Mahatma Gautama Buddha as a Pertinent Teacher: Reflections from the Vinaya Pitaka

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Why are terrorists (being a human), the young and energetic youths acting in a ridiculous and frustrated way? Didn’t they go school/college to learn and behave like a human? These questions led us to think about our present education system, a more career-oriented than focused personality development. It seems to me that the current professional and routinized teachers focus more on the needs of the market, state, and self and they are not able to make teaching and learning more social, attractive, engaging, and appealing for students. The highly digital students of the twenty-first century are easily becoming restless and for many, the only new escape routes lie along the dangerous roads of drugs, sexual experimentation, terrorism, and outburst of senseless violence. Does the Buddhist tradition have an answer or any possible clues and guidelines? How far is the Buddha’s method of teaching relevant in this age of instruction with high technologies? The article explores the possible answer and traces the significance of the Buddha as a teacher exhibited in the Pali Vinaya Pitaka particularly for the teachers and in general for the twenty-first-century educational system.

[Keywords: Buddhist pedagogy, professional, sattha, anusasana, Sakayanirutti, Dhamma]

1. Introduction

The Pali canonical texts often reflect the images of the Buddha such as, “An Arhat fully awakened....abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy with knowledge of the worlds, unsurpassed as a guide to mortals willing to be led, the
teacher of gods and men” (Digha Nikaya, II.8, III.1.2.). Gautama Buddha is more famous as a mahatma than a teacher. Most of us merely know him by his religious and spiritual life, teachings, preaching, and sermons. The Buddha was not only an initiator of a new sect in India, i.e., Buddhism but also, he was an erudite, simple, and charismatic teacher. Gautama was wandering and preaching in this material world after the enlightenment for the rest of life. In this course, the Buddha came into regular contact of ordinary folks, groups of people, wicked people, villagers, educated and illiterates, holy saints, philosophers and so on to learn, share, and teach his ultimate knowledge. He not only talked, shared, and conveyed his complex ideas but also always tried to make it understandable, and engaging in the contemporary standard, and pure dialect. In this way, we can suppose him as a successful and skillful teacher reflected through the increasing expansion of his thoughts and the construction of monasteries. Later South Asian Buddhist monasteries adopted educational ideas, pedagogy, and methods of the Buddha and these mahaviharas served as both reputed educational and religious institutions. It is easy to be a reformer, but it looks hard to change the heart of millions without being a perfect, accessible, powerful preacher, and teacher like Mahatma Gautama Buddha. Syrkin (1984) said, “the Buddha’s characteristics describe him as a salutary preacher, an incomparable tutor (sarathi) of men, and teacher (sattha) of gods and men etc. reflected from his didactical methods constituting the essence of the canonical scripture.” It seems like there is a need to face relatively unexplored aspect of the Buddha’s personality as a teacher in the present global, material, and professional education system.

2. Objectives

When we start peeping into the teaching activities of schools, colleges, and universities, the emerging crisis within the education system strikes our intellectual reasoning. Today’s educational system is getting affected increasingly by the demands of self, state, and market, which intensified the task of teachers in carrying out their responsibilities efficiently and effectively. Teachers became more formal, professional, routinized, and focused on increasing number of publications and project completions to get promotions. The teaching became focused on courses, which are mostly lacking any emotional, moral, personality, and social teaching. Somewhere the mentorship and informal relationship with students are lacking behind, putting formal education in serious trouble. Deresiewicz (2014) rightly opines that at present students starve for validation, for connection, for care— for (let’s not be shy about saying it) parental figure other than their parents, which is a necessary part of growing up. It is somewhere related to the increasing youth unrest in America, Europe, and Asia. This may be explained in diverse ways. Students are quickly becoming restless, and for many, the only attractive escape routes lie along the dangerous roads of drugs, sexual experimentation, terrorism, and outburst of senseless violence. The contemporary
education system is producing thousands of unemployed youths every year. We often read in newspapers that the criminals/terrorists have educated the person and they are going forward to join ISIS, MOSSAD, ISI and other terrorist’s organization in increasing number. The contemporary abnormal and inhuman events of violence and terrorist attacks in schools and colleges reflect the failure of our education system, for example, we often read in the newspaper about the event of gunfire in schools and colleges of America, mostly by the ex-students. Why is education taking a turn for the worse? Liu and Tee (2014) say that today students’ lifestyle, everyday language, hobbies and attitude towards life reflect a post-modern outlook—anything goes. This ‘anything goes’ attitude welcomes anything that brings instant pleasure, avoids pain, and as much as possible excludes anything that requires self-reflection, moral discipline, and social responsibility. Students are enjoying active virtual connectivity with family and friends and occasional professional email conservations with teachers through modern gadgets of communication and information technology. In other words, they became far from the social living realities and the physical interactions. In this twenty-first century, students’ mind-sets are changing fast. It means that there is a need for corresponding change in pedagogy or the methods of teaching. The article explores the significance of the Buddha’s pedagogy mainly for the teachers and in general for the twenty-first-century educational system. This study investigates those principles and practices of the Buddha, which could hold the key to the solution of many educational ills of our times. How far is the Buddha as a teacher relevant in this age of teaching with high technologies? How can we introduce and connect students to the social living realities? What kind of approach can teachers adapt so that students acquire the needed knowledge in the right ways, develop the proper skill and cultivate the correct values?

