

Wisdom, Compassion, and Critical Thinking: A Buddhist Framework for Contemporary Education

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Abstract: *The essential elements for modern education that are investigated in this study are wisdom (prajñā), compassion (karuṇā), and critical thinking (yoniso manasikāra), all of which are derived from a Buddhist perspective. Ethical awareness, emotional stability, and reflective understanding are frequently neglected in today's education system, which places a premium on technical knowledge and economic efficiency despite the world's fast pace of change. This research contends that a more comprehensive approach that promotes human flourishing is offered by Buddhist philosophy. The ability to go beyond surface-level information and into meaningful comprehension is a hallmark of wisdom, which is defined as profound, life-altering insight into the essence of reality. An ethical foundation for learning is compassion, which promotes caring, social responsibility, and empathy in the classroom. Students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, question their beliefs, and cultivate conscious awareness through critical thinking, which is seen as an inquiry-based process. When taken as a whole, these three factors provide a holistic method for education by bridging the gap between awareness, ethics, and cognition. In my view, this model is quite applicable to the problems that modern schools face, including students' lack of critical thinking skills, emotional distress, and moral decay. It advocates for education as a process of transformation that fosters caring and responsible citizens in addition to enhancing intellectual capacity. More balanced, ethical, and reflective learning environments can be created by incorporating Buddhist concepts into modern education, according to the study. In the long run, this kind of thinking helps bring about a world where education is about more than just passing on knowledge; it is about building a community where everyone feels welcome and valued.*

Keywords: *Buddhist education; wisdom (prajñā); compassion (karuṇā); critical thinking; holistic learning; ethical education.*

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1 | INTRODUCTION:

More and more, people in today's society expect schools to help students grow as whole people, not just as consumers of knowledge. A demand for educational systems that foster not just intellectual capacity but also ethical consciousness and emotional stability has arisen in response to the fast societal transition occurring as a result of globalization, technological advancement, and moral ambiguity. Buddhism provides a useful foundation for this kind of thinking by viewing knowledge, compassion, and critical thinking as three interrelated aspects of human flourishing. In contrast to dogmatic religion, the teachings of the Buddha stress the need of knowing via one's own experiences and thinking critically. That "the Buddha was not only a human being; he claimed no inspiration from any god or external power either" is something to keep in mind, according to Walpola Rahula (Rahula, 1959, p. 24). Modern educational ideals of critical inquiry and independent thinking clearly fit with Buddhism's foundation in human reasoning and self-realization. In Buddhism, wisdom (*paññā*) refers to a profound comprehension of reality as transient and interconnected, rather than just academic knowledge. It can be developed via paying attention, thinking deeply, and living in the present moment. According to Zane M. Diamond, "educating for wisdom" is the end purpose of Buddhist education, which connects knowledge acquisition with personal growth and altered perspectives (Diamond, 2021, pp. 77-102). Wisdom, in this view, is seeing through appearances to the root causes of both happiness and misery. This method is in line with contemporary constructivist pedagogy, which emphasizes student agency above teacher-mediated information acquisition.

Another fundamental aspect of Buddhist teachings is compassion, or *karuṇā*. This term describes the ability to empathize with other people's pain and take action to alleviate it. As he treated people of all social classes with kindness and compassion, the Buddha's life exemplifies this moral compass. Traditional Buddhist sources state that the Buddha "encouraged them to think for themselves, and helped them to distinguish between what was useful and what was not" (Buddhist Educational Texts, n.d., as referenced in Buddhist Online Library, 2020). Care, respect, and a sense of moral obligation are the bedrock of this kind of teaching. Emotional intelligence, harmonious social interactions, and welcoming classroom environments are all outcomes of compassion in contemporary education. Embedded in the Buddhist tradition is the spirit of inquiry, which is essential to critical thinking. One of the most often recognized places where the Buddha instructs students not to take teachings at face value but to test them with their own experiences and logic is the Kalama Sutta. Rahula sums up this introspective mindset when he says, "The freedom of thought allowed by the Buddha is unheard of elsewhere in the history of religions" (Rahula, 1959, p. 25) in reference to the Buddhist concept of free thought. Buddhism is a great fit with modern educational models that place a premium on critical thinking and problem-solving abilities because of its teachings on challenging authority and verifying knowledge via experience.

