

Buddhism and Holistic Education

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Abstract

This paper attempts to integrate the perspective of holistic education (a postmodern view of education) with Buddhist worldviews. It describes “the five dimensions of reality” that include objective reality, social reality, cosmic reality, infinite reality, and universal reality, referring to ideas derived from Mahayana Buddhist thought. Holistic education is defined as an attempt to explore the multiple dimensions of reality in our existence. It involves ideas such as “awakening” (*bodhi*) and “enlightenment” (*satori*) at its core. Therefore, Buddhism plays a central role in the development of holistic education by providing such concept as “enlightenment education” (Thurman).

Keywords: Eastern philosophy, holistic education, Japanese Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, multidimensional reality, Toshihiko Izutsu.

Holistic Education and Eastern Philosophy

This paper attempts to integrate the perspective of holistic education with Buddhist worldviews. Holistic education began in the late 1980s in North America, and I started my own studies in the early 1990s in Japan. From 1996 to 2000 I studied at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) at the University of Toronto, Canada, where I completed my Ph.D. thesis, entitled “Eastern Philosophy and Holistic Education,” under the supervision of Professor John P. Miller, one of the originators of this field. This thesis was later published as *Education for Awakening: An Eastern Approach to Holistic Education*². From 2000 to the present time, I have applied Eastern ideas from Indian Vedanta, Buddhism, and Taoism to educational theories³. Some of my essays contain Buddhist components as their essential elements⁴. Due to my cultural background in Japan, Mahayana thought has been most influential in developing my thought.

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² Foundation for Educational Renewal, 2000.

³ Nakagawa 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013.

⁴ 2006, 2008, 2009.

My approach to Eastern philosophy is informed by the method of Toshihiko Izutsu⁵ a remarkable Japanese scholar of Eastern philosophy. His methodological operation is called “synchronically structuralization” that intends to analyze different trends in Eastern philosophy in order to identify common strands of thought. Izutsu recognizes the multidimensional view of reality as an essential aspect commonly found in Eastern perspectives. These perspectives include multiple dimensions ranging from the surface dimension of separate things, various intermediate dimensions, and the deepest or ultimate dimension diversely defined as *Brahman*, *nirvāna*, *sunyata*, *tao*, and so on. The chief characteristic of Eastern thought lies in the direct realization of this ultimate dimension by cultivating contemplative awareness.

When we revisit education, it is important to recognize that Buddhism provides not only moral and religious teachings to be taught at schools but also offers fundamental worldviews or frameworks, upon which a whole edifice of education can be built. Holistic education has been concerned with providing a comprehensive worldview for education, and Buddhism has the potential to contribute a great deal to this topic.

Five Dimensions of Reality

I have developed the concept of “the five dimensions of reality” as a basic worldview of holistic education (first appeared in 2000). They include:

1. Objective reality: the surface dimension of separate things;
2. Social reality: the semantic articulation of objective reality;
3. Cosmic reality: the deeper interconnection in nature and the universe;
4. Infinite reality: the deepest or ultimate reality;
5. Universal reality: the unified whole of all dimensions.

In what follows, I will briefly describe these realities, particularly referring to sources from Mahayana Buddhist thought.

1. Objective Reality

⁵ 2008a, 2008b, Nakagawa 2010.

“Objective reality” is the phenomenal world composed of separate things that arise in our ordinary consciousness where the mode of distinction is predominant. We are identified with this dimension in our everyday living. This is also the domain of conventional education. In accord with today’s predominant objectivism, this education encourages us to believe in this objective reality. With this conditioning of the mind, we come to perceive things as objective entities separate from us. Furthermore, we also perceive ourselves as isolated individuals. Holistic education has been keenly concerned with resolving the problem of fragmentation and isolation thus produced.

2. Social Reality

Objective reality is given to us through the function of the mind that articulates what exists into separate things. Izutsu calls this “subjective fabrication” or “semantic articulation”⁶. Therefore, objective reality has its own semantic foundation, which is called “social reality” in my scheme. It is the dimension of social interrelation, for it articulates the meanings of separate things through our communicative action.

Buddhist thinkers recognized the mind’s ability to create distinctions between things, but at same time they underlined that such an ability is the primary cause of our delusive perceptions, false attachments, and, therefore, suffering. For example, Nāgārjuna highlighted the function of “mental fabrication” (*prapañca*) to articulate diversity in objective reality. The *Middle Stanzas* says, “Action and misery comes from conceptual thought. This comes from mental fabrication”⁷. For Nāgārjuna, mental fabrication has to be extinguished in “emptiness.”

