



# Relevance of Buddhist Thought in Modern Classrooms: A Critical Examination of Educational Application

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## Abstract

This study critically examines the relevance of Buddhist thought in modern educational contexts, highlighting its philosophical foundations, practical applications, and the challenges and opportunities it presents in diverse classrooms. Rooted in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, Buddhist principles such as mindfulness, compassion, interdependence, and experiential inquiry provide a holistic framework for addressing contemporary educational challenges. Through a qualitative, content-based analysis of classical texts and contemporary scholarship, the research demonstrates how mindfulness enhances attention, emotional regulation, and resilience, while compassion fosters empathy, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility. These practices not only benefit student learning and well-being but also support teacher effectiveness by reducing stress and promoting positive classroom climates. However, integrating Buddhist thought into secular and multicultural educational systems presents challenges, including concerns of religious bias, pedagogical adaptation, and risks of cultural appropriation. Despite these limitations, the study argues that Buddhist-inspired approaches offer significant opportunities to advance socio-emotional learning, intercultural understanding, and ecological awareness. Ultimately, the findings suggest that when thoughtfully adapted, Buddhist philosophy serves as a universal resource for reimagining education as a process that nurtures intellectual, emotional, and moral dimensions, aligning ancient wisdom with 21st-century pedagogical innovation.

**Keywords:** Buddhist thought, mindfulness, compassion, education, socio-emotional learning, intercultural understanding

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Buddhist thought, rooted in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, has long emphasized ethical conduct, mindfulness, and the pursuit of wisdom as essential for human development (Rahula, 1974). Over centuries,

Buddhist philosophy has influenced educational systems across Asia, shaping curricula and pedagogical practices that highlight compassion, discipline, and experiential learning (Prebish & Keown, 2010). In the modern era, the global education system faces challenges such as student stress, lack of emotional regulation, and the need for holistic approaches that go beyond cognitive development. Against this backdrop, Buddhist concepts like mindfulness (*sati*), right effort, and interdependence are increasingly seen as valuable tools for fostering socio-emotional learning, resilience, and ethical awareness among students (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Contemporary research indicates that mindfulness-based interventions in schools enhance attention, emotional regulation, and overall well-being, thereby aligning Buddhist practices with 21st-century educational needs (Roeser et al., 2013). Furthermore, Buddhist emphasis on compassion and non-harming resonates with inclusive education and peace-oriented curricula, making it relevant to multicultural and diverse classrooms (Ikeda, 2010). Thus, critically examining the educational application of Buddhist thought can provide insights into integrating ancient wisdom with modern pedagogical innovation, ensuring balanced and human-centered learning.

### **1.2. Rationale of the Study**

The rapid transformations in education, driven by globalization, technological advancement, and the growing emphasis on socio-emotional learning, have compelled educators to reconsider traditional pedagogical models. Conventional schooling often prioritizes cognitive achievement while neglecting emotional well-being, ethical reasoning, and inner development (Noddings, 2013). Consequently, students face issues such as stress, anxiety, and disengagement, highlighting the need for holistic educational approaches (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). Within this context, Buddhist thought offers valuable insights, as it advocates mindfulness, compassion, and ethical awareness as integral to human growth (Rahula, 1974).

The rationale for this study lies in the potential of Buddhist principles to enrich modern classrooms by promoting balance between academic rigor and personal development. Practices like mindfulness meditation have been shown to enhance concentration, reduce stress, and cultivate empathy among learners (Roeser et al., 2013). Moreover, the Buddhist framework of the *Eightfold Path* provides a moral and practical guide that can align with education for peace, inclusivity, and global citizenship (Ikeda, 2010). These values are particularly relevant in today's multicultural classrooms where respect for diversity and interdependence is paramount.

Critically examining the educational application of Buddhist thought is essential for two reasons. First, it addresses the gap between modern pedagogical demands and the neglect of inner values in curricula (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Second, it contributes to the discourse on integrating non-Western philosophies into global education, thereby fostering pluralism in educational theory (Prebish & Keown, 2010). By exploring these intersections, the study not only evaluates the relevance of Buddhist ideas but also considers practical strategies for their integration into contemporary classrooms. This examination will help educators, policymakers, and researchers reimagine education as a process that nurtures intellectual, emotional, and ethical dimensions of learners.

