

# A Buddhist Educator's Perspective on Well-Being Across the Curriculum

*In search of a beneficial relationship between my studies in Buddhism and my teaching of college English, I have formulated a philosophy of education and pedagogy grounded in the Buddhist training of the mind to improve well-being. Herein, I review my past scholarly work on mental attitude and attention, my emerging interests in Buddhism, six foundational Buddhist core concepts and three trainings of the mind, a definition of a Buddhist educational theory and method with its beneficial relationship to mental health and well-being, how three of my English courses have been shaped by these influences, and some implications for other disciplines across the university curriculum.*

**Keywords:** *Buddhism, English education, pedagogy, college teaching, philosophy of education, meditation, mindfulness, writing across the curriculum, teaching poetry, literary analysis, attention, mental health, well-being.*

**Many students and** faculty around the world are currently learning the benefits of contemplative or mindfulness practices in the classroom (Barbezat & Bush, 2013). As such, they may also be interested in learning more about the Buddhist foundations of those practices. Consequently, I provide here an overview of the Buddhist educational program and how it has influenced my teaching of college English. More specifically, I will review related interests in my past scholarship, define Buddhism, describe this study's methodological approach and resources, detail the conceptual framework of a Buddhist educational philosophy and pedagogy, demonstrate how my teaching in English studies has been shaped by this influence, and conclude with implications for other disciplines across the curriculum.

## **Buddhism Defined**

Buddhism is a collection of principles and practices aimed at relieving mental suffering and producing freedom. More specifically, Buddhism holds that the ongoing cycle of our mental dissatisfaction, anxiety, and oppression is generated by our ignorance of causality, fear of impermanence, and selfishness of ego. Also, we have the mental capacity to free ourselves and others from these causes by understanding the nature of reality and the human mind, and through training in moral living, concentration, and wisdom.

Buddhism takes its name from the originator of the teachings, Siddhattha Gotama. He lived about 2500 years ago in northern India and Nepal. After years of study and practice in the available wisdom traditions, including Hinduism, he established insights on the causal, changing, and interdependent nature of reality and human freedom. This achievement earned him the name "Buddha," which means "the Awakened One" (Hanh, 1991, pp. 119-131).

## **Background**

My interest in Buddhism began in response to my desire to create more productive relationships between my students and their learning, specifically in developing their abilities to focus their attention and become more aware of the nature of cause and effect in their lives and studies. I have a longstanding scholarly interest in how student behavior and assumptions contribute to or interfere with success in the English classroom. For example, I have written on the influence of attitude in college writing (Musgrove, 1998 & 1999), as well as how the background knowledge and experience students bring to the college classroom shape their relationships with literature (Musgrove, 2005). In the last few years, I have also incorporated drawing-to-learn (Musgrove, 2015 & 2016), Buddhist texts, and meditation practices to help students improve their study habits, to gain a historical, cultural, and contemporary understanding of the habits of the human mind, and to strengthen their confidence and attention in the classroom.

## **Method and Resources**

The method I used to develop this perspective on a Buddhist philosophy of education and pedagogy followed procedures and goals generally accepted in humanities research, namely the identification, selection, summary, analysis, and comparison of historical and contemporary ideas to arrive at a new synthesis of knowledge, application, theory, and practice for the advancement of human knowledge, behavior, and relationships.

The resources I have studied include classical Buddhist texts in translation and work by contemporary authors, such as *The Dhammapada*, Shantideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Goenka's *The Discourse Summaries*, Trungpa's *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, and Hahn's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*.

## **Conceptual Framework for a Buddhist Philosophy of Education and Pedagogy**

By "philosophy of education," I mean "a clear intention, a theory of the nature of reality and the human mind, and a method for achieving human progress." By "pedagogy," I mean "a method for fulfilling the intention of an educational theory." Buddhism itself is best understood not as a religion, but as a pragmatic theory of education with its corresponding pedagogy.