The *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, a treatise on Mahayana philosophy attributed to Asvaghosha, claims that the appearance of things arises from the “deluded mind”: “Since all things are, without exception, developed from the mind and produced under the condition of deluded thoughts, all differentiations are no other than the differentiations of one’s mind itself”⁸. Likewise, as the great Ch’an master Lin-chi addressed:

Followers of the Way, make no mistake! The various

⁶ 2008b 123-24.

⁷ Garfield 1995, 48.

⁸ Hakeda 1967, 48.

phenomena in this world and other worlds are in all cases devoid of intrinsic nature.... They are empty names, and the words used to describe them are likewise empty. But you insist on mistaking these idle names for reality. This is a great error.⁹

We implicitly project meanings onto things and tend to take them as the sole reality that exists. But the deeper reality is disclosed when the functions of the mind are suspended and cease.

3. Cosmic Reality

Beneath the social reality comes “cosmic reality,” which is an embracing dimension of nature and the universe. This is the realm of interconnection in which everything is dynamically connected to everything else. Here we find ourselves in direct communion with nature and the universe. In particular, faced with the current ecological crisis, scholars of holistic education introduced this dimension into the framework of education in order to go beyond both individualistic and social-oriented theories of education.

It is important to note that cosmic reality is not something to be comprehended only through gaining conceptual knowledge that ecological theories provide. But the direct connection with nature and the universe is realized through contemplative awareness. These two conceptual and contemplative approaches must be united in education. In this regard, Buddhist ecology would play an important role in this endeavor¹⁰, for Buddhism developed the concept of “dependent co-arising,” which is relevant to the discussions of interconnection. (For a more comprehensive understanding of this concept, it is necessary to incorporate the next two, infinite and universal dimensions.)

4. Infinite Reality

From Eastern perspectives, cosmic reality is not seen as the deepest or ultimate dimension of reality. They see infinite dimension on the deepest level of reality. Izutsu calls this “the absolutely unarticulated” or “the zero point of consciousness and Being”¹¹. This infinite dimension has been referred to as *nirvāna*, *sunyata* (emptiness), *h'sin*(mind, pure

⁹ Watson 1993, 47.

¹⁰ Badiner 1990; Tucker and Williams 1997.

¹¹ 2008b 147.

awareness), and *wu/mu* (nothingness) in Buddhist traditions. In other Eastern traditions, this level is called *nirguna Brahman* (formless absolute) in Vedanta, *tao* (the way) and *wu* (non-being) in Taoism, and *li* (principle) in Neo-Confucianism. All of these concepts are identical in their attempt to denote something infinite beyond any qualifications.

Ch'an/Zen Buddhism is a way of awakening to one's true nature on the infinite dimension, which is variously called "original nature" (Hui-neng), "the One Mind" (Huang Po), or "the Unborn" (Bankei). These concepts imply the Buddha-nature as pure infinite awareness. Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Ch'an, emphasized that "original nature" is inherently pure, and he remarked, "Buddhahood is actualized within essential nature...¹² If your own nature is awakened, you are a buddha".

Huang Po called the original nature "One Mind." In Chinese, the word for Mind is *h'sin*, which implies pure awareness. Huang Po said, "All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the One Mind, beside which nothing exists. This Mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible"¹³. The One Mind is "the pure Buddha-Source inherent in all men"¹⁴. What is important is to realize this Mind: "It is by preventing the rise of conceptual thought that you will realize Bodhi; and, when you do, you will just be realizing the Buddha who has always existed in your own Mind!"¹⁵.

The Japanese Zen master Bankei termed "the Unborn" (*fujyō*) to describe the "Buddha Mind." He told his followers: Everyone here is a buddha. So listen carefully! What you all have from your parents innately is the Unborn Buddha Mind alone. There's nothing else you have innately. This Buddha Mind you have from your parents innately is truly unborn and marvelously illuminating¹⁶.

5. Universal Reality

Infinite reality signifies the deepest dimension, yet it is not the final phase in Eastern perspectives. In realizing infinite reality, the whole world (objective, social, and cosmic realities) is transformed in a way that the infinite manifests itself through the finite world. This transformed reality is

¹² Cleary 1998, 28.

¹³ Blofeld 1958, 29.

¹⁴ p. 35.

¹⁵ p. 38.

¹⁶ Haskel 1984, 4.

called “universal reality.” Multiple dimensions never exist separately but they are unified in the non-dualistic way on this universal reality.

Nāgārjuna remarked on this unification: “There is not the slightest difference/ Between nirvāna and cyclic existence”¹⁷. The third patriarch of Ch’an, Seng-Ts’an, wrote in *On Trust in the Mind (Hsin-hsin-ming)* on the non-dualistic nature of reality: “Being—this is nonbeing,/ nonbeing his is being”¹⁸.

