

Learning to Live Together: An Overview of 21st Century Educational Goals from a Buddhist Perspective

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Introduction

The twenty-first century has brought unprecedented social, cultural, technological, and environmental transformations that have significantly reshaped educational goals worldwide. In response, international educational organizations have emphasized the need to cultivate individuals capable of living harmoniously in increasingly diverse and interconnected societies. The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, presented to UNESCO, identifies four fundamental pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. Among these, "learning to live together" has gained urgent significance due to escalating social conflicts, cultural tensions, environmental challenges, and the pressing need for peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies.

This study explores how Buddhist philosophical and educational principles can contribute to the realization of this educational goal. Using a qualitative textual analysis of selected Buddhist discourses (suttas), this paper investigates the Buddha's approach to human relationships, social responsibility, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. The findings demonstrate that Buddhism offers a holistic, practical framework that integrates individual psychological transformation with macro-level social harmony, offering a deeper vision for contemporary global citizenship and sustainable human flourishing.

Modern educational thought recognizes that learning to live together requires more than the acquisition of mere academic knowledge. It demands the cultivation of empathy, social responsibility, constructive communication, cooperation, respect for diversity, conflict resolution skills, and a shared commitment to the common good. Consequently, contemporary educational institutions are increasingly expected to prepare students not only for economic employment but also for responsible citizenship in a highly globalized world.

In this context, Buddhist teachings provide valuable insights by addressing both individual transformation and social harmony. Rather than viewing education strictly as a utilitarian tool, Buddhism conceptualizes it as a

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holistic process that seamlessly integrates intellectual growth, moral integrity, and spiritual development.

Research Problem and Methodology

The primary research problem of this study is to investigate the contemporary applicability and systemic value of Buddhist teachings in fostering the global educational objective of "learning to live together". To address this problem, the study utilizes a qualitative research methodology focused on the textual and philosophical analysis of canonical Buddhist discourses (suttas). By examining early texts and the core tenets of Buddhist educational philosophy, this study seeks to identify universal principles regarding human relationships, social responsibility, and conflict resolution that can be practically integrated into contemporary secular educational systems.

Discussion

Epistemological Inquiry and Intellectual Humility

The Buddha's educational approach was fundamentally grounded in critical inquiry, self-reflection, and experiential understanding. Rather than demanding blind adherence to dogma, he encouraged proactive investigation and personal verification of truth. This empirical approach is famously demonstrated in the Kālāma Sutta, where individuals are advised to evaluate ideas through careful personal examination and practical consequence.

In modern classrooms, this methodology promotes open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and deep respect for differing viewpoints. By developing these cognitive habits, learners are better equipped to engage constructively with individuals from diverse cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds without hostility.

Interpersonal Ethics: The Brahmavihāras

A central contribution of Buddhism to social cohesion is its emphasis on the four sublime states, or Brahmavihāras:

Loving-kindness (*mettā*): Promotes active goodwill toward all living beings without discrimination.

Compassion (*karuṇā*): Cultivates sensitivity to the suffering of others and the drive to alleviate it.

Sympathetic Joy (*muditā*): Develops an appreciation for the success and happiness of others, thereby reducing toxic jealousy and hyper-competition.

Equanimity (*upekkhā*): Fosters emotional balance, stability, and strict impartiality in social interactions.

Together, these four states provide a resilient ethical foundation for peaceful coexistence within highly diverse social environments.

Universal Interdependence and Global Citizenship

Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the principle of interdependence, highlighting that individuals do not exist in isolation but are deeply interconnected with one another and the broader cosmos. Fostering an awareness of interdependence in contemporary classrooms helps learners appreciate cultural diversity, recognize shared human experiences, and develop a genuine sense of global citizenship. This awareness is vital in an era characterized by mass migration, globalization, and rapid intercultural interactions.

Dialogue, Tolerance, and Conflict Resolution

The Buddha lived and taught in a highly diverse socio-religious environment marked by competing philosophical viewpoints and rigid social classes. Despite these divisions, he consistently modeled dialogue, tolerance, and mutual respect, engaging with individuals from all walks of life without discrimination.

Furthermore, Buddhism diagnoses the root causes of all personal and social conflicts as greed, hatred, and delusion. An education inspired by these principles seeks to develop self-awareness and emotional regulation to overcome these destructive tendencies. Secular practices derived from this tradition, such as mindfulness (*sati*) and meditation, build emotional intelligence and reflective thinking, enabling students to respond to disagreements with patience rather than aggression.

Socio-Ecological Responsibility

The concept of learning to live together extends beyond human relationships to encompass the relationship between humanity and the natural environment. Faced with modern ecological crises like climate change and biodiversity loss, Buddhist teachings offer a framework of deep respect for nature. Early Buddhist texts illustrate that the Buddha and his disciples regarded the natural world as an integral component of human well-being, supporting the development of environmental consciousness and sustainable lifestyles.

Reciprocal Duties and Personal Development

Buddhism recognizes that sustainable societies depend upon mutual respect, responsibility, and cooperation. The Sigālovāda Sutta, for instance, outlines the specific ethical and reciprocal responsibilities within foundational social relationships—including those between parents and children, teachers and students, employers and employees, and friends. By integrating personal transformation (wisdom, mindfulness, and self-discipline) with social responsibility, Buddhism offers a balanced educational framework addressing both individual growth and the collective common good.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, the educational goal of learning to live together has evolved from a theoretical ideal to an urgent global necessity. Buddhist teachings provide a rich, practical, and highly relevant foundation for achieving this goal through the cultivation of compassion, mindfulness, ethical conduct, and an understanding of universal interdependence. By validating inquiry, open dialogue, and tolerance, Buddhist educational philosophy not only supports the objectives of modern international frameworks but also offers a profound vision of holistic human flourishing. Integrating these insights into contemporary educational practices can significantly accelerate the development of peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable global societies.

Keywords - Buddhist educational philosophy, learning to live together, social harmony, interdependence, coexistence

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