### **1.3. Research Objectives of the Study**

The integration of Buddhist thought into modern education is not merely about adopting ancient philosophies but about reimagining pedagogy to address contemporary challenges in learning, ethics, and holistic development. As

classrooms become increasingly diverse and pressured by academic and social demands, it is vital to explore frameworks that balance intellectual growth with emotional well-being and moral responsibility. Buddhist principles such as mindfulness, compassion, and right understanding have been recognized as potentially transformative in fostering resilience, inclusivity, and ethical awareness in education (Roeser et al., 2013; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Therefore, the present study seeks to critically examine the relevance of Buddhist thought in modern classrooms, with the following specific objectives –

**RO<sub>1</sub>:** To analyze the philosophical foundations of Buddhist thought and their potential contributions to modern educational theories and practices

**RO<sub>2</sub>:** To investigate the practical application of Buddhist principles, particularly mindfulness and compassion, in enhancing student learning, well-being, and teacher effectiveness

**RO<sub>3</sub>:** To critically assess the challenges and opportunities of incorporating Buddhist thought into contemporary educational settings

#### **1.4. Research Questions of the Study**

Research questions provide direction and focus for a study, ensuring that the investigation remains aligned with its objectives and purpose. Since this study explores the relevance of Buddhist thought in modern classrooms, the questions are designed to uncover both the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of Buddhist educational applications. By framing the inquiry around philosophical, pedagogical, and contextual dimensions, the study seeks to generate a critical understanding of how Buddhist principles can contribute to contemporary education while acknowledging possible challenges. Accordingly, the following research questions guide this study –

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** What are the key philosophical foundations of Buddhist thought, and in what ways can they contribute to modern educational theories and practices?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** How can Buddhist principles, particularly mindfulness and compassion, be practically applied in classrooms to enhance student learning, emotional well-being, and teacher effectiveness?

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** What challenges and opportunities exist in incorporating Buddhist thought into contemporary educational settings, especially within diverse and multicultural classrooms?

## **2. Review of Related Literatures**

The integration of Buddhist thought into education has attracted increasing scholarly interest as educators search for holistic approaches to address the cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions of learning. Buddhism, with its emphasis on mindfulness, compassion, and ethical responsibility, provides a framework that resonates with contemporary educational goals such as socio-emotional learning, inclusivity, and global citizenship (Rahula, 1974; Ikeda, 2010). Several studies have highlighted mindfulness as one of the most influential contributions of Buddhism to modern classrooms. Wallace and Shapiro (2006) argued that mindfulness practice bridges the gap between psychological well-being and academic performance by promoting emotional regulation, attention, and resilience. Empirical research by Roeser et al. (2013) demonstrated that mindfulness-based interventions for teachers and students significantly reduced stress while improving classroom relationships and engagement.

Similarly, Schonert-Reichl and Roeser (2016) noted that mindfulness programs in schools contribute to enhanced empathy, prosocial behavior, and overall academic success.

Beyond mindfulness, Buddhist thought offers valuable perspectives on moral and ethical education. Noddings (2013) emphasized the importance of caring and compassion in moral pedagogy, which aligns with Buddhist teachings on non-harming and interdependence. Buddhist-inspired approaches encourage learners to cultivate awareness of their actions' impact on others, fostering inclusivity and ethical responsibility in diverse classrooms (Prebish & Keown, 2010). Such perspectives are particularly relevant in multicultural societies where education must support harmony, tolerance, and mutual respect (Ikeda, 2010).

The literature also acknowledges challenges in applying Buddhist principles in secular educational settings. While mindfulness programs have gained global popularity, critics caution against the risk of cultural appropriation or reducing Buddhist practices to therapeutic tools divorced from their ethical context (Hyland, 2017). Furthermore, integration into mainstream curricula often encounters resistance due to concerns about religious neutrality in public education (Grossman, 2011). These debates highlight the need for critical examination of how Buddhist-inspired practices can be adapted respectfully and effectively without compromising their philosophical integrity.

