

Education – Bhutan's Most Important Choice



>> These children of Zungnye Primary School in Bumthang are the graduates of Zungnye ECCD Centre located right next to the school

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At this moment in time, circa 2018, it is clearer than ever that a new approach to education is key to the survival of the world in general and of Bhutan in particular. This is no exaggeration.

The world's current education system is not only out-dated and even obsolete but is literally destroying the world. Researchers have shown that we can't blame car fumes, plastics, resource depletion and climate change for ecological devastation as much as the misguided education system that leads us to engage in such destructive behaviours.

So long as our texts, teachers and educational values glorify materialism, technological prowess, individualism, ambition, fame, career and gain, we are lost. And the proof is in the numbers. For example, the more education people have, the more energy and resources they consume and the larger and more harmful is their ecological footprint.

Yes, science and technology have improved medical care, extended our lives and made us more comfortable, but they have also produced deadly weaponry, addictive opioids, toxic pollution, species extinction, waste, and plastics that choke our oceans.

However, it's not just nature that suffers from the values embedded in our education system. Democ-

racy – so celebrated by our educated classes – has given us Donald Trump. Individual rights have given us isolation and alienation. The business model at the root of all our economics courses, acclaiming free trade and globalization, has produced a yawning gap between rich and poor that generates growing conflict and social unrest.

The colonial legacy – alive and well today

Sadly, Bhutan's present education system is relentlessly sucking the country and particularly its youth into that same destructive vortex. Bhutan's curriculum is a long out-dated British one, regurgitated and shoved down our throats by ex-colonial India. It is archaic

even by modern British standards where students no longer just passively copy, paste and memorize as they do in Bhutan with no encouragement to question or think critically.

At the same time, we can't really blame Bhutan because all Asia, including the two emerging super-powers on Bhutan's borders, has bowed and succumbed to the western educational model that is the world's current "gold standard". To get ahead, grow their economies, build their military power, and flood their roads with cars, China, India and other Asian nations have – since the two world wars – been spoon-fed and swallowed the whole western value system underpinning their materialist ambition.

And the trade-off and loss have been inestimable. Not only do Delhi and Beijing gasp for air, but profound, life-giving millennia-old Asian values have been irreparably weakened and in some cases lost forever.

The Cultural Revolution is widely blamed for destroying ancient Chinese traditions. But China – and the rest of Asia for that matter – are oblivious to the reality that the western educational system they have embraced has done more to destroy their age-old culture and values than any other influence.

Bhutan is so proud that it was not colonized and even turned back the attempted British takeover. But from Lhuentse to Thimphu and from Lunana to Gelephu, a much more insidious and far-reaching colonization has taken hold, as Bhutan's imported education system transmits western values, goals and cultural norms that are entirely alien to Bhutan's own esteemed wisdom traditions.

Indeed, despite the apparent

new-found independence of nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America, western colonialism has never really ceased, but has simply been transformed from political control into a far more effective and far-reaching economic and philosophical control. The east has absorbed and been thoroughly imbued with the morality and values the west has imposed.

The decline of western civilization

The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way, and neither Bhutan nor the rest of Asia have to continue on that damaging dead-end road.

A good starting point for Asians to wean themselves off their addiction to western values is simply to acknowledge the reality of the decline of western civilization.

The signs are everywhere – from obsessive consumption to a collapse of faith and spirituality to fractured families to disillusion with democracy and poor leadership to growing inequality to rampant individualism, alienation, stress and anxiety to the spread of junk culture, addiction to drugs and anti-depressants, and soaring youth suicide rates.

Though westerners are constantly annoyed and irritated by those symptoms, they remain in complete denial of the underlying causes of their civilizational decline. But we as Asians must make every effort both to see that reality clearly and not to pay the price of that agony of decline. Instead we can seek refuge in our own profound and fundamental Asian values that show an entirely different way forward.

This is not easy for us to do. The east has so imbibed western values that it has even learned to feel guilty for what the west is

guilty of – namely the contemptuous western disrespect for the culture and sentiments of others. "We're not sufficiently modern or advanced or cool or hip," easterners are liable to say and feel guilty and with shame as they adopt ever more western trappings in their effort to "catch up".

