

The Relevance and Potential of Buddhist Pedagogy in Mauritius

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Abstract

Mauritius, situated in the Indian Ocean and in the East coast of Africa, is a multi-cultural island, often called as the “rainbow” island. As a vibrant part of the Indian Diaspora, Mauritius shares strong cultural, educational, religious, and economical lineage with India. The triumph of the indentured labourers from India who settled in the island in the mid-18th century is to a great extent attributed to their spirit of tolerance and endurance, set of values, and wisdom that they carried from the Mother land, India. Along with the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, they also carried along the intangible Buddhist values and ethos that were instrumental in developing their settlements amidst colonial suppression.

It is against this backdrop that this paper intends to analyse as to how Buddhist teachings found expression as way of life in a multicultural and multiracial set up. It proposes to survey the teaching and learning of Buddhist Philosophy in the Mauritian Educational Curriculum and to propose the centrality of Buddhist ethics as a strong pillar of Buddhist Pedagogy and Didactics for a sustainable future with disciplined and confident youth.

Youth should be inspired to become accomplished in virtue by following the moral guidelines spelled out by the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*) by strong vectors. Therefore, to be able to propagate the ethical teachings of Buddha, educational reforms should be brought in the pre-primary and primary curricula. The Universal appeal of Buddhism would strengthen ties as Mauritius being a multicultural society where all religions have their own freedom can immensely benefit from Buddhist teachings.

Keywords: Mauritius, Mauritian Educational Curriculum, Multicultural, Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*), sustainable, reform, ethics, youth.

Mauritius – The Rainbow Nation

Mauritius, situated in the Indian Ocean and in the East coast of Africa, is a multi-ethnic island. As a vibrant part of the Indian Diaspora, Mauritius shares an umbilical relationship with India¹ through an indivisible and perennial cultural, philosophical, religious, linguistic, educational, and economical lineage.

Opinions differ as to whether it is a Creole Island, a Hindu-dominated Little India, or a neo-colonial outpost of the French-speaking world. Optimists see it as the greatest post-colonial social and economic miracle, while pessimists see it as a social disaster waiting to happen. Mauritius is a very new nation, shaping its identity over the past three centuries through successive migratory routes and settlements, to ultimately emerge as a multi-cultural “rainbow” island. For many visitors Mauritius appears to be a carefree tropical paradise, but its complexity will baffle any foreigner who dares to leave the comfort of the luxury beach resort. Daily life is far from idyllic for most of the population struggling to reconcile traditional culture and the old ethno-religious antagonisms with the demands of the modern world.

Although the South and the East Asian influence is very strong, its most defining characteristic is its multiculturalism. Its tradition reflects the diversity of the people, and the Mauritian language, food and religion form an intoxicating medley.

Mauritius is a pragmatic rainbow nation that strives to build an inclusive society based on equality, tolerance to diversity and democracy.

It is a model not only in the African continent but in the whole world for the social and economic achievements that it has made since its Independence in 1968.²

Migration

During Mauritius' colonization, the Dutch, French, and British brought slaves and workers from Africa and India. Slavery was abolished in 1834 by the British government. As a result, indentured labourers from India were imported to replace the emancipated slaves who were unable to work in the sugarcane fields. Most of the Indian indentured immigrants came from Bihar, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Bombay.³ Later on, some immigrants from the Hakka-speaking parts of southern China came as they were tempted by the commercial opportunities. (Mehta, 2015) The dynamics on the island are considered a great example of cultural integration- an island with different languages, cultures, and customs.

Mauritius is a member of the (British) Commonwealth Association. Mauritius is also associated with the *Agence of La Francophonie* which unites all the French-speaking states. Mauritius is a full member of the Organization of African Unity. Yet, most of all, Mauritius is Little India (Tinker, 1977).

The Resilience

The achievements of the indentured labourers from India who set foot and forth in the island is to a great extent attributed to their spirit of tolerance and endurance, to their wisdom and beliefs and to their patience and resilience, all earned through sweat and blood. These are nothing but the expression of the philosophical and ethical principles encapsulated in popular works like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhagavadgītā* which are diffused in their religious and cultural practices.⁴ Along with the *Rāmacaritamānasa* that they brought, they also carried along the intangible Buddhist values and ethos that were instrumental in developing their settlements amidst colonial suppression. In the face of all the abuses and injustices they faced, the migrants unwittingly followed the essence of Buddhism's First Noble Truth – ‘There is Suffering’. Through their way of life, they repeated and emulated Gautama Buddha's teachings and values. The migrants' spirit of compassion, respect, tolerance, and friendliness made them resilient in the face of adversity and enabled them to survive the test of time.