Overall, the existing literature underscores both the promise and complexity of incorporating Buddhist thought into education. While research validates the positive impacts of mindfulness and compassion-based interventions on student learning and well-being, it also stresses the importance of contextual sensitivity and critical engagement. This review therefore establishes a foundation for examining how Buddhist principles can be meaningfully integrated into modern classrooms, balancing philosophical depth with practical application.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, content-based research design to critically examine the relevance of Buddhist thought in modern classrooms. Data was collected primarily through an in-depth review of secondary sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and educational policy documents that discuss the philosophical, pedagogical, and practical applications of Buddhist principles. The study employs thematic content analysis to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and critical debates surrounding mindfulness, compassion, and ethical education as derived from Buddhist philosophy. By systematically analyzing both classical Buddhist texts and contemporary educational literature, the research aims to uncover intersections between ancient wisdom and current pedagogical needs. The interpretive approach ensures that findings are not only descriptive but also analytical, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges of integrating Buddhist thought into diverse educational contexts. This methodology allows for a critical and reflective understanding grounded in existing scholarship.

## **4. Analysis and Discussions with respect to Research Objectives**

### **4.1. Objective 1: *To analyze the philosophical foundations of Buddhist thought and their potential contributions to modern educational theories and practices***

Buddhist thought, rooted in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, offers a philosophical framework that emphasizes ethical living, mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom as integral to human development. At its

foundation lies the *Four Noble Truths*, which articulate the reality of suffering (*dukkha*), its cause, its cessation, and the path to liberation (Rahula, 1974). This path, further elaborated in the *Noble Eightfold Path*, integrates right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Collectively, these principles provide not only a spiritual guide but also a framework for moral and intellectual cultivation relevant to education.

A key philosophical foundation of Buddhism is *mindfulness (sati)*, which entails cultivating present-moment awareness free from distraction and judgment. In education, mindfulness has been widely adopted as a strategy for enhancing attention, emotional regulation, and stress management (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Empirical studies demonstrate that mindfulness-based interventions help students improve concentration and resilience, while also fostering positive classroom environments (Roeser et al., 2013). In this way, the Buddhist emphasis on mindful awareness complements modern educational priorities, particularly socio-emotional learning.

Another central principle is *compassion (karuṇā)*, which extends beyond empathy to active care for others' well-being. Buddhism situates compassion as essential for ethical living, arguing that education is incomplete without moral development (Ikeda, 2010). In modern classrooms, compassion translates into pedagogical practices that prioritize inclusivity, cooperation, and respect for diversity. The promotion of compassionate learning environments aligns with the goals of peace education and global citizenship, which encourage students to value interdependence and collective well-being (Noddings, 2013). Thus, compassion bridges Buddhist philosophy with educational models that emphasize ethical responsibility and humanistic values.

The concept of *interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda* or dependent origination) is another cornerstone of Buddhist philosophy. It posits that all phenomena arise in relation to others, highlighting the interconnected nature of existence (Prebish & Keown, 2010). Applied to education, interdependence encourages collaborative learning, ecological awareness, and respect for multicultural perspectives. In an era of globalization, teaching students about interdependence fosters critical awareness of social, cultural, and environmental issues, making learning more relevant and transformative.

Buddhism also emphasizes *experiential knowledge* over dogmatic acceptance. The Buddha himself encouraged inquiry and self-reflection, advising followers to “test” his teachings rather than accept them blindly (Rahula, 1974). This principle parallels constructivist approaches in modern pedagogy, where learners construct meaning through experience and reflection. The Buddhist encouragement of critical thinking and self-awareness resonates with progressive educational theories that emphasize active learning, inquiry, and reflective practice. The philosophical foundations of Buddhist thought—mindfulness, compassion, interdependence, and experiential inquiry—offer profound contributions to modern educational theories and practices. They provide tools for addressing pressing educational challenges such as student stress, ethical disengagement, and the need for multicultural sensitivity. By integrating these principles, education can evolve into a more holistic process that not only imparts knowledge but also cultivates wisdom, resilience, and moral responsibility. While originally developed as a spiritual path, Buddhist thought thus finds meaningful relevance in reimagining education for the 21st century.

#### **4.2. Objective 2: To investigate the practical application of Buddhist principles, particularly mindfulness and compassion, in enhancing student learning, well-being, and teacher effectiveness**

Buddhist principles, especially mindfulness (*sati*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), have found growing relevance in modern educational contexts. These values offer practical strategies to enhance student learning, promote emotional well-being, and improve teacher effectiveness. Their integration into classrooms fosters a holistic approach to education that goes beyond academic achievement, addressing psychological resilience, empathy, and ethical development.