3. Review of Literature

The teacher and its pedagogy are fundamentally constitutive of the contemporary education system, which they are a part, crossing over from the private sphere to shape the personality. The way the Buddha’s teaching is held and given is more important than on their content, or perhaps more important in the context of today’s educational crisis. Not only is the Buddha’s pedagogy ouster by modern education but also the attempts made to revive it are also critically analyzed. The formal aspect of the Vinaya has attracted many German scholars, e.g., Oldenburg, Frauwallner, Schlingloff, Huber, and others. The recollection of the Buddha’s teachings from the Buddhist canon keeps coming till today in monographs but lack the references to the Buddha’s methods of teaching. The books related to the history of early Buddhism and monachism have an occasional reference to the Buddha’s role as teacher and discipliner such as Oldenburg, 1904; Oldenburg, 1882; Dutt, 1960; Dutt, 1971, etc. Recent studies such as Lopez, 2001; Thubten, 2004; Bodhi, 2005; Gombrich, 1996 have shown little interest in briefing
the Buddha’s methods of teaching reflected from the whole Pali canon. The absence of serious and focused analysis of the Buddha as a teacher in the current intellectual writings is surprising.

The teaching of the Buddha has codified in full detail in suttas in prose and verse in the Pali-Trippitaka, i.e., the Vinaya, the Sutta and, the Abhidhamma which is also based on the instruction (anusasana) of the Buddha. The Vinaya Pitaka altogether available in six different versions but the Pali version is a particularly interesting text for the investigation of the Buddha’s pedagogy for several reasons. First, the Pali Vinaya Pitaka is the earliest, authentic and complete stratum of Buddhist literature, composed between the mahaparinirvata of the Buddha and the pre-Asoka period in the First Buddhist Council at Raajagraha. Second, The Vinaya means distinction, instruction, discipline, removal, etc. The Vinaya Pitaka is the first to show the program of teaching and the whole of the path as outlined in the early Buddhist community. Third, it does not only discuss the first fully ordained monks but also explains the course of development under which monks may progress toward arhatship depends on teaching dhamma in the right way. Fourth, the utterance of the Buddha mentioned in the Vinaya, where the teachings were promulgated through the medium of Sakayanirutti, i.e., the mode of expression or a language of his expression. Fifth, there was a tradition of studying the Vinaya during the time of the Buddha to become a real monk by mastering and practice it in their daily life. The Theravada Vinaya Pitaka has three divisions namely Suttavibhanga, Khanddhaka, and Parivara. Suttavibhanga consists of Parajika and Pavittiya. Khanddhaka contains two books Mahavagga and Cullavagga. I. B. Horner says that Parivarapatha seems concluding text of the Vinaya Pitaka added, later on, setting forth the method of teaching the Vinaya.

4. Implications

The canonical scriptures of Theravada Buddhism ascribed significant term sattha only to Gautama the Buddha,meaning the high status of teacher and/or master. We can also quickly notice in the Buddhist literature that the title sattha used very carefully not for anyone else but only for the Buddha. The Pali word sattha means a leader of a band, teacher, and competent. In this, we can say that the Buddha was the leader of his followers as a qualified teacher and guide. He is noted as the teacher of gods and men both. There are many instructional settings visible in the texts while the Buddha is interacting with debaters or laying down a rule. Professor Stoesz (1978) said in his article that these are not merely presentational devices of the early community developing its characteristic shape in the sense of dependence on its authoritative leader, but show a clear picture of the Buddha as a teacher seen canonically. It is his picture as the teacher in the Vinaya Pitaka as we have it that is interesting to the present study. What sort of figure does he cut in his aspect as the teacher? The Samannaphala Sutta and the prologue of the Suttavibhanga of the Vinaya describe the nature of the Buddha’s as
sattha. He has achieved freedom from rebirth and the ultimate knowledge of this material world, so he can lead others who wish so. He knows all events and causes of happiness and sorrow, so he is an authoritative, and compelling person to guide all in explicit soteriological content. Others can recognise and pay respect to the authorship of the true sattha. His ideas and practices on learning, the relationships between the teacher and the taught, explanations and visual aids, etc. are refreshingly modern.

