

# Exploration of Pedagogical Approaches during the Buddhist Era

Tilak Ram Acharya

## Abstract

This research article explores the education system prevalent in ancient India during the era of the Buddha. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the teaching methods employed during that time and elucidate various facets and dimensions of teaching practices. The article examines insights gleaned from Buddhist literature and scriptures, focusing on the Buddha's innovative and impactful teaching methods such as sermons, parables, and interactive exchanges. It also explores the pedagogical approaches of Buddhism, highlighting the egalitarian nature of Buddhist education and its inclusivity of individuals from all social backgrounds. The article discusses different teaching methods employed during the Buddhist era, including the Shraavan method, imitation method, demonstration and practice method, interpretation method, lecture method, debate and logic method, seminar, conference and *Shāstrārtha* method, self-study method, and excursion method. The research article concludes by highlighting the enduring relevance of the teaching methods from the Buddha's era in enriching the ancient culture and fostering a moral and virtuous society.

*Keywords:* Buddhist education, Buddhist literature, Gurukul system, Buddhist teaching method

## Introduction

In the era of the Buddha, education encompassed the holistic development of individuals, emphasizing the cultivation of both intellectual pursuits and physical well-being. Education during the Buddhist period served as a paramount tool for nurturing the comprehensive growth of individuals, encompassing their physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Buddhist literature highlights the significance and aims of education in fostering character development. Ethical conduct was regarded as pivotal, and individuals lacking such conduct were subject to condemnation across society.

The education system of the ancient Indian subcontinent stands out as one of the most captivating and significant civilizations worldwide. A comprehensive understanding of this civilization necessitates an exploration of its educational framework. The educational system of ancient India holds immense importance, offering valuable insights into the intellectual, cultural, and societal fabric of that era. By examining the educational practices and ideals of this civilization, we can gain profound knowledge about its multifaceted aspects and unravel the intricate tapestry of its historical development. Thus, this research article aims to delve into the education system prevalent in ancient India, shedding light on its unique characteristics and enriching our understanding of this remarkable civilization.

Throughout history, starting from the Vedic period, the significance of education has been widely recognized as a catalyst for both physical and spiritual elevation, as well as for fulfilling the diverse responsibilities within society. Education illuminates various dimensions of the human experience, providing valuable guidance and direction. From ancient times, education has played a central role in shaping individuals and their contributions to the betterment of society. It serves as a beacon, shedding light on different facets of human existence and facilitating personal growth and societal progress.

## Statement of the Problem

- a. What insights can be gleaned about the teaching system during the time of the Buddha?
- b. What information and evidence exist regarding the teaching methods employed during the Buddhist era?

## Objective

The primary objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the teaching methods employed during the era of the Buddha. Additionally, it aims to explore and shed light on the various facets and dimensions of teaching practices during that period.

## Limitation

The present study is constrained by its reliance on information exclusively sourced from the *Pāli Tripitaka*, limiting the scope to Buddhist teaching methods. As a result, it does not encompass other dimensions or teachings found in *Mahāyan* and *Vajrayān* texts, potentially limiting a comprehensive analysis of diverse teaching methodologies within the broader Buddhist tradition.

## Materials Collection and Analysis methods

In the course of preparing this article, extensive material has been gathered primarily from secondary sources, encompassing a qualitative research approach. Secondary sources such as books, newspapers, and internet resources have been utilized in the data collection process. The study adopts a library research method, facilitating the exploration and extraction of relevant information. The collected material has been subjected to a descriptive analysis method, enabling a comprehensive examination and interpretation of the acquired data.

## Analysis and Discussion

### Teaching Methods Implemented by the Buddha

In the 6th century BC, Shakyamuni Buddha revolutionized the art of teaching by introducing a distinctive approach that emphasized individual engagement and personal transformation. Drawing upon the *Pāli* sources, the early Buddhist scriptures, it is evident that the Buddha employed a diverse range of teaching methods, including sermons, parables, and interactive exchanges such as questions and answers (Armstrong, 2001). Notably, one of the Buddha's renowned and impactful teaching methods involved the utilization of parables or stories, which served as effective vehicles for imparting moral lessons and facilitating comprehension of the teachings. These stories, commonly known as "*Jātak* stories," were instrumental in illustrating the principles expounded by the Buddha and offering practical examples for his disciples to emulate (Strong, 1996).