Multi-Ethnicity and Multiculturalism

Mauritius has tried to put each ethnic and religious group on an equal legal and political footing. Policies of multiculturalism as witnessed through the Best Loser System⁵ have campaigned for national harmony and have created the image of a Government caring for each cultural political representation. Eriksen⁶ explores the politics of national identity in different situations in Mauritius: at home within the community, in the political sphere and within intra-ethnic relationships and according to him, the people of Mauritius, a nation with no pre-colonial past and a short post-colonial history, have developed various ways to negotiate their differences to achieve peace.

Today, Mauritius is among the many democratic countries faced with the unprecedented challenge of handling its diversity. There is a strong correlation observed between religious affiliations and ethnicity (Mehta, 2015). The majority of Mauritians are religious, which has led to the development of a peaceful and brotherly atmosphere. Such a welcoming mindset is a must for the island's cultural diversity to survive. All religions together with the diverse sects and cults work towards one goal - the maintenance of peace and stability (Suntoo & Chittoo, 2012).

Education in Mauritius

The style of schooling established during the French and British colonial periods influenced the Mauritian education system to a large extent. The current education system in Mauritius is an appendage of the British education system inherited since its independence in 1968.(Jinot, 2017). It has progressed from being a wholly private company to a national education system. The growth of education came about with an increase in annual income coupled with a high social demand for education⁷. Since 1955, the government has been promoting the learning of ancestral languages⁸ in formal education.(Sauzier-Uchida, n.d.).

Primary schools have a policy of not including formal religious instruction in their curriculum. However, several arrangements are made on a daily basis which informally teaches pupils about religious ethos in school without officially teaching them in lessons. It is only at secondary level that religious and cultural education appears in the formal curriculum (Maudarbux, 2016).

Hinduism was approved as an examinable subject for the Cambridge School Certificate examination⁹ in 1979, and as a subject at the Cambridge Higher School Certificate¹⁰ level in 1982. Buddhist philosophy was incorporated into the Mauritian educational curriculum through the study of Hinduism as a subject.

To promote Indian culture and education, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) was founded as a joint venture between the Indian and Mauritius governments. The MGI offers an M.A. in Indian Philosophy as a postgraduate programme as well as a B.A. (Hons) in Indian Philosophy as an undergraduate programme and a Diploma in Indian Philosophy as a diploma programme. All these programmes have Buddhist philosophy modules. Students are encouraged to undertake research projects in the field of Buddhist epistemology, Buddhist Logic and Buddhist Ethics.

The Buddhist Concept of Education

Gautama Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist school, reveals the ‘catvāri ārya-satyāni’ as a way to eliminate the core concept of ‘suffering’ (Datta, 2007). Being known as the ethical teacher and reformer, in his first Discourse, his interpretation of the Eight noble path has led his approach to an educational perspective. This is so in respect to the emphasis given to the internal and external plight or scrape. Even his theory of Dhamma has contributed immensely for individual growth, values, and happiness.

The goal of Buddhist education is to attain wisdom.(Dong, n.d.) As a philosopher guide, Buddha has given insightful wisdom to one and all for spiritual progression. Along with the four noble Truth, the Eight-fold path contributes to educational progression in terms of a meaningful life. Among the three canonical and authoritative works of Gautam Buddha popularly known to one and all, the ‘Suttapīṭaka’ contains the dialogues that highlights the notion of the approach to teaching and educational practice (S. Radhakrishnan, 2008).

Giving a holistic insight, the principles can be practiced simultaneously and eventually can applied to many dimensions of life; including personal, family, school, and communal levels, to cultivate responsive sustainable living practices for the learners.