In universal reality the infinite manifests itself in all beings, and so each being comes to appear as a wondrous being. *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, the principal sutra of Hua-yen (J. Kegon) Buddhism, conveys this view in a line such as this: “In the atoms of all lands/ Are seen Buddhas existing there”¹⁹. The universal reality is also called *tathatā* (suchness) in Mahayana Buddhism. *Tathatā* is absolute affirmation of things as they are, which arises in the realization of empty nature of things. D. T. Suzuki writes: *Tathatā* is the viewing of things as they are: it is an affirmation through and through. I see a tree, and I state that it is a tree; I hear a bird sing and I say that a bird sings; ... these are statements of *tathatā*²⁰.

This emphasis on “suchness” as ultimate reality appears remarkable within Japanese Buddhism. As Hajime Nakamura, an eminent scholar of Buddhist thought, says, “In the first place, we should notice that the Japanese are willing to accept the phenomenal world as Absolute because of their disposition to lay a greater emphasis upon intuitive sensible concrete events, rather than upon universals”²¹. It seems that the Japanese Zen arts developed according to this disposition.

In universal reality, everything is fundamentally empty and, therefore, mutually interpenetrates everything else. Hua-yen Buddhism calls this the *Dharmadhatu of shih-shih* (J. *jijimuge*), which means the unobstructed interpenetration of all things. According to D. T. Suzuki, “The moving power in the Kegon world of *jijimuge* is the Great Compassionate Heart”²². Therefore, universal reality is the place where great compassion (*karunā*) flows out. The power of great compassion is personified in the *Amitābha* (J. *Amida*) in the Pure Land Buddhism. The founder of

¹⁷ Garfield 1995, 75.

¹⁸ 1993, 152.

¹⁹ Cleary 1993, 215.

²⁰ Barrett 1996, 263.

²¹ 1978, 350.

²² 1948, 65.

Shin Buddhism, Shinran, said, “Compassion in the Pure Land Path should be understood as first attaining Buddhahood quickly through saying the nembutsu [recitation of Amida’s name] and, with the mind of great love and great compassion, freely benefiting sentient beings as one wishes”²³. In Shinran’s view, compassion is not released by our personal power (“self-power”) but it flows out of Amida’s “Other Power,” that is, universal reality itself.

Conclusion

The multidimensional view of reality described above provides a foundation for holistic education. Holistic education is defined as an attempt to explore multiple dimensions in our existence and to realize the full dimensionality or the wholeness of reality. In this regard, a well-known statement made by the Zen master Dōgen stands out: “To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things”²⁴. In forgetting the self, the self becomes selfless and open to myriad things. Here emerges the interpenetration of everything. The primary aim of this education is to empty the self toward nothingness (infinite reality). Then, from this nothingness arises the “selfless self” on universal reality.

Eastern wisdom traditions developed a great variety of contemplative practices. Some of them can be introduced into the practice of education in order to explore multiple dimensions. With regard to this, I have argued for the Buddha’s teachings of “mindfulness” (*sati*) as well as Jiddu Krishnamurti’s teachings of “awareness” and Aldous Huxley’s idea of the “nonverbal humanities”²⁵. In addition, importantly enough, the field of “contemplative education” is rapidly expanding among educators in Western countries, who have applied mindfulness to the practice of education²⁶. In Thailand, Associate Professor Anuchat Pongsomlee, the director at the Contemplative Education Center at Mahidol University, is promoting this new approach to education.

Informed by Buddhism, holistic education involves ideas such as “awakening” (*bodhi*) and “enlightenment” (*satori*) at its core. In this respect, it is important to note that the Buddhist scholar Robert Thur-

²³ Inagaki, et al. 2005, 8.

²⁴ Tanahashi 1985, 70.

²⁵ Nakagawa 2002, 2008, 2009.

²⁶ Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011.

man regards the work of the Buddha as remarkably educational: “His movement was not the founding of a religion it was the founding of a new educational system”²⁷. Thurman argues for an education directed toward enlightenment. He refers to “enlightenment education”²⁸ or an “enlightenment-oriented education system”²⁹. As he says in below, Buddhism offers the vision of enlightenment education, an education oriented toward realizing the highest potentiality within a human being.

Education is the major tool of truth-conquest. It promotes enlightenment as the flowering of the individual’s own awareness, sensibility, and powers, and thereby develops a strong society. Within the context of the politics of enlightenment, it is understood that the purpose of human life is education, not that education prepares a person for some other life-purpose³⁰.

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²⁷ 1998, 95.

²⁸ p. 99.

²⁹ p. 119.

³⁰ p. 126.

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