

# Integrating Buddhist Values into Nepal's Education System: Moving toward a Holistic Curriculum for Self-Transformation

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## Abstract

*The education system that has been developed in Nepal has come from the "Gurukul" system. Modern schools are offering education to the masses, keeping the target of developing Gross Manpower, ensuring literacy, civic sense, and overall socio-economic development in the country. However, school curricula in Nepal are feeble regarding self-transformation, discipline and moral education. It focuses on a skill and knowledge-based education system, where wisdom is relegated to the background. The education system is still continuing just by learning and taking exams, which often compromises morality, emotions, and spiritual growth. This research paper highlights the extremely crucial question of how the education system in Nepal can become more "Holistic" regarding the overall development of a student. The paper has its objective of initiating a discourse on the necessity of Buddhist values to be incorporated in the school education of the country and deliver the message to the common academia about the need to introduce the values of Buddhism – Mindfulness, Compassion, Morality, Honesty, and Simplicity in the education system of Nepal. The study follows the library-based qualitative research methodology.*

*Keywords: Nepalese education system, Buddhist values, holistic development, curriculum reform, value-based education*

## Introduction

The Nepali education system has undergone many changes over the years. Initially, the Gurukul system was practiced in the country, but the modern framework was later adapted by the Rana regime in the social context of that time. Education initially belonged to only a select few during the Rana regime (Dahal 112). After 1951, a new change in education occurred in Nepal. This change was influenced by Western methods of educating children. The aim was to increase literacy and develop a sense of identity in the nation along with the fulfillment of the educated and qualified citizens to aid in development.

The National Education System Plan, which came out in 1971, was another significant development in the education sector in Nepal. It revealed the state's intentions for making education universal in nature. At the same time, it aimed at ensuring it meets international standards (Bhatta 42). Currently, the School Education Sector

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Plan, which runs from 2016 to 2023, shapes the education sector. Its aims include inclusivity, accessibility, and quality, as it focuses on achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4, which attempts to achieve quality education (Bhatta 42).

In spite of all the development in the sector of education in the nation, there are still massive hindrances. The system stresses too much on exams. It stresses memorization rather than understanding a text and utilizing it in practical life. The burden of irrelevant texts in Nepali school education is a widely acknowledged issue. The curriculum is often criticized for being too theoretical, outdated, and disconnected from the practical needs of the labor market and students' real-life situations. This burden contributes to low learning outcomes and high academic stress (Lal 98). Another weakness is the lack of ethical development. Grade-oriented teaching has hurt practical life skills teaching. It has also denied emotional and moral values. The students are passing their examinations but are unable to solve social or personal problems. However, it doesn't mean that it is completely useless. Today's necessity is that there is a need to reshuffle the existing curriculum, removing unnecessary chunks of lessons, replacing them with useful Buddhist text materials that lead the society towards perfection.

New problems in the school curricula have appeared together with globalization and technology. Materialism is increasingly pushing spiritualism to the corner. The changes in technology have also led students to stress more as they are prone to overusing smartphones. As a result of this, anxiety and depression follow (Kohrt and Griffith 142). The students have also lost the roots of culture and tradition. "Value-based" education is not found in the national curriculum. This is a big void. The question remains how Nepal will get its schools to reform for its holistic growth.

The education system in Nepal is built on the secular model, which is constitutionally guaranteed since the adoption of the Interim Constitution of Nepal in 2007 and further reiterated in the new Constitution of Nepal in 2015. The term "secularism" in Nepal does not mean the absence of religion. Instead, it focuses on such values as the religious neutrality of the state, protection of all religions, and enhancing a culture of harmony (Hachhethu 45). Since, the insight in Buddhism is of secular nature, it is justifiable to inculcate Buddhist values in the curriculum of school education across the nation.

It is proposed that Buddhism can be used in education in Nepal through teaching students about such important human values as empathy, compassion, and self-control. It is suggested that it would be possible to discuss Buddhist ethics in a way that would not turn into indoctrination but instead would focus on introducing universal human values (Jackson 112). In other words, the notions of *Karuna* and *Sati* can be used in educational practices as tools for ethical and psychological

development of the learner.

Therefore, the above-mentioned study does not present Buddhism as being religious in nature, rather as a philosophy that fits well within the framework of an ethical discussion in tune with Nepal's secular and pluralist educational policies. This will ensure that any curriculum reforms made are inclusive, constitutionally valid, and non-offensive.