Interestingly, the three Buddhist principles; *Sīla-sikkhā* (moral conduct), *Citta-sikkhā* (mind training) and (*Paññā-sikkhā*) wisdom development are the guiding principles for the

teaching and learning practices (Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1999). Along with the three Universal Truths and the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eight-Fold path contributes to educational emancipation in terms of a meaningful, righteous, and fulfilled existence. These three principles are equated with the eight-fold path which is presented in a chart below;

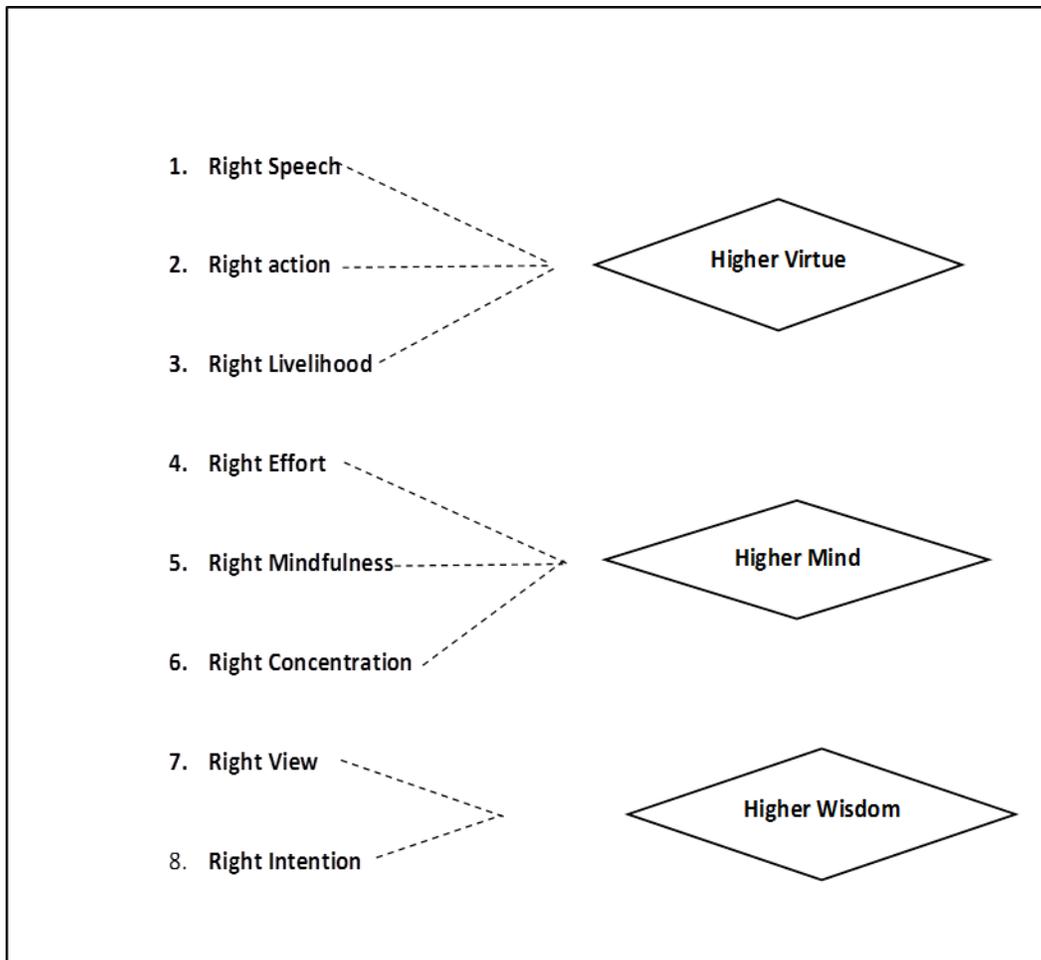


Figure 1: The Eight-fold path with the 3 principles

Learning and teaching cannot achieve the highest level without a moral principle, according to the Buddhist principle. In the procedural context of the Buddhist philosophy of education, the well-structured Programme for practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, as well as the threefold preparation, is also a prominent feature. It is the combination of cognitive development and moral-emotional foundation that makes Buddhist education a holistic scheme.

Virtue, Mind, and Wisdom are the three most essential components in learning skills and information for learners. And this can be extremely useful in aiding pedagogical approaches to the development of critical thought and reasoning skills. The Buddhist's aim has always been to gain knowledge, which becomes a relevant factor in the scope of education.

Analysis of the Buddhist's Pedagogical Teaching in Mauritius

Generally, the five core pedagogical principles are constructive, collaborative, integrative, reflective, and inquiring based learning (Peter, 1999). These five approaches have its similar taste in the aim of the Buddhist Education as the goal is to change an unwise man to wise. However, the learning and teaching principle cannot be relied to only the aspirant and the Guru but also in the Spirit as Bertrand Russell points out:

“More important than the curriculum is the question of the methods of teaching and the spirit in which the teaching is given”.

