



# **Empowering Youth through Buddhist Education**

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## **Abstract**

Youth is a group of people that will experience many physical and psychological changes that can result in confusion, anger and rebellion. Buddhism can be a good method to enhance their happiness. Due to the rebellious and independent nature of adolescence, we cannot force them to accept and practice any ideology or philosophy but to convince them to accept only by contemplating on the key concept in Buddhist philosophy. Over the past 30 years, I have been using teachings in Buddhist philosophy to change attitudes and harmful behaviors of our residents and to help them develop themselves as citizens who can make a positive contribution to the society, especially those drug addicts. Faith/confidence, virtue, knowledge, generosity and wisdom are the five qualities that Lord Buddha considered as the hallmarks of the model disciple, whether monks or lay people. Throughout our rehabilitation program, we practice and facilitate the development of the five qualities above.

*Keywords:* Buddhism, good method, happiness

## Introduction

“Youth” is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community. Youth is a more fluid category than a fixed age-group. The UN, for statistical consistency across regions, defines ‘youth’, as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. When a child reaches this stage, he or she goes through noticeable and vital physical and psychological changes. The physical changes which occurs at this period leads to changes in their emotions as well as behaviors. The physical maturation process directly affects the child’s needs, interests and moods which leads him to think and act differently. Furthermore, this transformation leads to changes in his social transactions as well as individuals he associated with. During this stage, adolescents experience many physical and psychological changes that can result in confusion, anger and rebellion. Therefore, they need support and understanding to survive this stage and emerge as mature adults.

Buddhism is the world’s fourth-largest religion, with over 520 million followers. Buddhism originated in India about 2600 years ago. In recent times, Buddhism is been widely accepted and practiced because it can be easily applied to solve problems which arise in our daily lives. Buddhism is not mere religion, it is a way of life. So anyone can apply this method in their day to day lives to enhance their happiness. I think I do not have to explain about the historical background about Buddhism since the majority here are well aware of Buddhist philosophy. But today, Buddhism is being practiced by individuals who have already attained some sorts of spiritual development. But I believe that it’s our duties to encourage and invite people who does not practice any type of religion or philosophy to “come and see” (ehipassiko) how Buddhism can aid them to improve themselves. Over the past 30 years, I have been using Buddhism to transform lives of people who were labeled as criminals and social misfits into the model citizens in my country.

When a child reaches youth, he tends to be more independent, rebellious, and curious in learning and experiencing novelty. He is easily influenced by his peers and from the media, exhibits strong feelings and intense emotions and becomes more sensitive and self-conscious. Furthermore, he tends to take more risks and quick in decision making without thinking about the consequences. This is a natural process evolution; a gift of nature to ensure his survival and positive progression in a competitive society. These qualities helps him to thrive and grow by performing well in his education, sports as well as in his social interactions. If he is not given the proper education in how to achieve ethical, intellectual and spiritual perfection, he will reach a state of confusion which can lead to dissatisfaction. This can cause him to seek

happiness through harmful and unethical means and behaviors which can lead to destruction. The most valuable asset of any country is its youth population and it's our duties as elders to show them the right path in life.

If we draw our attention on the youth population today, it's evident to us that they need guidance. We suffer from the environmental pollution coming from the byproduct of technology and begin to understand the need for protecting our environment. However, the problem of mental or spiritual pollution, raising the environmental pollution, is many times more serious than that of the environment. The modern society aims more on generating profit by giving more values to materialistic gains rather than promoting ethical and moral values. This causes confusion among the youth community due to the inability to differentiate between good and bad. Due to that confusion, they tend to take wrong and harmful decisions which can cause devastation to themselves and to the social structure they live in.

How can we address this problem in a Buddhist point of view? Can we find an answer for this social dilemma by using Buddhist philosophy as mean of refuge? What is the definition of Buddhism? Lord Buddha preached, "Doing all the good, not doing all the evils and purifying your mind is called Buddhism." Good is that which produces good effect and relieves one of sorrow and stress; evil generates ill effects and prolongs the agony of suffering and stress. This is the basis of Buddhism and the foundation of all Buddhist teachings.

Due to the rebellious and independent nature of adolescence, we cannot force them to accept and practice any ideology or philosophy but to convince them to accept only by contemplating on the key concept in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhists practice Buddha dharma through listening, thinking and experience. In Buddhism, we encourage the person to come, see and experiences instead of persuading him/her to convert to a Buddhist. The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think. To make us intellectually sound to make decisions on our own.