Critics are liable to label this analysis anti-western. But that is not so. Not only do I have the deepest respect for the west's extraordinary contributions to art, music and literature but I will gladly avail myself of western medicine, espresso coffee, jeans, pasta and more.

At the same time it is not anti-western simply to acknowledge the arrogance, colonial imposition, materialism, assumed moral authority, and actual cultural degeneration of the west that are clearly visible to the discerning observer.

In fact, recognizing these realities clearly is an essential first step to free ourselves from the paralyzing grip of western values, to seek viable alternatives that lie within our grasp in the very fabric of Asian societies, and to craft a new educational system that is true to our own values.

A new way forward

What an amazing opportunity this moment in history could be for China and India – the world's two fastest emerging super-powers – not only to save their own two nations but actually to lead the world in a new direction. For both these countries' profound ancient civilizations, philosophies and wisdom traditions are more relevant than ever to the needs of the modern world.

In fact, if only they could look closely at and take pride in their heritage, they would see that fun-

damental Asian values provide the essential foundation of an educational system that can transform the minds and consciousness of future generations in the noblest ways and change our present destructive path into one that benefits humankind and other species.

If they are really courageous, and before they even discuss how to educate the next generation, Asians will first contemplate deeply whether “education” in the way it is presently understood needs to exist at all.

From a pure Buddhist perspective, we’d likely conclude that conventional formal schooling as we know it has very little to do with the attainment of true wisdom that is our goal. But from a Mahayana perspective, we’ll also see we have no choice but to educate our young, since that is part of the imperfect package we call samsara and the human realm in particular.

Given that reality, we’ll find the guidance we need from the great beings like the Buddha, Mahavira, Lao Tzu and Kong Tzu, whom the East has hosted, and in the understanding and values they propagated and that we have treasured for millennia. We’ll see we could be educating future generations in the reality of dependent arising instead of individualism, in the value of responsibility and respect rather than “rights”, and in a wider nontheistic and polytheist perspective instead of just the limiting monotheistic view that comes from the troubled Middle East.

Transmitting ancient wisdom in modern ways

In fact, there are engaging, practical, modern ways to teach all these profound principles that would be a welcome relief from the dull irrelevance of most present school



>> The playground of Zungnye ECCD Centre in Chumay, Bumthang

texts. To give just one example, by examining how everyday objects in students’ lives come to be and how they are disposed, students can learn to see how all seemingly solid phenomena are made up of impermanent causes and conditions.

From the rice they ate for lunch to the pencil on their desks to the shirt on their backs to the plastic wrapped candy they crave – what are these objects made of, under what ecological and social conditions were they produced, how did they get here, and what happens when they’re consumed, disposed, or fall apart?

In such ways, and without ever mentioning complicated phrases like “dependent arising”, we have taught how the world functions in a way that will make our students aware, responsible and caring citizens with a joyful appreciation of life. And likewise we can bring all the dimensions of our ancient eastern wisdom in highly practical and relevant ways into the very fabric of our children’s education and lives.

Perhaps most importantly, Asians in general and Bhutanese in particular must distinguish “modernization” from “westernization”. There is nothing about our “ancient” wisdom that keeps us stuck in the past. On the contrary, future generations can be taught to face the future with confidence through creative, practical, and

forward-thinking solutions that are firmly grounded in our own unique forms of modernization.

Sadly, right now, we are trapped between two unviable dead-end alternatives that have unnecessarily divided Bhutan into opposing and hostile ‘camps’. On the one hand is the lure of western consumerism with its constant distraction, mushrooming gadgetry, and materialist obsession that is misleading our youth to seek happiness in external objects and that has led to the family breakdown, drug addiction, ecological destruction and other signs of decline noted above.

In steadfast opposition is the “old guard” of traditionalists and bureaucrats so threatened by change that they desperately preserve and cling to the customs, forms and rituals of the past, while forgetting their meaning. No wonder our youth reject such an ossified and deadening approach.

But a living and dynamic “culture” is not like that. It is ever evolving, adapting and creatively developing by using as tools all the forms and changing circumstances of our time and place without ever losing touch with the eternal truths, values and wisdom of our ancient sages. That understanding is the foundation of true “modernization” and of the new educational system that the world and we as Bhutanese so urgently need. ■