Mindfulness, which emphasizes focused attention and awareness of the present moment, has been widely adopted in educational psychology as a tool to improve cognitive performance. When incorporated into classroom practice, mindfulness helps students regulate attention, reduce distractions, and engage deeply with learning tasks. Studies show that mindfulness practices, such as short breathing exercises or mindful pauses, can enhance working memory, reduce anxiety, and foster better academic outcomes (Zenner et al., 2014). For example, brief mindfulness sessions before lessons prepare students to absorb new information with clarity, thereby improving comprehension and retention. Moreover, mindfulness-based interventions cultivate metacognitive awareness, allowing students to monitor their thought processes and adopt effective learning strategies (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011).

In addition to cognitive benefits, mindfulness nurtures emotional regulation, reducing stress and fostering resilience among learners. Children and adolescents often face academic pressure, peer competition, and emotional turbulence. Mindfulness activities, such as guided meditation or reflective journaling, provide students with coping mechanisms to handle these challenges constructively (Kuyken et al., 2013). Similarly, compassion-oriented practices encourage kindness toward self and others, reducing self-criticism and promoting a positive classroom climate. Compassion training, such as “loving-kindness meditation,” has been shown to increase empathy, prosocial behavior, and emotional stability among students (Neff & Germer, 2013). Together, mindfulness and compassion form a powerful foundation for cultivating emotional intelligence, which is critical for holistic well-being and academic persistence.

Teachers also benefit significantly from practicing mindfulness and compassion. Teaching is a demanding profession often associated with stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue. Mindfulness-based stress reduction programs have been found to lower teacher stress levels, improve emotional regulation, and enhance classroom management skills (Jennings et al., 2017). A mindful teacher is better equipped to respond to classroom challenges with patience and clarity rather than reactivity. Furthermore, embodying compassion fosters empathy toward students, helping teachers build supportive relationships that enhance student engagement. Compassion also helps teachers maintain professional well-being by reducing the risk of emotional exhaustion and promoting job satisfaction (Roeser et al., 2013). By modeling mindfulness and compassion, educators create an environment where students feel respected, understood, and motivated to learn.

Practical integration of these principles can take various forms. Teachers may begin classes with short mindfulness exercises to center attention, use mindful listening in group discussions to promote respect, and encourage

reflective practices that deepen learning. Compassion can be nurtured through peer-support activities, community service projects, and incorporating ethical discussions in the curriculum. Programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning have successfully adapted Buddhist-inspired practices for educational settings, demonstrating their transformative potential (Dalai Lama et al., 2019).

The practical application of Buddhist principles of mindfulness and compassion in classrooms offers a comprehensive approach to education that integrates cognitive, emotional, and ethical development. Mindfulness sharpens attention and enhances learning, while compassion cultivates empathy and emotional resilience. Together, they benefit both students and teachers, creating a harmonious and supportive classroom environment. As contemporary education increasingly values social-emotional learning, the Buddhist vision of mindful awareness and compassionate action provides a timeless framework for nurturing well-rounded individuals.

#### **4.3. Objective 3: *To critically assess the challenges and opportunities of incorporating Buddhist thought into contemporary educational settings.***

The incorporation of Buddhist thought into contemporary educational settings presents both significant challenges and rich opportunities, particularly in diverse and multicultural classrooms. Rooted in principles such as mindfulness, compassion, interdependence, and ethical conduct, Buddhist philosophy aligns closely with holistic and value-based education (Dalai Lama, 2001). However, its integration in modern contexts raises questions of cultural sensitivity, secularism, and pedagogical relevance.

##### **(a) Challenges:**

One major challenge lies in cultural and religious diversity. Modern classrooms, especially in pluralistic societies, encompass students from varied religious and secular backgrounds. Introducing Buddhist principles may be perceived as privileging one religious worldview over others, raising concerns of bias and indoctrination (Baumann, 2017). Teachers must therefore navigate carefully between transmitting universal humanistic values and respecting the distinct beliefs of all learners.

