

# Spirituality Matters for Holistic Education

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## Abstract

*This paper presents an overview of holistic education with focus on spirituality as critical element of it for effectiveness. For this, it tries to explore spiritual practices with importance of it in education for holistic development, moves to reviewing literature on holistic education, then highlights UNESCO of four pillars of education connecting them with holistic education. Further, it tries to underpinning selected spirituality-focused school practices in a way they implement pedagogical strategies and describes Buddhist practice as best having holistic elements for all round development of child and ends up with conclusion that Buddhist education can be appropriate avenue to see possibilities of inclusion of spiritual elements in education.*

## Spiritual Practices

Spirituality it is well understood as a practice of inquiry that is composed of two parts—first one is the notion of connection between “one’s complete self, others and entire universe” (Mitroff and Denton, 1999) and second one is the notion of mysterious aspect to being that transcends rationality, and we are naturally drawn to compete this aspect (Palmer, 2004). However, neither of these assertions is unique to particular religion, creed, or dogma. But they seem to be quite consistent with various faith traditions (Buddhism, Taoism) and movements within with faith traditions (Islamic Sufism, Christian Mysticism, Jewish Kabbalah), as well as contemporary secular scientific theories and paradigms, in particular, but not limited to systems theory (Pike and Selby, 1998) and quantum physics (Bohm, 2002).

The essence of education can be materialized, if and only if, the exploration of student’s true self is well motivated and engaged to achieve ultimate goal of education through curriculum provisions, because, nurturing the development of the whole person is possible through creating opportunities for the development of all potentials including spirituality. As bell hooks (1994) stresses “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we were to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin”. Moreover, this fundamental spirituality is part and parcel for the vision that holistic education has for engaging whole student in his or her education, and, crucially this vision does not stand in contrast with the principle that public school curricula should be secular in nature (McLeod, 2007).

Learning is a fundamentally contemplative and spiritual process and that teachers need to be in tune with that process themselves in order to be able to teach well (Palmer, 2003). Palmer’s teaching vision from a place of identity and integrity is fundamental spirituality, because assertion of teaching in a way where one connects with one’s true self allows one to authentically connect with subject matter and students alike, creating the potential for rich learning on the part of one’s students. Moreover, holistic education is fundamentally based upon the assumption that everything in the universe is interconnected, where spirituality has a significant role to play for holistic development.

## Holistic education

All round development of a child should be aim of education, said Mahatma Gandhi,

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but all round development is incomplete without provision and practice of spirituality in education. In this regard, holistic education has come into arena, which proposes that educational experience promotes a balanced development of-and cultivate the relationship among-the different aspects of the individual (intellectual, physical, spiritual, emotional, social and aesthetic), as well as the relationships between the individual and other people, individual and natural environment, the inner-self of students and external world, emotion and reason, different disciplines of knowledge and different form of knowing (Jafari, 2012). *Interconnectedness* of experience and reality is focused element of holistic education, which is directed towards developing human beings with global conscience, a vision for peace, love, and intelligence (Nava, 2001).

Holistic education neither can be regarded as synonymous with ‘new age’ nor product of the 1960's counterculture, but it has roots in ancient spiritual traditions and cosmologies (Jafari etl, 2012), existed in both eastern and western culture. Further, enlightenment of Buddhist philosophy has contributed to holistic education in the west when perennial philosophy, recognizing multiple dimensions of reality including divine reality, came into existence in mid-1980s. With regard to spiritual aspect, Montessori (1965) believed that within each person there is a ‘spiritual embryo’ that is developing according to divine plan, and that most urgent duty of a teacher to a child was to eliminate obstacles to the development as possible because of not being so important of making children learn things as compared to keeping children’s intelligence alive.

Wholeness in holistic education believes that a phenomenon can never be understood in isolation because of whole is comprised of relational patterns and educational attainment is not possible in absence of spiritual elements. Ron Miller (2000) has described five levels of wholeness for methodological operative purposes: Whole person (integral being with six essential elements: physical, emotional, intellectual, social, aesthetic, and spiritual); Wholeness in community (quality of human relationship in terms of school, locality and family); Whole planet (recognizing whole systems of a planet as dependent of sub-systems in a globe), and Holistic cosmos (spiritual dimension of human existence).

There are six major theories or world views underpinning holistic education: *perennial philosophy*, *indigenous view*, *life philosophy*, *Ecological view*, *System theory*, and *Feminist thought* (Nacagava, 2001). All of these theories keep spirituality as central theme in holistic education. The main being incorporated themes of perennial philosophy that have holistic education are: divine reality, wholeness, and multiple dimensions of reality (Miller, 2007). The major ideas included the indigenous worldview that has been built into theories and practices of holistic education are: reverence for nature, earth, the universe, and the spirit; the interconnectedness and sacredness of reality; and human’s reintegration with nature (Jafari etl, 2012). With regard to life philosophy, Miller (1997) introduced the term ‘life-centered’ to describe “a spiritually rooted [holistic] education. The ecological worldview is often addressed in holistic education through ‘ecological literacy’, where topics such as environmental issues, the interdependence of reality, and sustainability are explored (Nacagava, 2002).