This paper examines methods of implementing Buddhist principles in schools in Nepal, aiming at three aspects: Firstly, it examines what is wrong with the current educational system in the country. Secondly, it examines some of the influential international educational paradigms. Thirdly, it outlines a strategy to incorporate principles of Buddhism in the school curriculum. These principles are: Sila (Ethics), Samadhi (Meditation), Panna (Wisdom), along with Karuṇa (Compassion), Simplicity, and Honesty.

The history of Nepal's educational system was based on virtue and morality. The Gurukul system inculcated discipline and unity. The Buddhist monastic schools taught analytical skills and mindfulness (Tiwari 12). But since the 1950s, the system has changed dramatically. It has been switched to utility-oriented and is unconcerned with spirituality. Today, there are many issues that Nepalese society has been facing. Societal disunity and mental health breakdowns serve as examples. The school system that places emphasis on grades only will not work to bring happiness in the country. We require socially committed and empathetic citizens through a revised curriculum in Nepalese schools, integrating Buddhist Ideologies in it for the overall development of the school children.

The proposed application of Buddhism in the educational system includes ethics and emotional control. These values assist students in overcoming stress, as well as increasing empathy among learners. Students become more practical and understand the meaning of life. They know every detail regarding the art of living a meaningful life. These tenets are consistent with the shift towards holistic education worldwide (OECD). For this, the structural overhaul in the curriculum is necessary in the country. We should include Buddhist tenets in the curriculum for the greater good.

The prevailing education system in Nepal is more oriented towards examinations and rote learning. Students are required to acquire technical knowledge (skill to live a life); however, the output is devoid of skill, moral substance, emotional stability, and common sense. There is a deficit in the sense that students are educated but fail on the parameter of social responsibility and mental acuity. The main theme of this study is to convey the importance of interwoven education based on values such as mindfulness, compassion, and ethics that are intrinsic to Buddhism. In the process,

the study intends to upgrade the learning environment from rote learning to self-transformation.

This research employs a systematic qualitative methodology through library research. As opposed to a general narrative review, this study employs an organized procedure regarding the identification and examination of the materials used in this research in order to attain academic credibility and clarity.

There exist various strict criteria for selecting the sources used for conducting this research because of depth and relevance. Primarily, the choice depends upon the relationship of the content to the Nepalese education system and the studies of the values based and holistic education. In addition, the study will include not only Buddhist teachings in classical literature but also their interpretation in the context of modern approaches to ethics and pedagogy. To uphold the academic rigor of the work, only scholarly peer-reviewed articles and books written since 2000 will be considered.

Data collection and analysis in this research will depend on secondary sources, namely government documents, scholarly articles, and teachings of Buddhism. All the material will be analyzed using thematic analysis in order to discover recurring topics within the literature. Specifically, the research aims to discover weaknesses in moral and ethical education, study the worldwide practices in holistic approach and its possibility of application to today's teaching. The data was classified using themes like “ethics deficiency,” “student welfare,” and “educational reform” that guided the analysis process of this study.

Considering that this study does not require empirical research (such as observations, experiments, surveys, and interviews), it is purely interpretive. Consequently, the results should be viewed as hypothetical propositions rather than empirical evidence. Future studies may focus on classroom intervention or longitudinal analysis to validate the applicability of the theory.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Characteristics of the Education System of Nepal**

The education system in Nepal is eclectic, not clean-lined or uniform. Both history, politics, and economy of the country have shaped it, but its key objective remains to provide a set of skills among the students for national growth. The education system in Nepal can be categorized into three different phases: the Gurukul system, education under the Rana reforms, and the modern era starting after 1951.

The earliest form of education in Nepal was known as the Gurukul tradition. It is based on Hindu and Buddhist ideas. It focused on the total growth of a student. This

included moral teaching and spiritual discipline. It aimed to develop a student's mind, body, and character simultaneously. The Gurukul curriculum traditionally combined the study of the Vedas, Sanskrit grammar, and Vedic philosophy with practical Himalayan sciences such as Ayurveda, astrology, and statecraft, all while integrating the unique cultural and Buddhist influences of the region. Students lived with their teachers. They learned humility and respect. This system of education was directed towards building the character as well as the intelligence of the disciples (Tiwari 8).