A well-rounded educational philosophy that takes into account the intellectual, affective, and moral aspects of learning is the result of combining knowledge with empathy and analysis. Knowledge and morality are not taught separately in Buddhist schools, nor is empathy taught separately from intelligence. Learning, it argues, should be seen as a process of transformation rather than a discrete stage of human growth. This comprehensive framework provides a long-term strategy for raising conscientious citizens of the world in the face of mounting contemporary educational problems like stress, inequity, and value erosion. Consequently, this study presents a Buddhist paradigm for modern education that places equal emphasis on personal growth and academic achievement. The paper contends that schools should cultivate more than just competent workers; they should also help students develop into thoughtful, caring citizens who can think critically and act ethically.

2 | WISDOM (PRAJÑĀ) AS TRANSFORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE:

In Buddhist philosophy, wisdom (Prajñā) is more than just knowing a lot of information; it is a way of knowing that changes how you see the world, how you act ethically, and how you spend your life. Within the Buddhist curriculum, Prajñā stands for profound understanding of reality, including its impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā). Wisdom, which is fundamental to the Threefold Training (sīla, samādhi, and prajñā), is the pinnacle of human comprehension, through which ignorance is eradicated and freedom is attained. It is related with insight into impermanence, suffering, and non-self, and according to the classical interpretation of Buddhist thought, Prajñā is “the understanding of the true nature of phenomena” (Keown, 2003, p. 215). This suggests that Buddhist wisdom is not a body of facts but rather a consciousness that is dynamic, experienced, and capable of change. One way to look about Prajñā in an educational setting is as an ongoing process of learning that progresses from rote memorization to critical thinking and existential understanding. The learner’s perspective on information, themselves, and the world around them is altered, making it a transforming experience. The teachings of the Buddha, according to Walpola Rahula, promote direct realization above unthinking belief. Rather than demanding faith in authority, the Buddha invited his disciples to “come and see” (ehipassiko) (Rahula, 1959, p. 9). An early model of critical pedagogy, this principle upholds the idea that students should be taught to seek for, evaluate, and confirm information through their own experiences. Consequently, Prajñā evolves into a method of teaching that relies on experiential learning.

In addition, practising compassion and ethical awareness is closely related to prajñā. Not only does it include IQ, but it also includes emotional maturity and moral clarity. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, “a penetrative insight into the nature of existence that removes ignorance at its root” (Bodhi, 2011, p. 47) is what constitutes correct knowledge in Buddhism. Because it dispels the ignorance that gives rise to misery and immoral conduct, this shows that wisdom is essentially transformational. This concept questions the traditional divide between facts and ethics in modern classrooms, arguing that genuine comprehension should lead students to take moral responsibility and compassionate action. By advocating unrestricted inquiry and the use of one’s own experiences to validate knowledge, the Kalama Sutta bolsters the epistemological aspect of Prajñā. Nāṇaponika Thera (1994, p. 61) states that the Buddha instructs students to question whether teachings are harmful or beneficial rather than relying on tradition, authority, or hearsay. This way of teaching is quite in line with contemporary critical thinking, which emphasizes the need to test, verify, and contextualize information. Yet, Buddhist wisdom takes it a step further by combining analytical thinking with meditative insight, arguing that one can only reach a complete comprehension by bringing together theoretical understanding with acute awareness of one’s own experiences.