System theory is a theoretical attempt to explore comprehensive, cosmological models of cosmic world (Jafari etl, 2012) and systematic explanations of dynamic structure of universe or cosmic world (Nacagava, 2012). With regard to feminist thoughts, holistic

education has visible impacts of it, where Nodding (1992) has proposed caring centered education calls for the cultivation of relations of care in school, which includes: caring for the self, for inner circle, for distant others, for animals, for planets and earth, for the human-made world, for the world of ideas.

### **UNESCO on Holistic Education**

Four pillars of education such as *learning to be*, *Learning to do*, *Learning to learn*, and *Learning to live together*; in 21 century, as declared by UNESCO, which tries to capture holistic education spirit, with inclusion of spirituality elements substantially.

Learning to be means the discovery of true human nature, and encounter with essence of oneself, which goes beyond the psychic apparatus thoughts and emotion (Jafari et al, 2012). This learning is a part of whole, where the discovery of universal dimension is searched through self knowledge of genuine human value, own being, and inner wisdom. In this regard, holistic education nurtures this learning in a special way, by recognizing human being as a basically spiritual being in search of meaning (Nava, 2001). The implications of this pillar in curriculum be aiming at cultivating qualities of imagination and creativity; acquiring universally shared human values; developing aspects of a person potential: memory, reasoning, aesthetic sense, physical capacity, and communication/social skills; developing critical thinking and exercising independent judgment; developing personnel commitment and responsibility (Shriner et al, 2005)

Learning to live together calls to overcome prejudice, dogmatism, discrimination, authoritarianism and stereotypes because of all being crucial elements of confrontation and war, an opposite state of peace. The fundamental principle of this pillar of learning is interdependence, that is knowledge of the network of life (Nava, 2001), leading to live responsively, respecting and co-operating with other people in general and with all the living organism of the planet in particular. Specifically, it implies the development of such qualities as: knowledge and understanding of self and others; appreciation of the diversity of human race and an awareness of the similarities between, and the interdependence of, all humans; empathy and co-operative social behavior in caring and sharing; respect of other people and their culture and value systems; capability of encountering others and resolving conflicts through dialogue; and competency in working towards common objectives (UNESCO, 1996).

Learning to learn pillar is focused with asking of natural act of consciousness in its search of knowledge. It is particularly scientific awareness (Nava, 2001), where empowering the attributes of consciousness to exercise skills are employed, like paying attention, listening, perceiving, and developing curiosity, intuitiveness, and creativity (Jafari et al, 2012). Further, Nava (2001) mentions that learning to learn means having the ability to direct and take responsibility for one's own learning, for keeping oneself up-to-date, for knowing where to look for knowledge.

Learning to do pillar argues the application of known knowledge closely linked with technical and vocational skills, however it goes beyond narrowly defined skills development, which requires new types of skills, a kind of more behavioral skills than intellectual. Moreover, Shriner et al (2005) specify learning to do as knowing how to take risks as well as initiatives. Further, learning to do is linked learning profession to productive work: learning to adapt to the needs of work and ability to work in a team, along with the strategic use of knowledge

to resolve problems and make rational decisions in generating goods and services (Jafari etl, 2012).

### **Selected Schools of Holistic Education Practices**

Waldorf, Neo-Humanistic (NHE), and Montessori school systems are selected for reviewing their holistic perspective on education because of their educational philosophy deeply rooted with spiritual paradigm. They will be reviewed from human spirituality and pedagogical dimensions, as follows.

**Human Spirituality:** All three school systems embrace fully the principle of human spirituality, with slight variations in their conceptualization of it, they differ in their approach to implementing it (Rudge,2008).

Waldorf schools are basically guided by Steiner’s spiritual-inspired theory of human development, what he calls Anthroosophy that says individual is a threefold being of body (including physical, etheric and astral body, and the ego), soul and spirit. He suggested a curriculum in three levels of child development, as early period (0-7) with *Willing* dominant aspect of human character, second period (7-14) with *Feeling* prevailing characteristic, and third period (14-21) with *Thinking* domination. To achieve these goals, Waldorf schools are directed strengthening the child’s will and vital (etheric) body (willing). Drawing on imagination, beauty, and truth with engagement in learning activity (Feeling), and fostering reasoning and analytic thinking (Thinking) in early child hood, middle childhood and adolescent stages, respectively.

Montessori schools also interpreted the unfolding of child spiritual nature as occurring into three periods, or rather , three” planes of development” of approximately six-year intervals, each of which further subdivided into three-years segments (Rudge,2008). Montessori regarded as “sensorial explores”, “conceptual or reasoning explores”, and “humanistic explores” in first, second, and third plane of child development stages, respectively. These schools focus on school environment and adequate materials for sensorial, motor, and intellectual skill development, developing children’s power of abstraction, imagination, and reasoning, and fostering student’s critical thinking and guide them in their search to understand themselves and their place in the world, in first, second and third plane of child development stages, respectively.