### **Modern Reforms and Current Structure**

Modern education in Nepal started during the Rana period. One of the notable events within this period was the establishment of Durbar High School in 1854 under the influence of the Western system of education. The school initiated formal lessons that were based on British models with subjects like mathematics, history, and geography-strictly adhering to the standards and regulations of Calcutta University (Sharma 2). However, education then was not for all. Only the ruling group had access to it. This widened the gap between the rich and the poor.

After the revolution of 1951, education grew swiftly in the country. Nepal worked to have everyone in the country literate. The Education Act of 1971 (2028 BS) established the legal authority for the National Education System Plan, which standardized the curriculum to transition Nepal from a liberal-arts-based system to one focused on vocational and technical training. This shift was designed to produce the specific human resources and technical "manpower" required for national development in sectors such as engineering, medicine, agriculture, and public administration (Ministry of Education 9-13). It furthermore established a grading system (Bhatta 45). These developments connected education to development in the country. The government believed that education was the key to modernizing Nepal.

At present, Nepal has various important policies operational in the field of education. The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), which was operational from 2016 to 2023, has now been followed by the School Education Sector Plan (SESP). Besides, the National Education Policy, which came into operation in 2019, acts as the overall guideline to provide equality in accessing quality education with international standards (Ministry of Education 14).

The structure of the Nepalese system consists of primary, lower secondary, secondary, and tertiary levels. There are government and private academic institutions in Nepal. "Besides, the country is endeavoring to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4, which targets quality education and lifelong learning for everyone by 2030 (National Planning Commission 22).

This system has a host of specific goals, however. Academically, it aims at developing literacy and problem-solving skill in students. It prepares the learners for further studies and labor market. Socially, it strives for democratic behavior and responsible national citizenship. Economically, it is considered a means for poverty eradication. It develops the human capital, essential for the economy. In more recent documents, there is an inclusion of technology and innovation, though mild, in the system as well (Lal 102).

In spite of these, the system remains "utilitarian." This means that the modern curriculum has a provision of enhancing technical skills in students but it is silent regarding moral growth. It is true that "civic duty" and "ethics" are mentioned in various policy papers. But these are rarely taught in the classroom. The result is that schools are mostly concerned with examinations. Learning has become a memorization process; today children memorize the text, tomorrow they forget. It is no longer a life-changing experience.

In short, Nepal is having a progressive vision regarding school education system today with the provision of easy accessibility, quality, and inclusion. These goals match the needs of national development. However, in real life, the system is too academic. It ignores virtues and life skills necessary for total growth. This gap shows why we need to add ethical and cultural values in the curriculum. Buddhist philosophy is a great way to fill this gap.

### **Weaknesses in the Education System of Nepal**

Nepalese education system has made a significant improvement to meet the global standard, however, there is still significant weaknesses. Among the bigger challenges is the emphasis on rote learning. The exam culture compels students to memorize information. It does not encourage critical thinking or creativity; hence, students keep repeating information to pass their tests. They may not deeply understand concepts. Nonetheless, there still lack transformative texts in the courses. They cannot apply anything in life from what they learned. This narrow focus hurts life skills development and ignores emotional intelligence (Luitel 5).

The next weakness would be the absence of moral instruction. The documents mention values. However, the teaching of these values in class has not been taken into serious consideration. Moral instruction has been looked at as additional work. It has not been taken as an important part of learning (K. Subedi 4). The students acquire theoretical, and in some extent, technical knowledge but are away from effective moral instruction. They are not prepared to face moral issues. This causes problems of behavior as well as an absence of civic responsibility in citizens.

Inclusivity is also an issue here. Equality of access to quality education does not apply to all students. Disparities are created on the basis of finance, gender, and the location of the students (ActionAid 26). Rural schools do not have good buildings and qualified teachers. As a result, the performance of minorities goes down. Better-equipped private schools are available in the urban areas. However, only rich parents can manage to provide that to their children. So, the gap between social classes widens even further.

The education system in Nepal applies teacher-centric approaches as well. This hinders the participatory role of the students. Lecture method is common in most places and time (Shrestha 67). The students act as passive recipients of instruction. This halts the development of independent ideas on the part of the students. Many teachers lack knowledge concerning contemporary approaches to instruction. They lack the ability to teach MBSR and social skills.

There is a disconnection between the school system and the outside world. Topics are taught in an isolated fashion. There is no connection with the needs of society and developments in the workforce. The rate of change in advancement of technology is rapid. A degree of flexibility and morality is required together with the skill-based instructions. The existing education system does not equip students well for these aspects.