Prajñā is seen as transformational knowledge from a pedagogical standpoint due to the fact that it modifies both thinking and awareness. Instead, than just imparting knowledge, it alters the student’s whole way of being. A state of “non-discriminating insight” that perceives reality without bias or preconceived notions is central to Buddhist teachings, as pointed out by Damien Keown (2003, p. 217). This state of non-duality aids in the dissolution of fixed mental frameworks and the cultivation of flexibility, clarity, and openness. Modern educational systems frequently fail to integrate students’ emotional and ethical development with their intellectual growth, making this kind of approach all the more pertinent. My view is that Prajñā provides an all-encompassing approach to education in which learning can lead to personal growth and civic duty. It teaches students to think critically, reflect on their own actions, and develop an understanding of how everything is interconnected. Buddhist wisdom places an emphasis on understanding as emancipation from ignorance and suffering, in contrast to traditional knowledge systems that frequently place an emphasis on accumulation and competitiveness. Hence, by incorporating Prajñā into modern education, we may cultivate individuals who are not only good thinkers but also caring, ethically upright, and able to intelligently tackle intricate global problems. This means

that Prajñā, in its capacity as transformational knowledge, is a combination of three elements: ethical consciousness, experiential learning, and critical inquiry. It is an essential cornerstone of a well-rounded and comprehensive educational system because it connects information with wisdom, theory with practice, and intellect with compassion.

3 | COMPASSION (KARUṆĀ) AS THE ETHICAL CORE OF LEARNING:

Buddhist philosophy defines compassion (Karuṇā) as more than just an emotional reaction to other people's suffering; it is also a profoundly ethical and transforming principle that influences the way knowledge is perceived, used, and lived. Because it links intellectual growth with human responsibility, Karuṇā serves as the ethical basis of education within an educational system. It guarantees that learning becomes an ethical awakening and not just a process of acquiring facts and figures. Along with loving-kindness, sympathetic delight, and serenity, Karuṇā is one of the Four Immeasurables (brahmavihāras) in Buddhist philosophy, which is the genuine desire for all living creatures to be liberated from suffering. Harvey argues that the ethical obligation to respond to another person's vulnerability is the source of compassion (Harvey, 2000, p. 195). This interpretation places Karuṇā in the dual role of an inward philosophy and an external code of conduct for society. In my view, compassion as a pedagogical tool is what really has to be understood in order to turn the classroom into an environment where students and teachers may build ethical relationships rather than just exchange facts and figures. Knowledge becomes relational and learning becomes an act of compassion when both teachers and learners nurture Karuṇā. "Just as a mother protects her only child with her life, even so should one cultivate a boundless heart toward all beings" (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 6), according to the Metta Sutta, which is the Buddha's teaching that represents this universal orientation toward others. This allegory of motherly care is more than just a metaphor; it stands for the moral principle of unwavering duty. It implies that children need to learn to respect the inherent worth and fragility of all living things in order for education to be really effective.

Compassion, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi, is not a feeling of pity but rather a driving force in doing the right thing. According to Bodhi (2011), "Karuṇā bears the characteristic of aiding the eradication of suffering and manifests as non-cruelty" (p. 38), in his writings. Students nowadays frequently experience psychological stress, alienation, and competitiveness in the classroom, making this description all the more pertinent. Consequently, systems that put an emphasis on performance rather than wellbeing can be remedied through compassionate education. It stresses the need of teachers seeing their students as complete people with emotional and existential needs, rather than just a collection of facts to be processed. Classical Buddhist psychology provides more clarification on the ethical dimension of Karuṇā by linking compassion with wisdom (prajñā). When one considers the pain of living things and makes a conscious effort not to hurt them, compassion blossoms, as stated in the Visuddhimagga (Buddhaghosa, 2010, p. 319). This demonstrates that compassion is not an emotional breakdown but rather a self-controlled and introspective recognition of pain. This indicates that in order for compassion to stay a balanced and sustained ethical commitment in the classroom, instructors need to work on developing emotional stability and awareness.

