

Bridging the Disciplines:  
Integrative Buddhist Monastic Education in Classical India

Among some thoughtful and earnest scientists in the contemporary scientific community there is a growing awareness of the necessity and great potential of collaborative thinking and crossing disciplinary boundaries in search for solutions of the complex problems of today's world. Likewise, seeing a need for strengthening multidisciplinary research and teaching, in the response to disenchantment with a fragmented nature of western education, some of the most progressive academic institutions in America have slowly begun to introduce interdisciplinary programs and centers into their establishments. The recognition of a need for bridging the disciplines is brought about by several factors. One of them is the fact that the range and complexity of contemporary social and scientific challenges have remarkably increased. Global challenges such as finding cures for contemporary diseases and preserving natural resources represent the problems that transcend the boundaries of individual disciplines. Therefore, understanding these problems and providing practical solutions entail the multidisciplinary research and receptivity to cultural and intellectual exchanges. I believe that scholars who are willing to engage in

collaborative initiatives and those who are trained across disciplinary boundaries are ones who will be able to bring about intellectual renewal and scientific advances.

However, there are those in the academic and scientific communities who fear that the increase in multidisciplinary activities will inevitably lead to the weakening of individual disciplines and result in the sacrifice of disciplinary excellence. There are also those within a scientific community who believe that humanities have nothing to offer that could be of significant value to the pursuits of science due to their differing subjects and methods of investigation and the questions they raise. For this reason, we have seen that the multidisciplinary initiatives that have been carried out so far have included exclusively the collaborators working in the fields of natural and social sciences such as biology, environmental engineering, ecology, law, economics, public policy, and so on, and have completely ignored the humanities.

If one looks at the integrative Buddhist education of classical India, one finds that already in the early centuries of the CE, Indian Buddhist scholars were cognizant of the importance and promise of the multidisciplinary education. They operated on the premise that multidisciplinary projects do not have to weaken individual disciplines but can serve as springboards for fundamental disciplinary advances. They also gave the equal value to humanities and sciences, since both employed the similar methods of rational inquiry (*yukti*) and were concerned with all aspects of human life.

The Buddhist ideal of multidisciplinary education has its expression in the Buddha Śākyamuni himself. Indian Buddhist narratives of the Buddha's last and former lives celebrate not only his spiritual qualities but also his intellectual and practical abilities and his knowledge of the wide range of subjects, which were derived from his comprehensive and multidisciplinary education. In the *Jātaka* stories we come across the references to the Bodhisattva, the Buddha to be, mastering all branches of learning, including medicine in the famous medical school of Taxila.<sup>1</sup> The *Lalitavistara* extols the young Gautama for his proficiency in eighty-six disciplines of the humanities and sciences. As one reads these narratives, one is given an impression that the Buddha's highest achievements, that is, his spiritual realization and omniscience, were in part due to his intellectual capacities developed through his extensive, multidisciplinary education. In the *Vyākhyayukti*<sup>2</sup> (or the *Sūtravyākhyayuktyopadeśa*), Vasubandhu states that the Buddha's teaching is called comprehensive because it demonstrates his proficiency in every field of knowledge.

Although the Buddhist multidisciplinary education developed in the greatest degree in the monastic schools of Mahāyāna, some Buddhist Pāli sources attest to the fact that the respect for the cross-disciplinary learning can be traced back to the earlier period. They also show that multidisciplinary learning was not intended for the Buddha alone. For example, the *Milindapañha* mentions a wide scope of Nāgasena's learning, which included secular and

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<sup>1</sup>*Jātaka*, IV, 171.