In terms of ethics, Gautama Buddha's four noble truths are the jewels of human development, as he is a guide to humanity. Sufferings and ignorance are at the root of the problem, and Buddhist education aims to eliminate ignorance. As a result, this may be an argument in favour of studying and teaching in Mauritius and around the world, as the essence of knowledge is to eliminate 'Suffering.' This has been the basic principle in Indian Philosophy.

The educational sector in Mauritius reflects Buddhist education in terms of a child's holistic growth, values, beliefs, and reverence, among other things. With the introduction of nine years of schooling, children are able to further improve their learning skills through imagination, study, and contemplation, as well as be compelled to learn in a more vocational rather than academic manner. The Nine Year Continuous Basic Education¹¹ is grounded in a holistic philosophy that emphasizes both greater equity and equality of learning opportunities to all students for them to unlock their true potential, regardless of geographical location or socio-economic background.¹²

In the area of learning and teaching, Buddha's eight-fold path provides a direct value-oriented theory. Buddhist education also aims to develop a free, wise, intelligent, spiritual, nonviolent, and secular person. Buddhist education was open to people from all walks of life and was free of charge. The system sought to help us rediscover our true existence. It also teaches total equality, as Buddha recognized that all sentient beings have this inherent wisdom and existence. The teachings of Buddha assist us in realizing our natural perfect ultimate knowledge. We can then use wisdom to solve all of our problems and transform pain into joy.

In addition, many young people in Mauritius are now participating in village social events. For Mauritian youth, this depicts the concept of collective corporation and democracy, and it can be compared to Buddhist education in terms of shaping a holistic creation. Even, as M.K. Gandhi puts it, "all land belongs to God, where then is the boundary line?"(Reddy, 2009) The aim of education is to awaken man's spirit. As a result, true education is both theoretical and practical. According to Gautam Buddha, the ideal education is to care for both the body and the mind, as Aristotle said in his theory of education: "a sound mind in a sound body." (Collins, n.d.)

Ethical Dimension

Ethics is widely regarded as the most important subject in human life. A society without an ethical dimension is akin to an individual without legs. Ethics is needed in order to have a well-balanced society. Buddhist ethics propagate the pathway for realisation in considering about the *Pañca-sīla* and the eight-fold path - Right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

These ethical conduct prompts to a rapid change of everyday life. If we take the notion of right livelihood, it is clear that Buddhism is strongly opposed to any kind of war, when it lays down that trade in arms and lethal weapons is an evil and unjust means of livelihood. From the Buddhist point of view, both knowledge and wisdom can be known as best educational position and these two positions depend on ethical ground. (Dharmasiri, n.d.)

The four noble truths are a priceless gift to mankind today because they serve as a guide for man to live in a correct and righteous manner in order to preserve and sustain social peace and stability. Many societal issues exist in today's world, such as the decline of morals, the current pandemic, youth delinquency, crimes, drug addicts, and so on.

In this modern world, the application of Buddha's ethical teaching and education is thus needed. Students must be inspired to become accomplished in virtue by following the moral guidelines spelled out by the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*), that is, abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from falsehood, and abstaining from taking intoxicant.

Degradation of Human Values

Globally, today's youth can be described as possessing both good fundamental qualities and flaws. The youth's culture must be prioritized because it is their norms, beliefs, and behaviours that shape future generations, and the growth of any community is inextricably linked to youth. However, it can be observed on a global scale that human ideals are dwindling. Every civilization is collapsing due to a slew of vices, which is wreaking havoc on the planet. Discipline issues, crime, rape, and drug addicts are all major social issues that every community

Today, we can see that materialism is at an all-time high. Crime and aggression are two facets of life that have risen to the point that we can see the world has devolved into a battlefield where bloodshed occurs every second. Mauritius is known to be a 'paradise island' because of its political stability, peaceful co-existence among different communities.

However, crime, suicide, narcotics, and juvenile delinquency are all present on the island. Notwithstanding, the question remains: is the educational system ineffective? These issues can be resolved by faithfully observing what the Tathāgata¹³ taught many years ago. Limiting desire is a

way of relinquishing possession, as Gautama sees it in the concept of the "Middle Path." Desires are unlimited, but if they are limited, worries and difficulties will be reduced. The Covid 19 Pandemic is a great modern comparison. Buddha's middle path is the gem to cure all problems be it personally, socially, and economically.

