

Buddhist and Hindu Perspectives on the Role of Wisdom in Contemporary Education

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Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical exploration of some constructs of wisdom drawn from Hindu and Buddhist pedagogical traditions. It is a result from a dialogue between an Indian national, who is negotiating a place for herself and her children in the Australian education, and her mentor, an Australian born teacher educator who is Buddhist. Both authors are considering the need for the development of wisdom in education, how that might be enacted, and what might the ancient wisdom traditions offer in this quest. While western constructs of pedagogy prioritize knowledge and rational arbitration, eastern paradigms offer contemplation and yoga strategies that are cognitive and affective, and integral to the development of wisdom. These experiential approaches are experiencing growing uptake in westernised and globalised education through the proliferation of mindfulness exercises and hatha yoga in particular. The dialogue finds synergies and differences. Particular divergence stems from seemingly opposing ontological positions of *atma* and *annata*, yet provides an exemplar of how such a divide might be negotiated and demonstrates how giving priority to ethical imperatives can embrace divergent religious positionings and remain inclusive and relevant to plural and secular education priorities that further cultivation of wisdom as an education imperative.

Keywords: wisdom, education, Buddhism, Hindu

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Introduction: Wisdom in Hindu and Buddhist traditions

Both Hindu and Buddhist wisdom traditions offer pathways that promote personal development; personal responsibility, respect for all forms of life, preservation of peace, human welfare, nonviolence, altruism, integrity. In short, skilful action ever mindful of consequences. While Hinduism is known for many themes like “nonviolence” and revering saints and teachers, “one of the central aims of this religion is the stability and welfare of the world” (Kinsley,1982, p.8). Buddha’s teachings, the Dharma, shares these aspirational and practical learning outcomes. The ontologies of both traditions are based on perceptions that the essential nature of mind/ consciousness is essentially pure with an intrinsic potential to awaken into that full realisation. While the traditions are at variance regarding an essential self, *atma* in Hinduism, and *anata*, refutation of essential self in Buddhism, both traditions draw on the Law of Karma as a universal principle from which ethical reasoning and the development of wisdom is justified.

Karma

Sloganised, fatalistic or retributive justice interpretations of karma, as used in popular hip-talk, ‘what goes around comes around’ do not equate to religious literacy or cosmopolitan understanding. Buddhist discourse offers detailed and precise explanations of karma that impel ethical decision making that warrants deeper understanding. Rahula (1978) offers a succinct and distinctive definition:

...the Pali word *kamma* or the Sanskrit word *karma* (from the root *kr* to do) literally means ‘action’, ‘doing’. But the Buddhist theory of karma has a specific meaning: it means only ‘volitional action’, not all action. Nor does it mean the result of karma as many people wrongly and loosely use it. In Buddhist terminology karma never means its effect; its effect is known as the ‘fruit’ or the result’ of karma (*kamma-phala* or *kamma-vipaka*). (Rahula, 1978, p. 32).

This distinction moves the discourse towards individual agency and responsibility by offering an explanation of how mind interacts in the physical world of actions and reactions. Because intentions and motivations behind thoughts, words and deeds are decisive in determining the results, awareness of motivations creates acumen for choice, self- determination and integrity.

Therefore, “the law of karma is not regarded as rigid and mechanical, but rather a flexible, fluid and dynamic. Nevertheless there are relatively stable repeated patterns that arise from this collection of impersonal, ever-changing and conditioned events or processes, that form what we regard as a person’s ‘character’” (Harvey, 2000, p. 24). To fully apprehend karma as truth depends on the cultivation of wisdom: *cintamaya panna* the wisdom obtained by thought, *sutamaya panna* the wisdom obtained by study, and *bhavanamaya panna*, the deep insight knowledge developed through meditation. In this way, for any person who recognises dissatisfaction in themselves and seeks peace and happiness, openness to karma is heuristic.