## **Liberation from Suffering and The Four Noble Truths**

"Suffering" in the Buddhist wisdom tradition indicates the mental dissatisfaction all humans experience in their lives. Given the reality of human suffering, the primary concern of Buddhist education is the relief of mental suffering, further delineated in what is known as "The Four Noble Truths": (1) suffering is a shared condition; (2) there are three causes of our suffering; (3) the relief of our suffering is possible; and (4) the path for relieving our suffering is available (Fronsdal, 2006, pp. 71-74; Goenka, 1987, pp. 43-50; Hanh, 1998, pp. 28-40). Arising out of this fourth truth is a three-part curriculum of moral living, concentration, and wisdom, known as "The Three Trainings of the Eightfold Path," and it is appropriately understood as a lifelong method for developing mental health. "Moral living" refers to abstaining from unbeneficial

relationships of speech, action, and livelihood; “concentration” refers to the control of one’s mind and subsequent resistance to causes of suffering; and “wisdom” refers to the purifying insights learned from evaluative attention to the quality of moment-to-moment experience (Goenka, 1987, pp. 19-31).

### **Core Buddhist Concepts**

The following six core concepts on the nature of reality and human existence anchor the Buddhist educational program and have been formulated from a synthesis of the primary and secondary sources I have studied and taught.

**Causality.** “Causality” is the non-theistic, perpetually flowing reality of the relationship between cause and effect which permeates, energizes, and moves all things.

**Impermanence.** “Impermanence” is the infinitely arising and passing away of all manifestations of reality. Because all things are also subject to the logic of cause and effect relationships, impermanence is the outcome of those relationships.

**Interbeing.** “Interbeing” recognizes the impossibility of existing outside relationships that are permeated by cause and effect and ongoing change. In other words, our relationships with ourselves, others, and the world are continually subject to causality and impermanence.

**Suffering.** “Suffering” reflects the mental dissatisfaction or oppression we experience as a result of our ignorance of causality, our fear of change or impermanence, and our selfishness in rejection of interbeing. Ignorance, fear, and selfishness generate disruptive human suffering because they conflict with the universal realities of causality, change, and interdependent living.

**Equanimity.** “Equanimity” is the confident resilience of a balanced mind. The opposite of equanimity is suffering: a troubled, aggressive, or defensive mind subject to imbalances caused by ignorance, fear, and selfishness.

**Freedom.** “Freedom” is the beneficial relationship we create with the universal truths of causality, impermanence, and interbeing. Whereas suffering is generated by ignorance, fear, and selfishness, freedom from mental suffering is generated by morality, concentration, and wisdom. Freedom from mental strife is the final intention of a Buddhist philosophy of education and arises out of disciplined training in the wisdom of equanimity.

### **Application in English Studies**

To illustrate how I have applied a Buddhist philosophy of education and pedagogy to my teaching, I offer three examples of course design that incorporate aspects of “The Three Trainings,” including moral living, concentration, and wisdom.

#### ***Moral Living and Interbeing in Composition***

Beyond teaching the moral imperatives of respecting one’s audience by using appropriate grammar, spelling, style, and evidence, as well as respecting the source material of others, composition instructors must also design courses so that students find writing assignments

personally relevant and publicly meaningful and so that the psychological and moral conditions for fruitful learning are met.

It follows, therefore, that writing teachers do not teach writing alone; they necessarily teach causality, impermanence, and interbeing. They design assignments that help students understand (a) the causes and effects of language choices, (b) the beneficial progress that can occur in the process of writing, and (c) the usefulness of calling upon other sources, reviewers, and editors. They also teach suffering, equanimity, and freedom. Teachers address suffering when they acknowledge that if students are not given clear instructions and modeled behavior on process, format, purpose, and audience, they can experience anxiety and failure. Teachers address equanimity when they design assignments that help students balance their intentions with those of their audiences. And teachers address freedom when they give students choices in process, format, purpose, and audience.

I am currently designing a general education writing across the curriculum course to be offered in Spring 2021. Student success in this course is contingent upon the inclusion of a course theme that students with various career intentions and majors can readily see as relevant in their lives and disciplines. “Immunity” with its evolving history of meaning in concepts like “freedom,” “health,” “exemption,” “sanctuary,” “privilege,” “protection,” “resistance,” “inoculation,” “balance,” and “survival” will serve as the topic of this course as students explore the aims, terms, methods, and achievements of their chosen fields and then demonstrate their insights through summaries, presentations, and documented research papers.