Education is the principal tool of human growth, essential for transforming the unlettered child into a mature and responsible adult. Yet everywhere today, both in the developed world and the developing world, we can see that formal education is in serious trouble. Classroom instruction has become so routinized that children often consider school as an exercise in patience rather than an adventure in learning. Even the brightest and most conscientious students easily become restless, and for many the only attractive escape routes lie along the dangerous roads of drugs, sexual experimentation, and outbursts of senseless violence. Teachers too find themselves in a dilemma, dissatisfied with the system they served but unable to see a meaningful alternative to it.

In the modern society, parents and elders pay much more emphasis on institutional education in order to prepare their young ones to face competitive exams and professional programs. In Asian countries, the importance of Dhamma Schools still dwell in the minds and hearts of the elders but the negative trends of globalization have lured children from religious institutions in search of other means of education. Since a person's character is molded by values, and values are conveyed by inspiring ideals, the first task to be faced by Buddhist educators is to determine the ideals of their educational system.

“Mithra” is a Sinhala word, which is derived from the Pali word “Mitta”, in English “friend”. When we develop a relationship with a person based on loving kindness, it is called friendship. If a friendship is formed to nurture evil, it can lead a person to form destructive habit and behavior which can devastate to the entire world. With that notion in mind, in July 1987 we started the Mithuru Mithuro Movement.

In Sri Lanka, there was no other systematic approach in order to correct and liberate criminals or drug addicts, rather than watching them being imprisoned by the prevailing judiciary system. In demand to fulfill that requirement and to help people who were suffering from drug addiction, we started the Mithuru Mithuro Movement flowing from the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha welcomed everyone into his order; there were murders, alcoholics, bandits, so on. The Buddha's advice was that a person has not become wholesome or unwholesome by birth, but rather through their actions. Therefore, by changing attitude and behavior of a person, we were able to establish a successful rehabilitation program with the theme “Rehabilitation through Spirituality”.

Over the past 30 years, I have been using teachings in Buddhist philosophy change attitudes and harmful behaviors of our residents to help them develop themselves as citizen who can make a positive contribution to the society. By using methods in Buddhist teachings, we teach our residents how to differentiate between good and bad, how to control their sensations and how to enjoy lives in nondestructive manners. Since today's secular society dictates that institutional education has to focus on preparing students for their careers. In a Buddhist country like Sri Lanka the prime responsibility for imparting the principles of the Dhamma to the students naturally falls upon the Dhamma schools. Buddhist education in the Dhamma schools should be concerned above all with the transformation of character. I would like to share upon the methods I used to transform a person once considered as a menace to the society, to a human being who unveils his full potential to serve humanity.

Faith/confidence, virtue, knowledge, generosity and wisdom which. Lord Buddha considered the aboved five qualities as the hallmarks of the model disciple, whether monk or

layperson. Over 30+ years of experience I have gained through transforming the lives of young adults who have devoured by the evil nature of untrained mind. One needs to cultivate and practice the aboved mentioned qualities in order to free themselves from the evil within. Unfortunately, the drug addicts who arrives at our doorstep in search of refuge, are not aware of the value of developing these five qualities in their lives. There for, throughout our rehabilitation program, we practice and facilitate the development of aboved five factors in our residents and I strongly believe that it can be practically applied by any institution or even in a household environment since Buddhist education is wide open and available to the people of all walks of life.

### **Faith/Confidence (saddha)**

For someone who has lost faith in himself, as well as his family and the social structure he resides in, developing faith in the triple gem is vital in order to transform his life from a social misfit to a social asset. Spiritual development is a key factor in personal development and we have been using various methods stated in Buddhist philosophy to achieve this feat. Routine morning and evening Buddhist chanting and offering flowers, candle-lights, oil lamps and burning incense (Buddha Wandana) gives the chance to children resident to pay homage the Buddha, dhamma and sangha. The Karaniya metta-sutta - encompassing loving kindness for all the living creatures in the universe is one of the most prominent suttas chanted daily in our institution among with many other suttas. The Dhammacakkapavattana sutta – the first philosophical discourse of the Buddha and Mangala sutta, indicating various aspects of worldly prosperity with righteousness are chanted with many other chantings. Chantings which refer to the nine virtues of Buddha, six characteristics of the Dhamma and the nine qualities of sangha act as the foundation of all our spiritual programs.

Young minds are rebellious in nature and they are not willing to accept an ideology or belief without questioning. In Buddhist philosophy, Lord Buddha did not force his disciples to accept Buddhism based on mere belief, but only through rational thinking. The Buddha has applied his ‘ehipassiko’ (come and see) theory for every person to truly understand what he or she is doing. By delivering the correct and practical knowledge about the triple gem to the youth population, we can turn them in to devotees of Buddha since devotion in fact, is regarded as the preliminary step to develop faith in gaining wisdom.

