

## Educational Practices and Institutions in the Buddhist Era: A Historical Perspective

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### Abstract:

*The educational practices and institutions during the Buddhist era played a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual and spiritual landscape of ancient India and beyond. Rooted in the principles of Buddhism, which emphasized wisdom (prajna), ethical conduct (sila), and mental discipline (samadhi), these educational systems were designed not only to transmit knowledge but also to foster moral and spiritual growth. This research explores the evolution of Buddhist education from the early monastic communities to the establishment of renowned centers of learning such as Nalanda and Vikramashila. It examines the methods of teaching, curriculum, and the role of the guru and sishya (teacher-student) relationship, alongside the significant contributions these institutions made to various fields, including philosophy, logic, medicine, and the sciences. Through an analysis of historical texts and archaeological findings, the study provides insights into how Buddhist educational institutions became important hubs of knowledge, attracting scholars from across Asia. This historical perspective highlights the lasting influence of Buddhist education on the development of academic and monastic traditions globally and its relevance to modern educational thought.*

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### Introduction:

Buddhist education can be rightly regarded as a phase of the ancient Hindu system of education. Buddhism, itself, especially in its original and ancient form, is, as has been admitted on all hands, rooted deeply in the 26 pre-existing Hindu systems of thought and life. Max Muller in Chips from a German Workshop said, "To my mind, having approached Buddhism after a study of the ancient religion of India, the religion of the Veda, Buddhism has always seemed to be, to a new religion, but a natural development of the Indian mind in its various manifestations, religious, philosophical, social, and political (Mills,2003)."

The monasteries were the centers of education during the Buddhist period. Besides monasteries, there were no other organizations for imparting education. Only the Bhikshus could receive religious and other types of education. Other persons were deprived of this facility. There was no place for Yajna in the Buddhist

system. For admission the student had to present himself before the teacher and request him for giving education. The teacher was fully responsible for education of his pupil. In turn, the pupil had also to be responsive to the instructions received from the teacher (Schopen,1997). Thus, a relationship was established between the teacher and the taught as during the Vedic period.

Education in Buddhism was not merely an intellectual exercise; it was seen as a crucial element of the path to *nirvana*, or enlightenment. Buddhist teachings were focused on the cultivation of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. In this context, the monastic education system, with its emphasis on personal discipline, critical thinking, and spiritual development, became a critical institution for both religious and intellectual progress.

**Significance of the Study:** the significance of studying *Educational Practices and Institutions in the Buddhist Era* lies in its potential to illuminate both the historical development of educational systems and their lasting influence on contemporary educational thought. The Buddhist approach to education, with its emphasis on moral development, intellectual discipline, and personal transformation, provides valuable lessons that can help shape more holistic and inclusive educational practices in the modern world. Through this study, we gain not only a historical understanding of the Buddhist era's educational legacy but also a roadmap for enriching current educational frameworks to foster well-rounded, compassionate, and intellectually capable individuals.

**Objectives:** It examines the methods of teaching, curriculum, and the role of the *guru* and *sisya* (teacher-student) relationship, alongside the significant contributions these institutions made to various fields, including philosophy, logic, medicine, and the sciences.

**Pabbajja (First ordination)** It means 'going out'. According to this ceremony, the student after being admitted to a monastery had to renounce all his worldly and family relationship. After admission into 'Sangh', they could remain as a monk. The age limit fixed for Pabbajja was 8 years. At the time of entering into the Sangh, the disciple must have attained the age of 8 years. There they had to receive education for 12 years and during this period the new monk made his preparation for the Sangh life. After that he had to undergo the Upasampada ceremony, which entitled a student for a full- fledged membership of the monastery.

**Upasampada (Final Ordination):** After completing the education of 12 years, the monk at the age of 20 years had to undergo the Upasampada ritual and then he becomes the permanent member of the Sangh. This ceremony was democratic in nature. The Shraman had to present himself before all other monks (Bhikshus) of the monastery. One could be admitted for the Upasampada ceremony only when the majority of the monks voted in favour of the same.

In the Vedic age the student was given education upto 25 years of age and after that he was permitted to go home and lead the life, in the Buddhist system after having received education the student never came back to his parents place for leading the life of a householder. He remained a monk for good and cut off his worldly relationships forever.

There always existed cordial relationship between the teacher and the taught. The teacher too had to observe all these rules of conduct, which were prescribed for the students. It was the highest and most sacred duty of the teacher to impart intellectual and spiritual education of a higher order to his disciples. If any pupil ignored to respect his preceptor, he was deemed unfit and consequently was expelled from the Order. The teacher too put forth the ideal of high learning, excellent moral character, self-possession and spiritualism before his pupils to compel inherent high respect from them.

**Curriculum:** It was chiefly spiritual in nature. It was so because the chief aim of education was to attain salvation. Study of religious books was most important. Suttanta, Vinaya and Dhamma were the main subjects prescribed for the study. Besides these, spinning, weaving, printing of the cloth, sketching, medicine, surgery and coinage were the other subjects of Buddhist education.