That life can be unsatisfactory and the desire to be happy can be readily comprehended. These conditions are pervasive. Happiness does not remain a constant

lived experience for anybody. This reality is not reflected in current pedagogy in mainstream schooling. Even with significant inroads being made through incorporation of Social and Emotional Learning strategies and resilience programs there nevertheless appears reluctance to acknowledge this norm. Pervading methodologies either favour case-specific reactive approaches, and good results are shown from cultivating virtues and positive qualities such as gratitude, courage and so on, but from a Buddhist viewpoint these approaches are still lop-sided. What appear to be missing are technologies to assist students to think about internal and external changeability in their lives, their happiness and their choices at a daily and personalised level.

All principles revealed by Gautama are predicated upon three marks of existence in our conditioned phenomenal world: 1) change, whether obvious or subtle, is constant and consequently, everything is impermanent (Skt. *anitya*; Pali *anicca*); 2) this pervasive instability inevitably precludes lasting satisfaction (Skt. *dukha*; Pali *dukkha*), and 3) that self, the I, is not permanent, nor is there any intrinsic permanence i.e. 'not-Self' (Skt. *anatma*; Pali *anatta*). Things exist only in dependence upon the causes and conditions that have preceded any given moment. There is no creative entity and no endpoint of final annihilation or damnation, but a stream of successive events. The focus is on living in the world as we experience it –mindful of karma. However, the most radical tenet is *anatma*. This observation challenges the reflexive assumption that identity has an intrinsic core or Soul (Skt. *atman*), and in turn refutes extremes of nihilism (for each moment impels another) and eternalism (because there will always be change). When Gautama taught this he moved the pervading Indic understanding of cause-effect relationship, karma and rebirth, toward individual empowerment rather than fatalism or eternalism. At a time where religious fundamentalism has increasing sway these Indic traditions remain long-standing exemplars of how divergent views can peacefully co-exist and common ethics can infuse education. Teaching the inevitability of change, interdependence of existence, karma, provides a key that has been exemplified in Buddhist and Hindu traditions that can be employed globally in education today.

Western perspectives

The quest to know what wisdom is and how it can be developed, and even measured, nevertheless continues to draw the attention of western educators. An overview of several research papers, for instance, Grimm (2014), Yang (2011), Staudinger and Gluck (2011), and Takahashi (2000) propose a 21st century radical wisdom portfolio, that draws together different wisdom definitions, theories, dimensions, paradigms, models and descriptors as a heuristic approach to design future wisdom interventions in the field of education. We propose that including, say, the Bhagavad-Gita (Hindu) and Jataka stories (Buddhist) would further this agenda.

Often, wisdom is confused with its other putative constructs like intelligence, common sense, spirituality, knowledge, cleverness and trivial wisdom (Houston, 2011), noting that but a few empirical studies come up with the explicit differences between them. Wisdom is a rare potential influenced by experience, age and cognitive, reflective and affective knowledge (Jeste et al; 2010). Wisdom is also understood to be knowledge of what is good, personal standing of that good and a strategy to achieve that goodness (Grimm, 2014). Several scholars conceive wisdom

sprouting out of religious and spiritual education (Tisdell and Tolliver, 2001, 2003; Houston, 2011). Barhr, 2018 reflects on how wisdom and suffering are related to each other and how humility, one of the putative features of wisdom, in case of life adversities, contribute to enhance wisdom. Many a times, the wisdom is correlated with the administration of positive ethical values and contextual civic education (Sternberg, 2013; Sumardjoko, 2018). Jeste and Vahia (2008), delineated wisdom as an integral part of successful aging. Erikson considered wisdom to be a personality trait. Baltes, Gluck, & Kunzmann have taken a developmental route by framing wisdom as the successful human achievement that serves both the good of oneself and the good of others. Sternberg (2003) offers a balance theory of wisdom. Here the application of successful intelligence is to balance intrapersonal, interpersonal and extrapersonal interests in given time and context for the common good. Ethical teaching and learning ethics supports plays an important role in constituting a common good (Sternberg, 2003).

Generally, notions of wisdom in the west prioritise rational and analytical attributions, and possibly less didactic and synthetic pedagogies as they have been traditionally taught in the east. Some authors consider rationality and scientific acuties as the strongest dimensions of wisdom compared to sheer ability to judge and prioritize the practical, philosophical and/or theological constructs (Ryan, 2012, 2017; Kitcher, 2016). The broadly western construct of wisdom stresses acquisition of knowledge and problem-solving skills, and less has been drawn on more pervasive and holistic pursuits of wisdom which require self-development, self-regulation and developing ethical conduct. To further the field this void demands attention and the consideration of eastern paradigm of wisdom (Jeste & Vahia, 2008; Narasimhan et al., 2010) provide approaches to intrapersonal learning that are under-developed in the west.