Relevance of Buddhist Pedagogy

A better educational atmosphere can be easily created when Buddha ethical values are followed, and this can result in a happy and blissful environment. In Mauritius, Buddhist philosophy is already taught to secondary school students as an optional subject. To be able to spread Buddha's ethical teachings, educational reforms, such as teaching basic moral and ethical principles, should begin with small children in pre-primary and primary schools.

By incorporating ethical principles into the curriculum, each child will be better able to grow a critical mind and, as a result, will be more disciplined in the future. Simple moral educational exercises should be performed in pre-primary schools because the children are too young to be taught large principles of morals and ethics. For example, the act of 'non-violence' in a song, a novel, or simply by acting. As a result, children will learn from a young age that violence is considered immoral and that it is also inappropriate to use violence.

Besides, as far as the primary schools, a subject like 'ethical values' is to be introduced, where it can convey all the disciplines, habits, values that an individual should have to promote peace in the society. Since Mauritius is a multicultural society, each religion has its own way of life, but when it comes to living a good life, the motto is the same: "Do good and be good to others.' Buddha's teachings are not a cold philosophy designed merely to rearrange the concepts in our minds; they are a living act of compassion intended to show us how to open our hearts to the miracle of awareness—our own awareness among the awareness of others through the same practice thinking and experience (Dong, n.d.).

Conclusion

If man wants to make the world a better place to live, he must look inside himself, try to right his wrongs, and put an end to atrocities in society by incorporating Buddha's plain and realistic teachings to live a happy and better life. In the twenty-first century, no one should be looked down upon or denied opportunities for advancement because of the *pañca-sīla*.

The deeper meaning of right action and right livelihood is the abolition of war, which has plagued humanity since the dawn of civilization. Only by infusing the world's environment with the spirit of the eight-fold-path will tensions and disputes between nations be reduced, universal peace maintained, and human welfare promoted.

Therefore, to be able to propagate the ethical teachings of Buddha, educational reforms should be brought along at the very incipient stage of the learning curve, that is, from kindergarten, and spanning all the way throughout the pedagogical continuum through the teaching of basic moral and ethical values.

Dr. Ambedkar rightly said, “Cultivation of mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence.”

Mauritius, being a multicultural society where all religions have their own freedom of existence and association, can benefit in all senses of the term from Buddhist teachings.

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Notes

¹ Vivekananda International Centre, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/may/24/india-mauritius-an-umbilical-relation>

² This statement was made by the Governor of Uttar Pradesh, India, Mrs Anandiben Patel, on Saturday 02 November 2019, at the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site in Port-Louis who was the Chief guest at a ceremony held in context of the 185th anniversary of the arrival of indentured labourers in Mauritius.

³ Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund, 2009, <https://aapravasi.govmu.org/aapravasi/>

⁴ Rajendrakumar Dabee, *Mauritius as an outpost of Indian Philosophy, religion and Culture: a Unique Experiment of Transformation*, Conference: Asian Philosophy Congress 2018, Surat, Gujarat, India, 2019

⁵ BLS- The Best Loser System is a method proposed by the first Government of Mauritius after Independence to make sure that the minorities’ ethnic groups are represented in parliament. It is still used today although the issue of its rightfulness is widely debated in the media and within left wing politics especially when candidates at any general election are required to declare ‘the community’ to which they belong.

⁶ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Common Denominators Ethnicity, Nation Building and Compromise in Mauritius*, Oxford, Berg, 1998.

⁷ http://www.adeanet.org/sites/default/files/peer_review_maurice_web_en.pdf

⁸ Ancestral languages such as Hindi, Mandarin, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu

⁹ <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-o-level-hinduism-2055/>

¹⁰ <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-international-as-and-a-level-hinduism-9487/>

¹¹ <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/news/mauritius-focuses-21stc-competences-and-holistic-education>

¹² <http://jkc.edu.govmu.org/English//DOCUMENTS/INSPIRING%20EVERY%20CHILD%20FINAL.PDF>

¹³ Tathāgata is a Pali word; Gautama Buddha uses it when referring to himself or other Buddhas in the Pāli Canon.

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