The Buddha’s time of activities reflects an era of a perplexed religious situation in India. Indian society witnessed many rivals and jealous wandering religious sects and ideologies engaged in magical and miraculous deeds to win more supporters for them. The Buddha believed in the power of spoken words at that age. He successfully convinced people to change their way of life, adopt new values, and seek new goals through his peculiar methods of instruction. The Buddha as a teacher was useful in the sense that the number of followers was increasing day by day that the different sects became worried about self-improvisation. In this area, we can also see that his educational philosophy and ideas became the base of the later established Buddhist monasteries. These Buddhist monasteries followed the methods of the Buddha in training and learning of common men in Buddhism and various arts, crafts, and sciences. These mahaviharas produced many Buddhists and numerous disciplined and moral men, showing its efficient function as an educational institution. The originalities in the teaching proceedings of the Buddha were the main reason behind the success of the Buddha as a teacher and a preacher.

The Buddha was a master of a variety of means of instruction as appropriate to monks, laity, and ordinary folk; to those with varying needs on the higher path, on the lower way, on no path at all, and to those following another teacher. After the enlightenment, the Buddha’s career was practically a continuous round of debates and discussions with the exponents of other schools of thought. He used to answer all questions put to him at assemblies of his disciples or taught the people of different faith. His discourses aimed to make people aware of his ideology, i.e., the true nature of dhamma and guide to salvation through the simple and easy methods of teaching. He practiced making the complex philosophical matters of impermanence (Anicca), substancelessness (Anatta) and suffering (Dukkha) to eradicate the attachment and to attain salvation (Nibbana) through clear, understandable, and enjoyable to the common people. He was always open for discussion on what he said. He emphatically states addressing to Kalama that one should not accept anything on the ground of authority, tradition, more logic, and interference. Kumar (2018) mentioned in his book that one should examine and test the consequences of statement with the idea of verifying their relation to truth. If they are conducive to lose and sorrow, they should be rejected, and if they are helpful to profit and happiness, they should be accepted and abided therein. The Buddha’s concept of learning was convenient, which made him popular in the contemporary age.
The Buddha’s teachings were essential but also the used methods that made his education more relevant and useful. His stress on happiness and satisfaction of all with a practical approach resulted in a growing community of both monastic and laity from his teaching that embraces the principle of inclusiveness and diversity. Later the learning and techniques of the Buddha, which he has discovered and set forth, became a base for the reputed monasteries like Nalanda, Vikramasila, Odantapuri, and Valabhi. The Buddha focused on the real-life conditions of himself and the listeners in his meaningful dialogues. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2005) aptly explains that the entire process of training was based on personal experiences. Also as an inspiring teacher, he had trained himself first and lived the actual life he preached. In his praxis-based pedagogy, the listeners were participants rather than spectators, contributors rather than recipients, and subjects rather than an object in the learning.

What a teacher should do, the Buddha did it all. It was his essential humanism, rationality, and simplicity of expression that made his idea and teaching acceptable at that age and getting practiced in all over today’s world. The method of his teaching is marked as continuous training like the ocean, i.e., to get the knowledge on beginning from the lowest as the base to the top elevated one. Exactly like the ocean, in the discipline of the Buddha, the training is gradual, the path is progressive and there is no sudden advance into full knowledge (Khuddaka Nikaya, I.126). An oral teaching, memorisation, highly disciplined life, monitorial system, discussion, debate, and traveling distant places are other techniques adopted by the Buddha. The Buddha’s whole work was carried on by an oral communicative method with individual and group attention. The Buddha showered love and compassion and created the congenial atmosphere to raise interest among the people through putting out a series of questions. Apart from this sometimes the Buddha found it challenging to guide the ignorant people on the right path and put into place some disciplinary rules.

The Vinaya Pitaka mentions, “the Lord as satth? is pure in moral habit, mode of livelihood, the teaching of Dhamma, in exposition and knowledge and vision.” In this way, we find an appropriate definition of the Buddha as a teacher up to an extent. The Buddha used to be pure both by heart and inactions, i.e., enlightened in the form of teacher. The Buddha as sattha is the ideal nature of his character. His knowledge, vision, and dharma are for everyone equally, which he not only teaches but also practices and lives with it. His morality and livelihood were transparent. The operational aspects of concept formulation in the Buddha’s teaching methods are, i.e., lucid introduction, medium of spoken words, individual and community focused interactions, social services, use of the concept of causality and anatt?, authoritativeness, and mastery, etc.