Wisdom attributes of modern education

Wisdom education aims not only creating academic astute but also the insightful humans who transcend self, completely understand the concept of “uncertainty” and manage to implement positive ethical or moral values and take skilful action for the well-being of the individual and others. There are multiple factors contributing to wisdom development. “Members of Eastern and western cultures have systematic but different conceptions of wisdom and they often employ their specific conceptions of wisdom in solving everyday problems and judging others” (Yang,2008, p.48).

Tacitly, the necessity of wisdom education has been realized in plenty of other subject areas, like medicine to make positive decisions in patient care and support (Tajima,2006; Shah and Arora, 2015), judiciary and law decision making (Dunnivant and Lewitt, 2015), management and business in establishing egalitarian work places (Ranjan Chatterjee,2009; Parboteeah, Paik, and Cullen, 2009), leadership in formulating outstanding leadership behaviours to inspire others (E. Greaves, Zacher, McKenna and Rooney, 2014), and in psychology to resolve mental health issues arising out of the complexities of life (Bhatia, Madabushi, Kolli and Madaan, 2013). Most of these subject areas require a serious dealing with human nature and common issues which require an equilibrium between eastern and western constructs of wisdom for more pervasive and holistic approach towards human pursuits. Apparently, only rational and analytical dimensions of wisdom which contribute to sheer knowledge acquisition, are not sufficient to deal with the human nature which

affect everyday life endeavours. At this point, an innovative approach to education is required which must include character cultivation, ethical conduct, integrity, human well-being, peace and skilful actions, collectively, wisdom.

Given the seemingly elusive nature the wisdom definitions, Yang (2011) categorised them into four groups: composite personality traits, positive result of human development, knowledge about meaning and conduct of life and lastly, emergence of wisdom from interaction between individuals and their surroundings. Essentially wisdom is a positive process that encompasses cognitive integration, actions and positive effects of those actions on oneself and others. “Wisdom is achieved after a person cognitively makes an unusual integration, embodies his or her ideas through action and hence brings forth positive effects for both self and others” (Yang, 2011, p. 49).

The Hindu-Buddhist wisdom and achievement of practical wisdom

Yet there are global commonalities. Nelson Mandela from South Africa, Martin Luther King from USA, Mahatama Gandhi and Mother Teresa from India and Winston Churchill from England have shown wisdom (Sternberg, 2003). These global leaders have become exemplars for collective human welfare and world stability. Irrespective of creed or culture wisdom invariantly fits within Yang’s (2011) definition, for these luminaries and others: they were successful in integrating their ideas, embodied them in appropriate actions and brought forth the positive effects for human welfare. While investigation into eastern traditional views of wisdom will include variously Chinese, Japanese, Taiwan, Tibetan and Indian wisdom, and others, Hindu and Buddhist wisdom remains central to the eastern discussions (Takahashi, 2000). Yang, (2011) concluded:

For Tibetan Buddhist monks, wisdom includes attributes such as recognizing Buddhist truths, realizing emptiness is the true essence of reality; becoming the non-self; existing beyond suffering; being honest and humble; being compassionate to others; respecting others; treating all creatures as worthy and equal; having the ability to distinguish between good from evil; and being efficient in projects. Content analysis of the Bhagavad Gita, the most influential text of Hindu philosophy and religion, have found that for Hindu wisdom is related more to control over desires, renunciation of materialistic pleasures, emotional regulation, self-contentedness, compassion and sacrifice, insight and humility, yoga, decisiveness, duty and work love of God, and knowledge of life (p.50).

These are nuanced differences, and not exclusively the preserve of monks, that nevertheless illustrate shared commonalities of determining the cognitive and affective (action and its effects) role of wisdom compared to prioritising analytic knowledge (Takahashi,2000; Yang, 2011) that are practical and considerate of effects on society and the environment.