Over the course of the term, students will write a series of summaries on how the six Buddhist concepts and the immunity terms are evident in examples of peer-reviewed scholarship in their disciplines. Students will also read a collection of recent interviews I have conducted with faculty on the application of “immunity” to their discipline and teaching. These include faculty in nursing, journalism, political science, and physical therapy. The final research paper will ask students to compose a more extensively sourced discussion of an immunity term and one or more Buddhist concepts of their choice and then to conclude with an insight on the value of this research to their understanding of their discipline. The final exam for the course will include an essay in which students describe the wisdom they acquired from other students in the class on the relationship between their disciplines and the concepts they explored.

The benefit of this design in a core curriculum research and writing course is not only to help students investigate their chosen disciplines responsibly but to demonstrate the cooperative strategies, concerns, relationships, and concepts all disciplines share.

### ***Changing Concentration and Attention in English Studies***

An effectively designed course is one thing; promoting student engagement and success is quite another. The requirement of a sharp and sustainable attention is not unique to English studies. It is, however, one of the most common unstated assumptions about how learning must accrue in school, particularly the attention and mental stamina required of reading and writing. Morrison et al. (2014) found that short practices in mindfulness training in university classes “showed greater sustained attention task performance and lower self-reported mind wandering during task completion.” Similarly, I start every class period with a brief three-stage warmup activity to help students mentally prepare for that day’s lessons. Certainly, many of my students already bring effective habits of mental well-being to class, but in my courses, particularly in general education

sections, I find many students struggle with mental attention, confidence, and persistence.

As a result, I set aside the first 15 minutes of each period for three brief warm-up activities designed to (a) bring their mental attention to the classroom, (b) focus that attention, and (c) reflect upon the changing location and balance of their attention.

As students arrive in class, I give each an index card. I ask them to write their name and date on the lined side, and to draw a picture on the blank side. This may be a self-portrait, a sketch of a simple object or a friend, or an image that comes to mind when they think about a concept like happiness, freedom, wealth, or intelligence. This image may also be related to the day's lesson. At the end of class, students submit this card as evidence of attendance.

After about five minutes of drawing, I move to a guided meditation. I ask students to sit with their feet on the floor, waistband pulled in, back and head erect, eyes closed if possible, and to focus on the sensations of the breath as it enters and leaves the nose. I then guide them to notice their thoughts and physical sensations. I ask students to label the thoughts and sensations as past or future-oriented. Then I ask students to return their mental attention to the physical sensations of the breath at the opening of their nostrils.

After about five minutes of calming, focusing, and balancing, I assign a brief period of reflective writing. I ask students to write about their distracting thoughts and sensations, what they think the causes and effects of those thoughts and sensations were, and what they have in their power to change about the causes of their unbeneficial thoughts and sensations.

After about five minutes of reflective writing, I ask students if they have any questions about the course, assignments coming due, or anything related to the drawing, guided meditation, or reflective writing assignments. We then move to the activities for that day's lesson with improved attention, confidence, and shared purpose.

With regular practice over the course of the term, students arrive to class confident in knowing that these attention-gathering and focusing activities await them. They look forward to drawing, sitting and calming, and writing reflectively about where their thoughts and feelings are taking them. They not only gain trust in these routines, but in the wisdom of establishing the mental well-being necessary for learning. One student on a recent end of term evaluation from a Fall 2018 course put it this way: "I enjoyed this class because it created a mental break from the daily chaos, but the break also consisted of teaching us how to gain control of ourselves. I think this course was valuable to my understanding of how the mind operates and how we can control it with practice."

### *The Wisdom of Cause and Effect in Literature*

Of the six concepts on the nature of reality and human behavior I teach in literary studies, I give the most attention to causality, specifically to the formal causes of creating beauty in a literary work. It is also true that I teach (a) the impermanence or changing history of genres, readers, authors, and topics, (b) the interbeing or interdependent relationships of time, place, and culture that influence that changing history, (c) the mental suffering to which all literature responds, (d) the equanimity sought by all creative strategies, and (e) the freedom of mental well-being desired by characters and authors through their art.

However, because many students I encounter have little training in formal analysis, I focus much of my course design on the causes and effects of an author's choices evident in stories and poems. In other words, I teach students the artistic wisdom of these choices as they relate to the balancing effects authors attempt to produce for themselves and their readers.

To illustrate, I introduce five formal elements all poets call upon when creating verse. They include shape, line, music, comparison, and balance. When poets effectively use these to harmonize form and content, they produce beautiful equanimity between the material and meaning of the text for readers to enjoy.