The social aspect of Karuṇā is also emphasized by contemporary understandings of Buddhist ethics. Analayo posits that the concept of interconnectedness, in which the plight of others is perceived as an aspect of our common human situation, is intimately related to compassion in early Buddhist writings (Analayo, 2015, p. 88). In order to promote global citizenship, modern educational systems must take this viewpoint into account. The text suggests that students should not only strive for individual achievement, but also raise consciousness about issues like as social injustice, environmental catastrophe, and the importance of group welfare. Education, in my opinion, becomes a responsible practice when compassion is seen as the ethical foundation of learning. It proposes caring, empathy, and moral sensitivity as fundamental learning objectives, which challenges individualistic and

competitive learning paradigms. Students' academic engagement and personal growth are both improved in a caring classroom where they feel heard, valued, and encouraged. Most significantly, it fosters the development of people who are responsible members of society in addition to being well-informed. Therefore, in Buddhist pedagogy, *Karuṇā* stands as a link between understanding and ethics, thinking and feeling, and individuality and community. It makes sure that learning becomes a compassionate endeavour with the goals of alleviating pain and improving the lives of all. Rethinking education as a practice of care, interconnection, and transformative human growth requires an ethical foundation of compassion in a society characterized by rising social fragmentation and psychological anguish.

4 | CRITICAL THINKING AS REFLECTIVE INQUIRY:

In Buddhist philosophy, critical thinking is more than just the ability to reason or argue; it is a way of life that involves deconstructing one's own beliefs and perceptions via introspective inquiry. *Yoniso manasikāra*, or wise attention, is a method of systematically investigating one's experiences, dismantling delusions, and gaining an awareness of reality (*yathābhūta*) within the Buddhist educational paradigm. Since the goal is to alleviate suffering and promote freedom, this line of inquiry is not value-neutral but rather ethically oriented. In the *Kalama Sutta*, the Buddha states that people should not blindly follow teachings from tradition, scripture, or authority, but should instead test their veracity via their own experiences and the ethical repercussions (Ñāṇaponika Thera, 1994, p. 61). One of the first philosophical underpinnings of educational theory's critical inquiry is this instruction. To me, the key to understanding Buddhist critical thinking is to see it as a two-step process: first, shedding light on deeply held assumptions; and second, building new understanding by cultivating mindfulness. In its deconstructive spirit, the component questions dogmatic worldviews, conceptual rigidity, and unwavering convictions. Buddhism, according to Rahula, "tells you exactly and objectively what you are and what the world around you is" (Rahula, 1959, p. 49), which promotes a practical and dispassionate outlook on life. Learners are invited to examine the manufactured character of their experiences and illusion-based thinking is destabilized by this perspective. This is how critical thinking turns into "unlearning" the attachment and suffering-inducing false certainties.

To further, Bhikkhu Bodhi says that perceiving things as conditioned processes instead of fixed beings is the way to get the correct knowledge in Buddhism. "Penetrative insight into the nature of existence that removes ignorance at its root" is the source of wisdom, according to his writings (Bodhi, 2011, p. 47). By shifting the focus from debating abstract ideas to actively observing one's own thought and experience, this kind of critical thinking becomes more akin to meditation and self-reflection. Buddhism views contemplation as a means to attain experience clarity based on mindfulness, rather than engaging in abstract speculation. This form of epistemology revolves around the *Kalama Sutta*, which lays forth an approach to knowledge-seeking that strikes a balance between skepticism and ethical duty. Doubt is not something the Buddha advocates for its own sake; rather, he says that we should investigate things in light of whether they cause damage or good. A organized investigation based on ethical verification is what Buddhist critical thinking is, according to modern interpretations (Anālayo, 2015, p. 88), rather than just relativism or a rejection of all authority. This means that the effect on human flourishing should be considered alongside measures of knowledge's consistency and logic. This is how Buddhist teachings combine ethics with epistemology.