## **Virtue (sila)**

The five precepts are the moral guidelines followed by any lay person who is willing to become a devotee of the triple gem. Abstinence from killing, stealing, and sexual abuse, falsehood and intoxicants are those five precepts and they are considered vital since it brings righteousness to every word and action he or she performs. If we look at them closely, following these five precepts can be considered as a long lasting solution to every social dilemma we encounter in our modern society. To achieve this, we should educate our youth generation on the Buddhist methods used to control thoughts and emotions. Patience, concentration, anger management, obedience and discipline should be encouraged and their development should be facilitated in order to aid them to follow these five precepts.

In our rehabilitation program, we use various methods like counselling, group counselling, friendly pull-ups and other means in order to help the youth community to accept these precepts as a way of life. By giving them the right knowledge and advices, they learn how to enjoy life and seek for true happiness in life without causing harm to themselves or to the society they live in.

## **Generosity (caga)**

In our institution, Individual ones who were selfish and destructive take the firm decision to change their behaviors and attitudes by learning ways to be generous and caring to others as well as to themselves. How do they achieve this daunting task of total self-transformation?

Most of us are used to indulge and act upon our sensual desires and emotions without thinking about the consequences. When we start to realize about the severity of the repercussion, it's too late for rectification. Selfishness of human beings has caused so many devastation to our world which has endangered generations to come. Therefore, we should teach our young generation about the importance of generosity by encouraging them to be generous, which is essential for overcoming selfishness, greed, and the narrow focus on self-advancement that dominates in present-day society. In Buddhism, an act of giving has been compared to a war fighting with various enemies such as greed, attachment and other mental defilements to fight very hard to defeat and sabotage it. According to the natural law of cause and effect, or kamma, an act of giving can bring happiness and other positive benefits in this life and in future lives. As kamma has been defined by the Buddha as the volition “*chetanaham bhikkhawe kammam*

vadami,” an act of giving associated with wholesome volition, will naturally increase the benefits one receives as a result.

In our center, we hold various programs to teach children resident about the importance of generosity. We conduct programs where they get the chance to care for their parents, the elderly and teachers, programs they perform voluntary social welfare activities which needs physical labor and events where they get the chance to use their knowledge and expertise various subject matters to educate school children and the public.

### **Knowledge (suta)**

In today’s world, the main purpose of the knowledge and expertise given to the youth community is to prepare them to thrive and prosper in the present commercialized society. The knowledge gained through the conventional education system is not enough to bring upon satisfaction and therefore they seek happiness and fulfillment in means which are harmful to themselves and to the society they live in. Therefore, the need for an alternative education system is strongly felt by the modern society due to the shortcoming of the prevailing system.

Buddhism can be considered as a way of life rather than a religion based on theories and scriptures. Therefore, the knowledge gained through Buddhism is readily applicable to our day to day lives. That knowledge is directly related building faith and virtue in a person. In our rehabilitation program, knowledge is delivered through seminars, lectures and providing the opportunity to our residents to use our library which there are over 10,000 volumes.

If we want to encourage someone to get rid of bad habits and behaviors, we should introduce them to adopt and follow healthy alternatives. We hold meditation and special poya day programs to educate them how to achieve spiritual development in order to cultivate true content in life. Core concepts such as four noble truths, dependent origination and three marks of existence are introduced to them gradually and complimentary information required to analyze those concepts are also provided. Therefore, the residents are able to perceive the world in a different view point by not clinging on to sensual desires and negative emotions.

## **Wisdom (panna)**

Wisdom is the direct personal insight into the truth of dhamma. Wisdom is generated through methodical mental training and coming in to a firsthand realization about the knowledge gained about the core concepts of Buddhism. With this insight, the person can come to understanding about the reality of the world he lives in, which further strengthens his faith in Buddhism. Therefore, knowledge about Buddhism and generating wisdom is closely interwoven. Because Wisdom arises by systematically working the ideas and principles learned through study into the fabric of the mind, which requires deep reflection, intelligent discussion, and keen investigation. This wisdom must be generated by methodical mental training in calmness and insight, the two wings of Buddhist meditation. It is wisdom that the Buddha held up as the direct instrument of final liberation, as the key for opening the door to the Deathless, and also as the infallible guide to success in meeting life's mundane challenges.

Encouraging the youth population to practice meditation and systematic mental training is key factor in generating wisdom. We provide our children resident with the knowledge needed to practice meditation through 10 day meditation programs, discussions and special poya day programs.

Thus wisdom is the crown and pinnacle of the entire system of Buddhist education, and all the preliminary steps in a Buddhist educational system should be geared toward the flowering of this supreme virtue. It is with this step that education reaches completion, that it becomes illuminating in the truest and deepest sense, as exclaimed by the Buddha on the night of his Awakening: "There arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and light."