For example, the first thing we notice when confronting a poem is the body of the poem and its figure on the page. These shapes may be small or large, wide or thin, tall or short, and ordered or random. And though we may not consciously acknowledge how the shape of the poem influences our relationship with that poem, we are affected by that shape in ways that motivate us to turn away or to see it as a welcoming friend.

I also include in my teaching of these elements how they relate to other aspects of human experience. The shape of a poem is similar to the causality we experience when responding to other visual information, including the shapes of natural objects, and especially the size and color of another person. We all come with assumptions and learned prejudices that cause us to respond to visual material with deeply embedded emotional effects, like fear or desire, before we even realize it.

After I introduce each element with examples via lecture, students select a poem from a series of poems, write how they might relate to the content of the poem, identify one of the causal elements, and then describe how its form harmonizes with its content. Later, students compose a cause and effect formal analysis of another selected poem using all five elements. This is followed by another assignment wherein students reflect upon the insights they gained from these analyses, explain which causality they can most easily identify and apply to poetry, explain which causality they still struggle to identify and apply, and conclude with a reflection on what they have learned about the nature of cause and effect in their own learning and lives.

In the end, we do not read poetry to read poetry. We read poetry, like any example of literature, to see its relevancy to our study of cause and effect in human suffering and well-being. In other words, the wisdom of literature is not specific to or contained within some disciplinary silo. Educating ourselves out of the ignorance of cause and effect is the responsibility of all fields of academic study.

### **Implications Across the Curriculum**

Earlier I mentioned that I have interviewed faculty colleagues in nursing, journalism, political science, and physical therapy. To further demonstrate the fertile ground for implications across the curriculum, let me briefly share two of their perspectives here, specifically on how the application of “immunity” and its related terms function in their disciplines and teaching. According to Greenwald, my colleague in nursing who teaches microbiology and immunology, the terms most resonant with her work are “resistance” and “equanimity” as they relate to stressors that cause and are caused by inflammation: “We nurses need to assist patients on the health-illness continuum: either to stay in the “health zone” or provide interventions to assist the patient to be able to return to the homeostatic health zone” (B. Greenwald, personal communication, October 20, 2020). And according to Gritter, my colleague in political science who teaches American politics and public policy, the terms most resonant in his teaching are “freedom” and “privilege” as they relate to civil liberties and advantages related to race and class: “Studying American democracy in particular, you often look at the incredible promise of freedom and the harsh reality of privilege...I think that tension more than anything animates the

puzzles and questions we consider in political science” (M. Gritter, personal communication, December 16, 2020).

My colleagues in journalism (J. Boone, personal communication, September 10, 2020) and physical therapy (L. Atkins, personal communication, September 14, 2020) also readily identified resonate terms as well, such as the tensions between the freedom of the press and libel and the freedom from physical pain and the obligations of self-care, further highlighting the potential for developing a shared vocabulary of immunity that might help students bring conceptual coherence to their studies and research across the curriculum and university.

In other words, what if we accepted that all studies at their core are “freedom studies” or what were once termed the “liberal arts”? What if we maintained that well-being was our shared academic mission, rather than the role of student affairs or the campus counseling center? What might be the interdisciplinary relationships and solutions possible when students across the curriculum share a limited set of universal concepts?

For example, how might my colleagues in the arts, history, natural sciences, health care, engineering, and business already incorporate the universal realities of causality, impermanence, and interbeing in their work? And how might my colleagues in political science, religion, social work, criminal justice, and counseling already apply the distinctive human behaviors of suffering, equanimity, and freedom to their academic interests? What benefits would our students, colleagues, and disciplines accrue by anchoring teaching across the curriculum in an educational philosophy and pedagogy explicitly aimed at supporting our students’ mental health and well-being? What relationships might be created? What quality of attention might it require? What new insights?

## Conclusion

It is not lost on me that I have provided summaries of the results of my own experience and learned wisdom in Buddhism, resulting in the formulation of an educational philosophy, pedagogical methods, and courses. But I also hope that readers will move beyond receiving this interpretive overview, reflect generously upon its application to their work, and investigate how they might incorporate (a) the universal teachings of the six core concepts designed to facilitate the interdisciplinary study of freedom and (b) the non-controversial pedagogical approaches of morality, concentration, and wisdom in their own course designs and teaching.

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