A significant number of schools in Nepal have overcrowded classrooms. In these learning environments, it has become a challenge for learners to receive the attention they require. In contrast to the ‘Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’, average of 21 children per learning class in the delivery of primary education on an international basis, a considerable number of schools in Nepal have more than 40 or even 50 children in one classroom. In such a classroom setting, the teacher finds it difficult to concentrate on teaching. In overcrowded classrooms, more time is spent on managing the children than on instruction. Such a classroom setting is overwhelming and offers a poor setting for learning vital skills such as emotional and creative skills.

At last, one important factor that is not addressed in the curriculum is mental health. Students are already under too much stress and competition. A well-rounded strategy is required vis-à-vis emotional development. Anything less would leave students burnt out or alienated from society (Lal 98).

There are several gaps in the existing system of education in Nepal. These include the teaching system and holistic development of students. It often ignores Sila (ethical conduct), leaving students without a strong moral compass for life. There is no space for meditation or mindfulness, which makes it hard for students to find inner peace and

focus. Because morality is not taught as a core value, many graduates prioritize money over helping their community. The system creates clever minds but often forgets to nurture kind hearts and disciplined spirits. This gap between modern degrees and traditional wisdom is why many feel the soul of education is missing in Nepal today.

### **Global Benchmarks as Catalysts for Reform Nepal's Education System**

In order to make a difference in the existing education framework of Nepal, certain lessons can be learned from international systems that can be able to strike a chord between academic success and all-around development. Finland, Japan, and Singapore prove that success can't be achieved at the expense of the morals and well-being of a student.

Finland is a world leader in defying the culture of "rote learning." Moreover, Finland does not support the culture of taking achievement tests. Instead, it practices critical thinking or creativity. Finland gives its teachers the autonomy to construct their lessons according to the needs of their students (Sahlberg 22). Thus, it is assured that in the rural or urban schools, the students have an equal chance to become emotionally strong people (Niemi 45). Moreover, Finland does not have the overemphasis on the achievement test scores, giving the "breathing room" for the deeper learning to take place, which is what is urgently required in the pressurized environment in the schools in Nepal.

Conversely, East Asian models of Japan and Singapore herald the significant importance of incorporating character education into the curriculum. Moral education is not a technical subject taught individually, but is embedded in living through communal actions like cleaning the classes and sharing meals (Fujita 88). Such actions develop a sense of discipline, collaboration, and a cohesive social whole from a tender age. The example of Singapore's "Character and Citizenship Education" (CCE) proves conclusively that a high level of education and virtuous qualities can coexist side by side (Tan). The Singaporean system provides applied learning, which applies study concepts to real life.

What ties all these exemplary systems together is that they opt for participation and involvement that is student-centered rather than teacher-led and lecturer-dominated classes. Although the Nepali education system is attuned and sensitive to the grades and "unhealthy imposition of lessons," these international models of education offer a possible road map for a reconstruction of the education system in the Nepali context. If Nepal combines modern global standards with its own rich traditions, the government can create a school system that brings out the natural creativity in every student.

### **Application of Buddhist Teaching Paradigms in the Existing Educational System**

In order to fill this identified "void" within the national curriculum, it is suggested

here that there needs to be an integrated approach made to the "Threefold Training" (Sila, Samadhi, and Panna) and the "Four Sublime Sublimes" for enriching the curriculum. In regard to the first component of Buddhism and its teachings that transcend into the first pillar, based upon "Ethics," Sila/Right Conduct stands as the foundation of an ethical and integral society.

By teaching moral lessons from the Suttas, Dhammapada, and Jatakas, schools can impart something far more valuable to students than mere tips of morality. These texts impart the lesson of critical thinking and sound judgment to children. They also inculcate strength and resilience in students so that they do not give up when faced with difficulties in life. Students learn to handle quarrels in a non-violent manner and learn to take care of the environment. Rather than imparting mere facts, they impart emotional intelligence to students. This knowledge bears the potential to make every child a focused, kind, and capable leader.