Education during this period may be classified into two parts primary and higher. In the primary education the emphasis was given on the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic. Knowledge of grammar was essential. The child was primarily educated in the knowledge of the alphabet, vowels, Sandhis or rules of combination.

In the higher education, religion, philosophy, military science, medicine and other difficult subjects were taught. The Vedas were also studied for acquiring comparative knowledge; nevertheless the Atharvaveda was not included in the curriculum upto the Jataka period. As regards higher education, Hiuen-Tsang has quoted the example of Nalanda where Buddhist philosophy, the Literature, the Yoga and other spiritual sciences were taught. The institution at Vikramshila was reputed for imparting education in Logic and Jurisprudence.

**Method of Teaching** The main aim of education in Buddhist period was the purity of character. Therefore, like Vedic educational system, they also emphasized much on the practice and training for pure character instead of psychological development of the students. Later on to attain the stage of Bodhisattva personal development was considered essential and mental and moral development began to be emphasized. Originally there was predominance of religions.

At first the teacher gave a lecture on a certain topic and the students were required to listen to him with attention. Afterwards students were expected to memorize the same. Thus, method of teaching was mostly oral. The importance of discussion encouraged the logic in the Buddhist period. It was useful to argue controversial matters and on the development of the mental power and knowledge of the students. Followers of different religions held occasional discussions; hence students were trained in the art of debating from the very beginning of their academic career. Since the main aim was to propagate Buddhism, some Acharya gave importance to tours for educating the students. After the completion of education, the students were encouraged to gain the practical and real form of the theoretical knowledge gained by them undertaking long trips. Thus, their knowledge became solid and evident.

The teaching method in regard to technical education in Secular Science, Arts and Crafts was identical with that of Brahmanical education i.e. students were given education through both theoretical and practical methods. On the beginning (Pratipada) and close (Purnima) of each month learned people used to assemble together. This type of assembling together was a very important part of Buddhist education. Purpose of this assembly was to maintain the moral standards of all the monks (Bhikshus) because the total education system was based on morality.

**Commercial and Occupational Education** Indeed Buddhist education was basically religious. Yet, occupational education was not neglected altogether and Mahabagga mentions about spinning and weaving, tailoring etc. Among the other useful arts- Architecture, Arithmetic, Painting, Agriculture and Animal Husbandry etc were also taught. In Buddhist period emphasis was laid on the development of the medical science. There were many medical experts during that period. The Indian Chikitsaks (medical men) were not only experts in the examination and treatment of most serious diseases, but they were also efficient in serious surgical operations like that of brain, stomach etc. Takshila was the main center of medical education and the complete course of the science was completed in 7 years.

In short the following conclusions may be drawn in regard to Buddhist education.

**Centers of Education-** In Buddhist period, there were many such centers where foreign students used to come for higher education. Among such centers, Takshila was notable. It might be called the spiritual capital of India of the time.

**Minimum age of education-** The minimum age for admission in Takshila University was 16 years because here the students were taken only for higher studies.

**Education fee-** It was about 1000 coins at that time, which was probably charged in the beginning. Those who were unable to pay the fees in any form either cash or manual labour, were educated as a charity.

**Scholarships-** The meritorious students who did not have means to support themselves were given scholarship by the government of the time.

**Residence of Students-** Generally the students lived in the centers with their teacher but some married people and students residing in private lodges, were also not prohibited from gaining education.

**Teaching arrangements-** One head teacher, with the help of his assistants arranged for the education of about 500 students. More students could not be put under him. Efficient and experienced students were appointed as assistant teachers and meritorious students used to teach the students of lower classes. According to convenience, the teaching work was done during daytime as well as night hours, but the students who paid fees, were taught during the day.

**Higher Education-** In higher education, students were taught Literary, scientific and Vocational education. In literary education, religious teachings were also included. Beside Atharvaveda, all the Vedas formed the foundation stone of this education. The following subjects have been mentioned in the Jatakas.

- Medicine
- Vashikaran Kam-Tantra
- Tantra-Mantra
- Archery
- Elephant taming
- Hunting
- Giving life to the dead
- The knowledge of the voices of various animals

**Search of truth and nirvana-** Some students who could not get mentally satisfied even through higher studies used to go to the isolated place of some monk and spent their lives in search of truth and Nirvana. Gradually gaining spiritual knowledge they became ascetics in their future life.

**Conclusion:** The educational practices and institutions of the Buddhist era were deeply influential in shaping the intellectual and spiritual development of ancient Asia. From the early monastic communities to the grandeur of institutions like Nalanda and Vikramashila, Buddhist education was characterized by a holistic approach to knowledge, blending intellectual rigor with spiritual wisdom. The legacy of these educational traditions continues to inspire and inform modern educational practices, emphasizing the importance of ethics, critical thinking, and the integration of intellectual and spiritual growth. As such, the

study of Buddhist education provides not only a historical insight into ancient knowledge systems but also valuable lessons for contemporary education worldwide.

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