Deep introspection is also a part of Buddhist reflective inquiry. Focusing inward on the processes of perception, emotion, and intention, Buddhist practice differs from modern critical thinking frameworks that frequently center on external arguments. "Understanding the mind is essential to transforming it" (Harvey, 2000, p. 112), which is why Buddhist ethics and cognition are intertwined, says Harvey. The discipline of critical thinking takes an inward turn, turning the student both an investigator and an object of study. With this kind of self-reflection, students can see how their own biases, desires, and lack of

knowledge colour their perceptions of the world. A fixed ego is likewise dismantled by deconstructive consciousness in Buddhist education. Rather of viewing the self as a static entity, adherents of the philosophy of *anattā* (non-self) are encouraged to view it as a constantly evolving process. Because it encourages intellectual humility and discourages egocentric thinking, this realization has significant ramifications for education. A learner's receptivity to discussion, correction, and increased comprehension increases when they realize that their opinions are subjective and conditional.

An all-encompassing educational approach that incorporates analysis, mindfulness, and ethical reflection is presented by Buddhist critical thinking, in my opinion. In doing so, it reimagines critical thinking as a liberatory practice that goes beyond the Western understanding of it as an arguing skill. It educates students to not only think critically about ideas but also to analyse their contexts. A more rigorous and ethically sound method of education can be achieved by combining reflective inquiry with deconstructive awareness. According to the Buddhist view, critical thinking is more about refining one's understanding than it is about rejecting one's beliefs. It is a methodical investigation of truth that helps one see through delusion, gain insight, and develop empathy. This Buddhist methodology provides a potent alternative to the current educational climate, which is characterized by disinformation, partisanship, and information overload, by bringing together the search of wisdom with mindfulness, reason, and ethical responsibility.

5 | INTEGRATIVE EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK:

A holistic paradigm for human growth can be found in an integrated educational framework that is based on Buddhist philosophy. This framework brings together wisdom (*prajñā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and critical thinking (*yoniso manasikāra*) into one transformative vision of learning. Emotional development, moral responsibility, and intellectual growth are frequently taught in isolation in today's schools. Education, according to Buddhist pedagogy, is not a discrete procedure but rather an ongoing journey toward greater self-awareness, moral maturity, and intellectual clarity. In this view, education is about more than just gaining facts and figures; it is also about developing into a well-rounded person who can make sense of the world, be compassionate, and draw sound conclusions from their experiences. The Buddhist concept of interconnectedness (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), which states that human progress cannot be broken down into separate areas, is central to this integrative framework. The three pillars of development—wisdom, ethics, and mental discipline—are emphasized in contemporary research on Buddhist education. According to Zane M. Diamond, "wisdom curriculum" that links knowledge with lived change and character formation, and experiential learning are central to Buddhist educational philosophy (Diamond, 2021, pp. 45-47). Rather than focusing solely on intellectual capabilities, education should engage the full person. According to Kallio, Mononen, and Ek (2024, pp. 171-174), there are holistic understandings of Buddhist pedagogy that propose learning should encompass not only the cognitive but also the emotional, ethical, and existential aspects of human existence. The goal of Buddhism is to change one's way of knowing and being, and these points of view are consistent with that.

Wisdom (*prajñā*) serves as the cognitive-epistemic basis in this integrated approach. It helps students see things as they really are, without bias or preconceived notions. But wisdom is not complete on its own; the relational and ethical component of learning comes from compassion. An awareness of one's own pain inevitably leads to a concern for the suffering of others, as Buddhist ethics often stress. In this view, empathy is not a morally desirable trait but rather a necessary byproduct of self-awareness. Buddhist ethics, according to Peter Harvey (2000, p. 51), stem from the understanding that negative mental states (e.g., greed, hatred, and delusion) are the source of suffering and that positive mental states (e.g., non-harm) are the path to wellness. That is why it is inevitable that education based on Buddhist ideas will link knowledge with ethical duty. Within this approach, compassion (*karuṇā*) guarantees that learning becomes socially engaged and centered around humans. It changes

classrooms into places where students feel cared for and respected by their peers. Insight into suffering inherently develops the intention to alleviate it, as Bhikkhu Bodhi notes, therefore correct understanding is inseparable from ethical behaviour (Bodhi, 2011, p. 32). This suggests that education should foster not just logical reasoning and analytical skills, but also empathy and the ability to act morally. Knowledge has the potential of being selfish or instrumental without compassion, but it may become a powerful tool for the common good when infused with empathy.