One of the most critical ways in which the Buddha teaches is by laying down rules of conduct for a better life. The Buddha as a sattha often created rules when questions and event arise against the established traditions while talking to a
group of people. He always tried to take a middle path especially in laying down rules of behaviour suitable for a simple man. He used to focus on different standards for villagers, ignorant, educated, Buddhists, and monks for a better moral and disciplined life. His teaching and rules aimed at the formation of a harmonious and happy civilisation for the present and the future. This shows the Buddha’s better understanding of the interplay of exterior and interior scenario for a disciplined life and inner realisation. Monks were the center of the Buddha’s teaching activities, as the torch bearer of Buddhism. The enlightened has delivered more to the gradually increasing monks and laid down extensive rules in steps to bring them and keep them on the right path. The Patimokkha consists of rules of training laid down in stages by the Buddha for the guidance of those who have been ordained as a monk.

The Buddha tried to know the heart of learners by the extensive use of the standard similes, stories, parables, and fables in his teaching. He used to instantly adopt the ways and styles of talks after knowing the level of enlightenment and motivations of the desirous. His communicative method of lecturing using examples from daily life was mostly practical, understandable, and compelling. He mostly narrated about the contemporary social and religious realities and suggested in between the middle path for a righteous life. The Buddha’s style of adapting his teachings on prevailing conditions is characterised as ‘pouring new wine into old bottles.’ This illustrative approach was a conscious attempt to stand with listeners and make the talk interesting, attractive, effective, understanding and encouraging. The Vinaya Pitaka notes several different sorts of similes and stories mentioned in the Vinaya Pitaka. One is the recounting of the progress toward enlightenment itself, as in the Suttavibhanga prologue. Another is the telling of some incident that occurred in the Buddha’s life before his enlightenment. Sometimes the stories are about the previous experiences of talkers. Other stories may be drawn from the lore of contemporary religion. The Buddha wanted to make all men social but also devoted.

The Vinaya Pitaka is full of examples of the Buddha disagreeing and agreeing on the specific points of others. This shows the perception of apparent mastership and objectivity. Sometimes the opposition is set up either in the choice of words or the meaning of the words. This method of dialectical inquiry involving questions and answers and counter-questions is aimed at stimulating critical thinking and reflection of the listener. The Buddha had the peculiar analytical skill and loved to debate, discussion, and questions. Several types of questions such as Ekatsavyakaraniya-pañha (one pointed question), Vibbajjavyakaraniya-pañha (explanatory questions), Patipuccha-vyakaraniya-pañha (counter question reply) and Thapaniya-pañha (waived questions) adopted by the Buddha in the course of his preaching. Sometimes the discussion became filled with several types of question-answer, and sometimes a single kind of questions dominated the debate, which was altogether decided by the nature and content of the theme.
The teacher-taught relations act as the base for teaching and training procedures. The personal and interdependent relationship between teachers and students, especially in the informal situation and context is notable. Irrespective of the age of the parties concerned, the relationship engendered is that between a parent and child. We can refer that the Buddha taught his pupil more as a supervisor of self-learning than as the distributor of acquired knowledge. The Buddha used to assimilate himself into the group of disciples while addressing them. He used to establish a close and intimate relationship with students by knowing their perceptions and perspectives. He started his career with a small group of followers after his first sermon in Saranatha. His group/band increased gradually. It looks like the Buddha played two types of the role of teacher. He was an enlightened teacher, guide, and preacher for his group of followers, with whom he was living and wandering. It was like a 24x7 teaching job and always available to solve the queries of monks besides lecturing in the morning and the evening. In this part, we can witness an intimate and personal relationship between teachers and taught as they are taking care of each other in the case of illness. The Buddha played another type of teaching job while discussing in public, in a group, and among intellectuals. This occasional but frequent appearance as a teacher in the society had a less intimate relationship between teacher and taught but with lots of respect. The Buddha became more popular by establishing his divine and straightforward image as a teacher in the society.

5. Conclusion

Gautama the Buddha did become a sattha, which means he became a teacher or a master and provided instruction in Buddhist and material knowledge. His practical, analytical and illustrative methods of teaching reflected both subjectivism and objectivism, putting forth the appropriate degree of energy and guidance based on the peculiar relation between the teacher and the taught. His emotional, interested, and encouraging methods of teaching based on real life and the intimate relationships with his disciples is notable and the role it can make in solving today’s educational crisis in the world is hopeful. There is a need to motivate and connect students to the studies by making teaching interesting, real, and useful like the Buddha. We must establish a close relation and try to know more about learner’s needs and aspirations for making a lecture attractive and worth like the Buddha. It seems there is a need for continuous training in morality, spirituality, and social values like the Buddha for bringing back the current students from the digital world. He left no one person as successor in his role as teacher (sattha), but he left his Dhamma and instruction methods, which the teachers could follow successfully in his way.

References


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