in logic and metaphysics (Chattopadhyaya, 1994). Students learned through discussions and debates. The moral standard of the students was very high. In the question of morality, the rules and regulations were very rigid. There were systems of tests and awarding titles to the successful learners.

Vikramshila was next to Nalanda among the Buddhist education centers of ancient India. When the pride of Nalanda was on the wane, then Vikramshila emerged. We get descriptions of Vikramshila from Tibetan literature. Dharmapala (775-800 A.D.) set up the Vihara in 8<sup>th</sup> century. There were 108 temples, many houses for the 'Shramans' and 'Vikshus', large hall rooms for debates and discussion. The Vihara was residential. Conference rooms, research laboratories and open premises were there. The syllabus of Vikramshila was not so large as Nalanda, but the theories and practices of the Mahayana and Hinayana were taught. Besides these, Grammar, Logic, Linguistics, Yoga, Magic, Mathematics, Astronomy, Military science, Medical science, etc., were included in the syllabus. Architecture, Handicrafts, Drawings etc., were also taught (Chattopadhyaya, 1994).

Valabhi was another prominent Buddhist education center. Historical sources suggest that Valabhi earned recognition for its instruction in secular subjects, including law and administration, side by side with Buddhist studies. Graduates of this institution were often appointed to administrative positions, reflecting the practical relevance of its education (Mukherjee, 1989).

Other institutions like Odantapuri, Jagaddhala, and Somapura further spread Buddhist education across the Indian sub-continent. All these institutions combined to form a learning network that facilitated intellectual exchange and spread Indian knowledge systems throughout Asia.

## **5. Social and Educational Impact**

The characteristics of Buddhist educational institutions were a structured administration, an advanced curriculum, and a strong moral foundation. Due to royal patronage, these institutions enjoyed financial stability, which allowed them to maintain academic excellence. These institutions practiced inclusive education, which was quite advanced compared to the Brahmanical education system of that time. Although monastic rules applied uniformly, educational participation was not strictly limited by caste, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds in higher learning (Thapar, 2002). Through these institutions, Buddhist education played a significant role in shaping the ancient intellectual and cultural history of the region. Their teaching methods --- especially debates, reasoning, and focus on moral foundations --- align remarkably well with the characteristics of modern universities. Liberalism in education, participatory learning, discussion methods, the practice of advanced ethics, and the teaching of various subjects were not only essential for academic excellence but also left a significant positive impact on society. Despite its glorious sides, Buddhist education was not fully flawless. Access was mostly restricted to monastic life, and women's participation in royal patronage made institutions vulnerable to political change. These contextual factors must be acknowledged to avoid idealizing Buddhist education without historical nuance (Sharma, 2016).

## **6. Relevance to Modern Education**

Buddhist education emerged in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. in ancient India. Since then, it has been contributing to the education of this sub-continent and throughout the world. Though very ancient, the Buddhist education system is highly consistent with the education of the present time. The major concerns of the current education system are dealing with moral decay, student disengagement, the mental and emotional health of students, and exam-centric study. In this context, there is a value in reviewing the trends of Buddhist education. The foundations of moral education that Buddhist education emphasizes is value-based education, ethical foundation, moral discipline, compassion, non-violence, and responsibility. Moreover, in the modern education system, most of the

emphasis is placed on academic performance and technical expertise, and moral education is often neglected. However, scholars have placed enough importance on the necessity of value-based education. Scholars argue that value-based education is essential for nurturing socially responsible citizens, and Buddhist moral teachings provide a coherent framework for such an approach (Noddings, 2013).

The combination of awareness and intellectual development is a significant feature of Buddhist education. To resolve the concerns we have at present, we must take refuge in ancient moral education. Student-centered dialogic and discussion methods, encouraging questioning, debates, mindfulness, and the arrangements in Buddhist education for the welfare of students are particularly relevant for tackling various obstacles and challenges of the present time. Meditation, attention practice, etc. of Buddhist education are very much needed in the modern education system for complete development. Treating education as a lifelong learning process is very effective for self-improvement. This lifelong process aligns with modern educational philosophy, where lifelong education, personal growth, and self-awareness are prioritized. A significant feature of Buddhist education is Education was not confined to formal instruction, but extended to everyday conduct, reflection, and community engagement (Harvey, 2013). The liberal Buddhist education system can also be followed to ensure educational equality in the present time. Although there are challenges in directly integrating Buddhist education into the current education system, considering the reality, the ethical grounding, reflective practice, dialogic education system, etc. of Buddhist education are significantly relevant in the education system of the present time.

## 7. Discussion

This study reveals that the Buddhist educational system was remarkably historic, value-oriented, and intellectually robust. It put emphasize on the development of moral character, critical inquiry, and practical wisdom --- elements that were vital for both the personal and social lives of students. When we compare these ancient principles to the challenges of modern education, several significant insights emerge.

Buddhist education uniquely harmonized intellectual growth with ethical grounding. In contrast, modern systems often segregate academic learning from moral development. In Buddhist pedagogy, concepts like compassion, responsibility and ethical reasoning were deeply integrated into the learning process. These elements significantly influenced curriculum design, instructional methods, student assessment and student engagement.

Furthermore, the pedagogical approaches used, such as dialogic learning and the Socratic-style questioning, are essential for fostering critical thinking and student engagement. These methods enhance a student's autonomy and analytical depth, qualities that are increasingly sought after in today's educational institutions. By encouraging students to question, reflect and debate, Buddhist education fostered the same autonomy and analytical skills emphasized in modern constructivist and inquiry-

based models (Freire, 1996). Additionally, practices like mindfulness and meditation are proving to be essential in addressing contemporary challenges such as student distraction, mental stress, and overall well-being. One of the most serious concerns for modern educational institutions is ensuring the social and emotional learning of their students. Buddhist education offers evidence-based practices for achieving this moral and emotional excellence.

## 8. Conclusion

The expansion of Buddhist education in Ancient India started a remarkable chapter in the world of learning. This system was highly sophisticated, blending moral, intellectual, and practical education alongside religious education. This was a unique aspect of Buddhist teaching. It was designed not just to provide information or knowledge, but to cultivate wisdom, ethical behavior, mental upliftment and social responsibility.

Although these monastic educational institutions declined over time, the innovations and thought processes they brought to the field of education remain highly relevant even today. That is why this educational model gained popularity not only in the Indian subcontinent but throughout Asia. The structure of Buddhist educational institutions, their management, admission processes, and secular styles of study took Buddhist education to a remarkable height.

The deep influence of the excellence of Buddhist education is still reflected in modern education. Therefore, revisiting or discussing ancient Buddhist education is not just about studying history; it is an opportunity to reshape the current education system. So, we can not but admit and admire the importance of Buddhist education of ancient India and its immense contributions to modern education.

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