Yoniso manasikāra, or critical thinking, is the reflective aspect of the system. Assumptions, authority, and the conditions under which knowledge originates can be examined by learners through this process. Rather of taking ideas at face value, Buddhist pedagogy advocates for students to examine them through experience, a practice known as inquiry-based learning. In this respect, the Kalama Sutta is frequently referenced, in which the Buddha instructs students to consider the ethical and practical implications of teachings (Ñāṇaponika Thera, 1994, p. 61). This exemplifies a pedagogical approach that places a premium on introspection, inquiry, and the validation gained from direct experience. Buddhist critical thinking, according to modern interpretations (Anālayo, 2015, p. 88), is more than just skepticism; it is a method of inquiry that is led by ethical awareness and mindfulness. A living educational ecosystem is created when wisdom, compassion, and critical thinking are all integrated; each component supports and changes the other. Lack of empathy can lead to emotionally unstable compassion, a lack of knowledge can lead to emotionally unstable compassion, and critical thinking without an ethical foundation can become destructively analytical. A well-rounded human being with insight, care, and reflective judgment is the result of integrating these dimensions.

In my view, this integrative paradigm brings together knowledge and ethics as well as cognition and emotion, providing a strong alternative to the disjointed present educational institutions. It shifts the focus from academic achievement to the flourishing of the individual as the ultimate goal of education. Such a framework offers a significant way forward in this age of environmental catastrophe, social injustice, and psychological stress by encouraging the development of caring, intelligent, and globally conscious individuals. Consequently, the integrative educational framework of Buddhism offers a comprehensive view of human growth, in which education is seen as a path to self-transformation and civic duty. The model for sustainable and meaningful education in the modern world is formed by aligning intellectual clarity with ethical compassion and introspective inquiry.

6 | CONCLUSION:

Through the integration of wisdom (prajñā), compassion (karuṇā), and critical thinking (yoniso manasikāra), this study has investigated a Buddhist paradigm for modern education. These three aspects are interrelated and contribute to a person's holistic development. According to this view, schooling is more than just a means to an end—it is a life-altering adventure that molds the character, values, and perceptions of the student. It is clear from the research that Buddhist thought offers a human-centered method of teaching and learning, one in which the development of one's intellect is inextricably bound up with one's capacity for moral responsibility and self-reflection. Within this paradigm, wisdom manifests as life-altering epiphanies that help students see the world more clearly and with more depth than they could with only academic understanding. The moral compass that links education with consideration, sympathy, and duty to one's fellow man is compassion. Through intentional awareness and experiential verification, critical thinking—also known as reflective inquiry—guarantees that information is continually investigated, questioned, and modified. When taken as a whole, these three factors provide a well-rounded educational approach that encourages personal growth as well as community service. To me, the real importance of this Buddhist method of teaching is in the way it counteracts the shortcomings of contemporary educational systems, which put an emphasis on test scores, rote memorization, and technical proficiency rather than on the development of character. The goal of education should not only be to produce intellectually gifted people but also to foster in them a

sense of social responsibility and ethical integrity via the integration of knowledge, compassion, and critical thinking. Therefore, this model provides a useful starting point for thinking about education differently in the modern era. The importance of self-awareness, alleviation of pain, and advancement of collective wellbeing as outcomes of genuine learning is emphasized. A more thoughtful, empathetic, and environmentally conscious world is something that can be achieved through the application of Buddhist pedagogy.

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