In addition to employing parables, the Buddha adopted an interactive approach to teaching by engaging his disciples through questions and answers. This dynamic method facilitated a personalized learning experience, as the Buddha could directly address the individual concerns and uncertainties of his students (Batchelor, 1995). Furthermore, a crucial aspect of the Buddha's teaching methodology was the emphasis on personal comprehension and experiential understanding. The Buddha encouraged his disciples to engage in critical thinking and self-inquiry, urging them to question and examine subjects rather than accepting them blindly (Rahula, 2011). This approach fostered an environment of active learning and self-reflection, empowering the disciples to develop their own insights and deepen their personal spiritual journeys.

Overall, the teaching methods employed by the Buddha were not only innovative but also highly effective, facilitating personalized instruction that encouraged critical thinking and personal growth. By embracing interactive approaches such as using parables, asking and answering questions, and emphasizing personal understanding, the Buddha created an environment conducive to transformative learning experiences (Singh, 2012). These teaching methods empowered individuals to cultivate their own insights, engage in self-reflection, and embark on a path of personal development. The Buddha's teachings not only imparted knowledge but also nurtured the capacity for independent thinking and self-discovery, making his methods a powerful catalyst for intellectual and spiritual advancement.

## **Pedagogical Approaches of Buddhism**

During the Buddhist era, the education structure fostered a profound sense of equality, transcending distinctions of social hierarchy, wealth, and privilege (Gombrich, 2011). Education was made accessible to all individuals, regardless of their background, by the Gurus (teachers). The Guru-disciple relationship was characterized by a harmonious and affectionate bond, where disciples exhibited deep respect and reverence towards their Gurus. Notably, Buddhist education centers played a pivotal role in imparting the values of unity within society (Poudyal, 2080 BS). Women and individuals from the Shudra caste, traditionally considered lower in social hierarchy, were equally afforded educational opportunities (Singh, 2012). This egalitarian approach underscored the inclusive nature of Buddhist education, promoting social cohesion and justice (Narendradev, 2015).

The method of education during the Buddhist period appears to share similarities with the teaching methods employed in the Vedic period. Disciples would attentively listen to lessons imparted by the Gurus and commit them to memory. However, while the Vedic tradition placed significant emphasis on precise pronunciation, the Buddhist period shifted attention to other aspects while still acknowledging the importance of pronunciation (Cowell, 1895). Based on these criteria, the suitability of individuals for *upasampadā* (higher ordination) was evaluated and differentiated.

A monk who underwent the *upasampadā* became a permanent member of a Buddhist monastery, marking a significant milestone in their spiritual journey. This ordination served as a holistic tool for imparting knowledge and discipline to the body, mind, and consciousness (Singh, 2012). Considering the unique characteristics exhibited by children at different stages of development, it became essential to employ distinct teaching methods tailored to their specific needs. Consequently, Buddhism devised different approaches for educating children belonging to various age groups. The teaching methods developed by Buddhism can be broadly categorized into two aspects: individual teaching method and collective teaching method (Batchelor, 2009). The individual teaching method prioritized self-study techniques, while the collective teaching method predominantly relied on lecture-style instruction. Students are often provided opportunities to think like a philosopher, a historian, an art historian, an anthropologist, an ethnographer, a critical theorist, a literary scholar, etc. and when they become adept at thinking within various disciplines, they can make informed decisions about the methods that they might want to employ in their own research and writing (McGuire, 2021). This overview provides a general introduction to the diverse teaching methods that Buddhism has developed.

## **Shravan Method**

We are discussing about the ancient era, back then there was no concept of literacy. Instead, one would memorize, repeat, and recite what they learned (Singh, 2012). Students were expected to memorize not only the content but also the method of learning. The prevalent method at that time was known as the 'Shravan Bidhi' or the 'hearing tradition,' where students would listen attentively to memorize and recite it to others. It is important to note that there were no written texts or materials outlining what

should or should not be accepted by the monks in the Vinayapitaka (Gombrich, 2012). This further attests to the significance of the hearing tradition as a fundamental component of the educational system during that period.

The purpose of the method involving repetition to aid memorization was to firmly imprint the teachings in individuals' minds. This method was also employed in the composition of the entire *Tripitaka* (Singh, 2012). It was believed that committing texts to memory enhanced intellectual capacity, with thoughts being associated with the letters of the alphabet. Scholars who utilized this method reported a heightened clarity of thought within a span of approximately ten days (Mishra, 1994). Once heard, there was no need to repeat the teachings as they were naturally retained. This method gained popularity during the Buddhist period and has persevered even in contemporary times, showcasing its enduring legacy.

### **Imitation Method**

The imitation method is a natural approach to learning. In the context of Buddhist education, monks (teachers) would write each letter and number on a board, accompanied by the corresponding pronunciation, to teach children about language letters and mathematical numbers. Through this process, children would imitate the pronunciation demonstrated by the teacher and also engage in writing practice. The imitation method served as a means to instill discipline and foster ethical conduct within the framework of Buddhist education (Gombrich, 2006). It facilitated not only the acquisition of language and mathematical skills but also the cultivation of character and behavioural traits.