Based on these ethical foundations, the incorporation of Samadhi-encompassing mindfulness (Sati) and meditation-meets the cognitive and affective needs of the contemporary student. Teaching mindfulness and meditation does not promulgate a religion; rather, it is the practical way to train the human brain for the modern world. Just as we wash our bodies, meditation acts as a method of "scraping away" mental defilements like stress, anger, and distraction, as well as greed, hatred, and delusion. By clearing this mental "rust," students transform a cluttered mind into one that is calm, pure, and focused. Mindfulness can enable a student to experience a state of "internal peace" irrespective of outside pressure (Gunaratna 101). The OECD adds weight by pointing out that "social and emotional skills," such as emotional regulation, are equally important as high grades for future success. This simple habit turns the mind into a clean and powerful tool, thus enabling every child to face life's challenges with a steady heart.

"The revamped Nepalese curriculum aims to move students from memorization to the application of Panna (Wisdom) and Karuna (Compassion). Panna is more than book knowledge; it is a tool that enables the students to see the world from the perspective of 'cause and effect'. They understand the law of interconnectedness and thus respect every being in the planet equally. When they understand the true nature of objects, the 'law of impermanence,' as it is, they develop an unshakeable mental resilience in them. They realize that their stress, failures, and even their successes are not permanent, which allows them to "scrape away" the anxiety of clinging to specific outcomes. This insight naturally shifts the classroom focus from "what to think" to "how to think," empowering students to handle life's challenges with a steady and clear mind (Gunaratna 101).

Yet wisdom is never complete without the inclusion of Karuna. While Panna allows

students to see the world clearly, Karuna enables them to live in the world in harmony. Schools can use the tools of community-based education and "buddy programs" to turn on the compassion functions that enhance a stronger society. A certain kind of compassion emerges from recognizing that our own hardship is common to all. It is out of this solidarity that the compassionate attitude is born. It transcends the ego (Chodron 6). When students possess the wisdom of Panna coupled with compassion, they no longer excel merely as test-takers but instead excel as leaders.

### **Criticism and Arguments**

The incorporation of Buddhist values in education comes with its own share of disadvantages despite the various strengths. One of the main concerns is whether the inclusion of concepts associated with religious faith in public schools would have a negative impact on secularism by excluding those with diverse religions. According to Nussbaum, any form of value orientation from a particular religious practice may lead to prejudice against other religions (27).

Implementation of the idea could also be difficult due to the structural problems already existing in the current educational system of Nepal, such as scarce educational resources, congested classes, and lack of teacher capacity (Bhatta 67). Moreover, lack of appropriate pedagogical skills may cause distortion of the philosophical teachings of Buddhism, especially the concepts of mindfulness and compassion.

This research addresses these worries by adopting an approach that is both secular and educationally appropriate. Rather than concentrating on religious education, the emphasis will be on ethics that are universally applicable and compatible with international education objectives, including social and emotional learning and well-being (OECD 35). Furthermore, incorporating these values can be accomplished through gradual incorporation into curricula, teacher training, and piloting projects.

Accordingly, although the worries raised are legitimate, they can be addressed effectively through proper policy-making, framing, and implementation approaches.

### **Conclusion**

There has been significant progress in the accessibility of education in Nepal, as well as integration of curricula at all levels in the country. Nevertheless, the mainstream school educational system in the present context is dominated by the ideology of exams and skill development, without giving adequate importance to the development of morals, practicality, and the transformation of individuals. This has been amply demonstrated in the present study, where technical experts lacking in morals, social responsibilities, and mental strength are produced.

Inculcating the Buddhist ideals of *Sila* (discipline), *Karuna* (compassion), *Panna*

(wisdom), and mindfulness provides a culturally relevant and educationally sound model for change. Such ideals do not conflict with modern education but supplement educational pursuits in the realm of knowledge by inculcating sound moral reasoning, sound emotional, and reflective foundations. They thus can shift the thrust of education from the grades to the life span. The study clearly shows that the best models of education in the global context are those that concentrate not just on academic achievement but also put great emphasis on ethics, student-centered education, and well-being. These, in fact are long incorporated in Nepal's own traditions in Gurukul education and in monasterial education.

This particular research, being grounded in both qualitative studies and library research, aims to conceptualize rather than empirically implement it in future studies. Future studies would involve pilot projects, classroom interventions, or longitudinal studies of the value-integrated approaches to education in Nepalese schools. Nevertheless, the current research draws attention to the historic needs of the nation in transforming its education process in order to develop the 'mind, heart, and character' of the nation's children, together with the life-skill in a balanced fashion. In this model, it would develop individuals in Nepal who would be educated as well as equipped with skills to perform for both the nation's growth and developing the quality to meet the criteria required for a global citizen.

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