Unlike Waldorf and Montessori schools, NHE schools don’t mention specific age periods of development, rather describe the nature of mind as system of five levels- Sensorial (perceiving and responding to the world through sensory and motor organs), Intellectual (analyzing and interpreting the world), Creative (expanding its view of the world), Intuitive (qualities of discrimination), and Spiritual (sense of oneness). Moreover, these schools, from a very early age children are introduced the spiritual vision that they are first and foremost eternal precious beings, part of divine creation, of an “Infinite Universal Consciousness” (Rudge, 2008). Furthermore, spiritual activities like meditation, yoga, visualizations, dancing, singing and drama are organized for student participation, specifically geared to develop spiritual awareness throughout their education. The aim is to carry students to the highest levels, yet never discarding the lowest ones.

**Pedagogical features:** All of three aforementioned school systems have designed a pedagogical strategies, as discussed below, in a way that has given due attention to nurture human spirituality. Broadly speaking, pedagogy of practically oriented to spiritual development can be categorized into the development of morality, the arts, and the exercise

of meditation and/or religion.

Waldorf and NHE schools are considered to be most emphasizing the development of morality as their belief of acquiring moral values as essential step for spiritual growth (Rudge, 2008). Teacher's exemplar behavior and reading of stories (fairy-tales, myths, fables, or legend) are considered to be two main vehicles to transmit ethical values to children in Waldorf schools (Rudge, 2008). Moreover, NHE teachers are expected to lead a life inspired by moral values and to pass them on to their students in their daily interaction with them (Rudge, 2008). NHE schools utilize rich ethical valued literature, like modern stories and biographic narratives in addition to fairy-tales, myths, fables or legends. Both schools organize drama, singing, or dancing for addressing morality, and most often is a theme for contemplation in meditation.

Waldorf and NHE schools considered arts to be connector between spiritual and earthly world (Rudge, 2008), with the belief that individual could connect with his/her own spiritual source as well as with the spiritual realm itself. The practice of arts is considered to be core element in the curriculum. Waldorf schools also practice Eurythmy, where Eurythmy is movement art performed to verse or music, in which each consonant and vowel has spiritual significance and a specific movement attached to it (Rudge, 2008).

Waldorf, NHE, and Montessori schools regard meditation or religion lessons as a vehicle to further human spirituality. Meditation, silence and religious lessons are characteristics of NHE, Montessori, and Waldorf, respectively, for connecting Spirituality. Montessori students are trained to practice quietness and to appreciate value of stillness. Waldorf schools include religious lessons in addition to regular rituals like morning verse, singing, rhythmic movements, candle lighting etc. NHE school children meditate on regular basis, with belief that meditation, as well as contemplation, yoga, and visualization is an indispensable practice for spiritual development and road to enlightenment.

### **Buddhist Education for Holistic Education**

Buddhist teachings are meant to be explored, examined, and then accepted or rejected by individual practitioner on basis of his or her experience (Nath Hanh, 1998b). Moreover, Buddhist education, more popularly humanistic education, is characterized as transformational teaching geared towards liberation and well-being, encompassing major modern education theories, like Global education, critical pedagogy and social theory (Bhandari, 2013). Because Buddhist ethics have contributed significantly in shaping human life and society of those days and continues even today, with concept of three jewels-Buddha (teacher/ guide), Dhamma (teaching), and Sangha (Community).

One of most rooted criterion attributed in Buddhist education is the provision of three standards named collectively supremacy-supremacy of the self, supremacy of the world and supremacy of righteousness for motivating in performance of actions and making judgment regarding ethical values of actions (Kamadee, 2009). For this, Buddhist education has grounded on three fold of training *Sila* (morality) with provision of *Pariyati* education for destruction of suffering, *Samadhi* (Meditation) with provision of *Patatti* education for training of oneself to the lesson of three root cause of evil-lust, hatred and delusion, and *Panna* (wisdom) with provision of *patiivetha* education for practical result of mind development up to the level of seeing thing as impermanent, unsatisfactory and without self. However, these three categories of education are not meant of being layers of education but all three are given simultaneously to supplement each other.

Buddhist education is considered to be cultivation of profound and praxis that contributes in an individual's spiritual liberation (McLeod, 2007). Further, the Buddha's call for the development of critical consciousness is nuanced and deepened by his application of three roots of wholesome or skillful mind and heart states-non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, or stated in positive terms, generosity, love, and wisdom –to the enterprise and process of developing critical consciousness (McLeod, 2007).

### Conclusion

Developing whole student for personal and societal needs is a global call in response to competitive market economy. But spiritual element of holistic development still needs to be explored in a way that is well responded, interlized, and practiced through wider consultation and acceptance, which is a challenging task for systematic development and operation. However, Buddhist practice, originated in Nepal, has gaining worldwide popularity, might be appropriate avenue to begin with to see the possibilities of inclusion of spiritual elements in development and delivery of education services in order to have holistic development of a student.

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