### **Demonstration and Practice Method**

This method can be regarded as an enhanced version of the imitation method. It involved the teacher demonstrating specific actions using specialized verbs, which the students would then memorize. Subsequently, the students would imitate the teacher and strive for proficiency in the particular action through independent practice. This modified approach was employed by Buddhist teachers to impart instruction and training in various arts, skills, and practical subjects (Jha, 2017). It served as an effective means to foster hands-on learning and practical expertise in students.

### **Interpretation Method**

This method can be considered an evolved form of the conventional interpretation method. Buddhist teachers would orally present subject-related information and supplement it with illustrative examples, effectively elucidating the data (Rahula, 2011). This process was commonly referred to as data interpretation. Furthermore, teachers actively assisted students in resolving their queries and addressing their problems. They would diligently respond to students' questions, ensuring that the lesson would not proceed until each student had a clear understanding of the material being taught. This method emphasized the teacher's dedication to ensure a thorough understanding and addressing any questions or uncertainties that may arise.

### **Lecture Method**

The lecture method employed by Buddhist monks during that era differed significantly from the contemporary lecture method (Gethin, 2004b). It resembled a modern guest lecture but possessed a distinct level of refinement. Buddhist Higher Education Centers would invite experts in specific subjects to deliver lectures. The experts would impart their knowledge, and subsequent to the explanations, any doubts or queries would be addressed. Moreover, the lectures encompassed the presentation of relevant facts pertaining to other subjects, providing students with a broader understanding of interconnected knowledge domains.

## Debate and Logic Method

In the realm of logic, it appears that Buddhist scholars predominantly represent the *Mādhyamika Nyāya* School. Consequently, there was a strong emphasis within the Buddhist education system on mastering the intricacies of logic and reasoning. To teach contentious subjects, Buddhist monks developed the method of debate and argumentation. Participants in these debates would present their opinions and put forth arguments in support of their positions. These arguments were backed by eight types of evidence, namely principle, *hetu*, example, *sādharmya*, validity, direct, inference, and *āgam* (Davidson, 2010a). It is widely recognized that this method differed significantly from the contemporary approach to debating. For instance, Maitreya elucidates the art of debate in seven chapters within the fifteenth volume of the *Shaptadasabhoomishastra* book (Maitreya 1974).

## Conference and Shāstrārtha Method

The *Shāstrārth* (religious-debate) method represents an ancient tradition of showcasing one's intellectual competence (Davidson, 2010b, p. 1). Davidson further elaborates that the Buddhist teachers occasionally organized conferences in the realm of higher education where scholarly discussions and debates among different schools of thought were conducted (Davidson, 2010b, p. 1). These conferences invited subject experts to deliver lectures on specific subjects, followed by *Shāstrārtha* sessions. During these sessions, students engaged in higher education would attend and present their inquiries and doubts to the speaker, who would then provide clarification and resolution. Through this process, students gained a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Numerous historical examples of *Shāstrārtha* exist, spanning not only the ancient and modern periods but also the Buddhist era, the Ashoka period, the Harsha period (7th century AD), and subsequent eras (Davidson, 2010b, p. 13).

The method also employed during the Buddhist period is seminar or *Sangosthi* which is different from the contemporary notion of a seminar. During that time, a seminar referred to a gathering convened to collectively deliberate and arrive at a decision regarding a specific subject of relevance. Participants in these seminars consisted solely of students studying the respective subject and the teacher instructing the same subject. Within the conference, each individual would present their thoughts and reasoning, ultimately culminating in the determination of the correct decision or course of action. It is important to note that this definition of a seminar in the Buddhist era diverged from the contemporary understanding of the term.

## Self-study Method

The development of this method can be attributed to Buddhist teachers, who built upon the already-established art of writing during that era (Gethin, 2004a). The Buddhist monks took the initiative to translate various texts from the prevailing environment into the *Pāli* language. Additionally, they meticulously produced numerous handwritten copies of these books and established libraries to safeguard these valuable resources. These endeavours provided the foundation for self-study, as basic materials and tools were readily available. Students pursuing higher education during that time would engage in reading relevant books found within these libraries, striving to absorb the subject matter. Following their study, they would seek clarification and resolution for any lingering doubts from their teachers.