Another difficulty arises in terms of secular educational frameworks. Many contemporary education systems are constitutionally secular, which limits explicit inclusion of religious doctrines. Concepts like mindfulness and compassion can be introduced as universal values, but direct reference to Buddhist cosmology, karma, or rebirth may conflict with secular mandates (Brown, 2016). This tension often requires educators to “translate” Buddhist insights into non-religious, psychological, or ethical language.

A further challenge is pedagogical adaptation. While Buddhist practices such as mindfulness meditation have been widely researched, their classroom implementation can be hindered by lack of teacher training and institutional support (Jennings, 2015). Educators may also worry about time constraints in curricula dominated by standardized testing, limiting the space for contemplative practices.

Lastly, there is the issue of cultural appropriation and authenticity. When Buddhist ideas are detached from their original contexts to serve educational purposes, there is a risk of oversimplification or commodification (Wilson, 2014). For instance, “mindfulness” is sometimes reduced to a stress-reduction tool, losing its ethical and philosophical dimensions.

**(b) Opportunities:**

Despite these challenges, incorporating Buddhist thought offers significant opportunities for enhancing educational quality and inclusivity. One key opportunity is in promoting socio-emotional learning (SEL). Buddhist practices such as mindfulness cultivate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy, which are increasingly recognized as essential for students' well-being and academic success (Roeser & Eccles, 2015). By encouraging compassion, schools can create nurturing environments that reduce bullying and foster positive peer relations.

Another opportunity lies in fostering intercultural dialogue and pluralism. Introducing Buddhist thought alongside other traditions allows students to engage critically with multiple worldviews. This aligns with multicultural education's goal of nurturing respect for diversity while highlighting universal human values (Banks, 2016). Buddhist principles of interdependence, for example, can encourage students to see connections across cultural and ecological systems.

In addition, Buddhist-inspired practices provide tools for stress reduction and resilience-building in high-pressure academic environments. Research shows that mindfulness interventions in schools improve attention, reduce anxiety, and enhance overall classroom climate (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014). In this sense, Buddhist applications directly address mental health challenges faced by students globally. Finally, Buddhist thought offers opportunities for ethical and ecological education. The principle of interconnectedness resonates strongly with contemporary concerns such as environmental sustainability. Teaching students the interdependence of life can foster ecological responsibility and global citizenship (Sivaraksa, 2005).

Incorporating Buddhist thought into contemporary education thus involves a delicate balance between respecting diversity and leveraging the philosophy's transformative potential. While challenges such as secular constraints, cultural sensitivity, and risks of misrepresentation persist, the opportunities for socio-emotional learning, intercultural understanding, and ecological responsibility are profound. With careful adaptation and inclusivity, Buddhist principles can enrich modern classrooms, not as a religious imposition but as a universal resource for human development.

**5. Conclusion**

The exploration of Buddhist thought in the context of modern education reveals its profound relevance and adaptability when carefully integrated into contemporary settings. Philosophically, Buddhism emphasizes mindfulness, compassion, interdependence, and experiential inquiry, principles that resonate strongly with modern educational theories such as constructivism, humanism, and socio-emotional learning. These foundations address not only cognitive development but also the cultivation of wisdom, ethical responsibility, and resilience—qualities urgently needed in today's rapidly changing and often stressful educational environments.

Practically, the application of Buddhist principles demonstrates clear benefits for both students and teachers. Mindfulness practices improve concentration, reduce anxiety, and enhance academic engagement, while compassion fosters empathy, inclusivity, and supportive learning climates. Teachers who embody mindfulness and compassion report reduced stress and greater classroom effectiveness, thereby reinforcing positive teacher-student

relationships. Such practices contribute to a more holistic vision of education, one that nurtures emotional well-being alongside intellectual growth.

At the same time, challenges cannot be overlooked. The integration of Buddhist thought in secular, multicultural classrooms requires sensitivity to religious diversity, avoidance of dogmatism, and careful adaptation to institutional frameworks. Risks of cultural appropriation and oversimplification further highlight the need for authentic, respectful engagement with Buddhist traditions. Despite these challenges, the opportunities are considerable. By promoting socio-emotional learning, intercultural dialogue, and ecological awareness, Buddhist principles offer transformative possibilities for reimagining education. When implemented inclusively and ethically, they can serve as universal resources that enrich modern classrooms, preparing students not only for academic success but for compassionate, responsible participation in an interconnected world.

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