<sup>2</sup>Obermiller, E. *The Jewelry of Scripture of Bu-ston*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1931, p. 29.

religious subjects.<sup>3</sup> *Jātakas* point to the well-integrated and comprehensive education offered in the schools of higher learning in Taxila, where students were encouraged to expand their knowledge and practical experience through various types of field research and even post-graduate travel abroad. Moreover, since early Buddhist monks in India were expected to make their own robes and oversee constructions of buildings, already in the early Buddhist monastic communities arose a need for monks' practical training and practice in different crafts and technical disciplines, which were added to the monks' religious training. Thus, the inception of the many-faceted Buddhist education in India was most intimately related to the inception of the Buddhist monastic order and the practical needs of the Buddhist monastic community. However, in the early period, the scope of crafts and disciplines that was taught and allowed in Buddhist monasteries was very limited. Some early Pāli texts even refer to the creative arts, some crafts, and scribing as vulgar fields of knowledge (*tiracchānavijjā*), which should be studied only by lay people.<sup>4</sup>

As the Buddhist monastic educational system was developing through time, it became more diversified and more centered on the significance of the interdisciplinary study. At the time of the emergence of the Mahāyāna Buddhist monastic schools, the study of the five fields of knowledge (*pañca-vidyā-sthāna*)—namely, linguistic, logic, inner science (Buddhism proper), medicine, and creative arts—became incorporated and mandatory in

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<sup>3</sup>*Milindapañha*, IV, 3, 26.

<sup>4</sup>*Samaññaphalasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*.

Buddhist monastic education. Mahāyāna monasteries were the first Buddhist institutions to offer educational opportunities to the monastic and lay Buddhist communities and to non-Buddhists as well; and they were the first to provide them with both secular and religious education. This must have been of great significance for Buddhist communities because in the Indian Buddhist world, educational opportunities did not exist apart from monasteries. Mahāyāna monastic universities in many ways resembled the earlier famous schools of Taxila, which were the first educational institutions that offered both religious and secular education and that accepted students of different backgrounds from all over the Indian subcontinent.

One of the reasons for Mahāyāna's strong emphasis on multidisciplinary education lies in the ideal of a Bodhisattva way of life. The goal of all Buddhism is to eradicate ignorance. In early Buddhist communities, attention was given almost exclusively to the elimination of spiritual ignorance, whereas, Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism seemed to be concerned with the eradication of every kind of ignorance. As some Mahāyāna texts attest, a Bodhisattva was encouraged to gain proficiency in all kinds of knowledge in order to attain Six Perfections and assist others in every way needed. Thus, in the Mahāyāna Buddhism, the proficiency in the knowledge of diverse disciplines was considered indispensable for both the pursuit of one's own and others' pragmatic, mundane ends and for the pursuit of spiritual realization. In the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, it is explicitly stated that a Bodhisattva who does

not undergo training in the five fields of knowledge in no way attains omniscience. He trains in them for three reasons: to defeat others in debate, to assist others, and to gain knowledge for himself. The study of linguistics and logic enables one to engage with others in debate. One studies medicine and creative arts to assist those who desire so, and trains in the inner science in order to gain knowledge for oneself.

The scope and manner of the study of the five fields of knowledge in Mahāyāna monastic schools are known to us from the records of Chinese scholars, such as Huiyen Tsiang and I Tsing, who visited India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. During their stay in India, some of the most renowned and largest Buddhist universities in India were Nālanda (central India) and Valabhī in western India, which was not a Mahāyāna university according to Huiyen Tsang. Nālanda, which was the largest Buddhist university of all times, by the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE had eight colleges with 300 lecture hall, 1,500 instructors who were in charge of 10,000 students and 100 lectures per day. According to Tibetan accounts, Nālanda also had a grand library, occupying three buildings, one of which was nine stories high. Nālanda and later university of Vikramaśilā, which had six colleges, each with 108 instructors, became international centers of higher learning and their fame spread throughout Asia. It is due to the reputation of their high academic standards and the multidisciplinary approaches with the wide range of secular and religious subjects that these two schools attracted foreign student from China, Tibet, Korea, and Java and received rich endowments from the kings of

domestic and foreign countries. Moreover, these Buddhist monastic universities also taught non-Buddhist systems of thought as they used to accommodate not only the adherents of different Buddhist schools but also non-Buddhists, who held the views that were incompatible to their own. Their receptivity to crossing the disciplinary boundaries and bold willingness to engage in collaborative thinking with those of differing views are the features that made these two Buddhist universities grand at that time and progressive even for us today. They demonstrated that it is possible for an educational institution to maintain its religious or secular identity while avoiding the spirit of sectarian exclusiveness or the spirit of superiority for its secularity.