## Excursion (demonstration and practice) Method

This method was predominantly employed by Buddhist teachers in the context of monastic education (Gethin, 2004b). Monks undertaking monastic education were afforded the opportunity to embark on visits (Johnston, 2017). Through these visits, they were able to immerse themselves in

the study and contemplation of the true essence of the world. These visits also provided them with an opportunity to delve into the intricacies of society and receive training in religious preaching. During this era, a prominent teaching tradition revolved around the study of Sanskrit grammar. Students were primarily focused on delving into various Sanskrit texts, including *Pāṇinisūtra*, *Dhātupāṭha*, *Ashtadhātu*, *Unādi Sūtra*, *Kāshikāvṛtti*, *Churni*, and possibly *Pāṭanjali Mahāmānya* (de Jong, 1989). Additionally, they were exposed to Bhartṛhari's scriptures, *Vakyadeep*, and *Bhagavṛtti*. Younger students engaged in the study of *Hetuvidya* and *Abhidharmakośha*, fostering the development of their reasoning abilities under the guidance of justice. Through the exploration of *Jātakamālā*, they enhanced their imagination, and critical thinking, and also acquired knowledge of *Vinaya*.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that religion had a profound impact on the education system during the *Jataka* period. Shakyamuni Buddha placed greater emphasis on the spiritual growth of individuals. Considering this perspective, it appears that the Buddha's teachings leaned more towards idealism than practicality. The teaching methods employed during the Buddhist period were extensive and enriched, offering valuable insights into contemporary teaching practices. The relevance of the teaching methods from the Buddha's era persists in modern times, as they can contribute to the enrichment of ancient culture and the cultivation of a moral and virtuous society.

The study highlights the holistic approach to education during that time, emphasizing the cultivation of physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of individuals. The emphasis on moral and spiritual growth, personalized instruction, and active learning experiences can contribute to the enrichment of ancient culture and the cultivation of a virtuous and morally conscious society. In summary, this research article has shed light on the multifaceted aspects of the education system and teaching methods prevalent in the ancient Indian continent during the era of the Buddha. By delving into the unique characteristics and pedagogical approaches of Buddhism, this study enriches our understanding of the historical development of education and provides valuable insights into contemporary teaching practices.

## References

### Hindi and Nepali sources

- Acharya, N. (2015). *Bouddha Dharmadarshan*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Mishra, P. C. (1994). *Bharatiya Samajik Yewam Aarthik Sansthave*. Delhi: Nag Prakashan.
- Poudyal, U. (2080 BS). *Buddhakalin Samaj*. Fineprint Books.
- Singh, N. (2012). *Brahman Yewam Bouddha Shikshya Paddhati*. Patana: Pratibha Prakasana.

### English Sources

- Armstrong, K. (2001). *The Buddha: A Biography*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Batchelor, S. (2009). *Buddhism: A Short History*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Batchelor, S. (1995). *The Buddha and the Modern World*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Cowell, E. B. (1895). *Jataka Tales* (3<sup>rd</sup> part). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, R. (2010a). *The Eightfold Path of Debate in India* (2nd ed.). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Davidson, R. (2010b). *The Shāstrārth Method: An Ancient Indian Tradition of Scholarly Debate* (2nd ed.). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

- De Jong, J. W. (1989). *The Indian Tradition of Learning: Religious and Philosophical Traditions* (2nd ed.). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Gethin, R. (2004a). "The Self-Study Method in Buddhist Education." *Buddhist Studies Review*, 21(1), p.1.
- Gethin, R. (2004b). The Teaching Methods of the Buddha. *Buddhist Studies Review*, 21(1), p.55. (No citation from this)
- Gombrich, R. (2006). *Education in Early Buddhist Schools*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gombrich, R. (2012). *The Pali Canon: A Critical Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gombrich, R. (2011). *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Jha, R.K. (2017). "Relevance of Teaching Methods in Vogue in Ancient India in Current Educational Scenario." *Pedagogy*, 7(1), p.4.
- Johnston, W. J. (2017). *The Buddhist Tradition: A Historical Introduction* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Maitreya. (1974). *The Shaptadasabhoomishastra: A Treatise on the Seventeen Constituents of Enlightenment* (A. Wayman, Trans.). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Rahula, W. (2011). *The Buddha's Teachings*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- Strong, J. S. (1996). *The Jātaka: Birth Stories of the Buddha*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

### Internet Sources

- McGuire, B. (2021). "Pedagogical Possibilities: A Review of Approaches to Undergraduate Teaching in Buddhist Studies." *Philosophy and Religion*, 12(4), 231. Doi:10.3390/re112040231.

### Author Note

Dr. Tilak Acharya is the registrar at Lumbini Buddhist University.  
Email: tilakg55@gmail.com

Received :12/07/2023

Revision received:11/11/2023

Accepted: 05/01/2024