Surprising ingenuity of the Bhagavad Gita wisdom domains

Drawing from ancient Indian literature in education provides expanded possibilities for ethics and wisdom education. For example, the Bhagavad Gita tells of Lord

Krishna advising his disciple Arjuna. On the battlefield of the Kurukshetra, Arjuna must decide whether to annihilate his own relatives (Bhatia et al., 2013). “Krishna tells Arjuna that he should detach his inmost self, his eternal Atman or soul from his social role and then play that role without concern for personal consequences. True renunciation involves not renunciation of one’s social role but renunciation of desires for the fruits of actions” (Kinsley, 1982, p. 33). The statement uncovers the wisdom features asserting, realization of truth of life’s uncertainty, importance of responsibility towards society, control of desires and appropriate or skilful action. Several scholars successfully draw on the parallels between existential beliefs and values of the Bhagavad Gita teachings and modern psychotherapies and modern wisdom conceptualizations (Jeste & Vahia, 2008; Narasimhan, Bhaskar & Prakhya, 2010; Bhatia et al., 2013). Likewise, Jataka stories from the Buddhist canon, and well known throughout Asia, and taught in Australia by Smith & Seah (2008) and Smith, (2010; 2013) show how wisdom in education in plural classrooms can be furthered.

Seeking a nexus between Hindu Buddhist wisdom and wisdom fostering approaches

A comparative analysis of the pot of wisdom (Ma Rhea, 2017) and seven pillars wisdom model (SPWM) from Ranjan Chatterjee, (2009) draws on the synergies and constituent differences between Hindu and Buddhist framings of wisdom. Both the authors acknowledge that the models put emphasis on human tendency to all the transformation through cultivation of wisdom and ethical imperatives. Each tradition holds detailed experiential and philosophical curricula that offer guidance towards complete realisation of wisdom, this is beyond the scope of this paper. Both the paths employ yoga and meditation as the sources of self-realisation to practice concentration, morality, self-regulation, self-contentedness and control over desires (Kinsley, 1982; Feuerstein, 2014). The use of mindfulness (Orr, 2002), yoga and meditation are discerned as the path to find the innate wisdom every human possesses as an inborn capacity. Teaching mindfulness in schools continues to grow worldwide. It supplements social and emotional learning, attention, emotional regulation, and, as the traditions tell us, the cultivation of wisdom.

In Australia, Beare (2010) sought to restate wisdom in the remit of education, and the dedicated role of the teacher to manifest general and personal wisdom in particular. A teacher, according to wisdom philosophers should be able to search for overarching theories, patterns and how and why they take place. Beare also discussed three essentials which influence individual wisdom conception: personal faith or beliefs as foundations for learning; understanding that the learning process proceeds through life; and, where secular, Hindu and Buddhist constructs align, an awareness of universal interconnectedness as the foundational rationale for ethical living. These above stated three essentials are extrapolated by McKenna (2013) who systematically maps, via various authors: teaching wisdom as personal expertise, teaching of wisdom as personal transformation, spirituality, and reflections on the under-utilised eastern traditions, and concluding that wisdom can indeed be taught. Stange and Kunzman, in their chapter offer five wisdom criteria: rich factual knowledge, rich procedural knowledge in interpreting and managing one’s life, life-span contextualism or an ability to understand different stages of life, being tolerant and understanding of different cultures and values, and being able to deal with uncertainties of life. Park Peterson’s chapter on values in action and Eleanor Rosche’s advocacy of a

contemplative education with its focus on meditative relaxation, mindfulness, emotional intelligence and regulation and touching concerns about life and death informs the education community worldwide with a robust connection between the ancient (Indic) wisdom traditions and novice wisdom fostering techniques.

Measuring wisdom

As interest in wisdom education grows, so does the quest to measure wisdom. Various wisdom measuring scales and methodologies are extant. Jesta et al, (2010) reviewed and modified wisdom measurement tools and developed 53 Likert Scale items using the Delphi method. This study differentiates wisdom from intelligence on 46 items out of 49, however, 31 items differentiate spirituality from wisdom find symbiosis with Hindu and Buddhist wisdom domain. Commonly held constructs of wisdom include emotional regulation, practical life skills, life satisfaction, ethical conduct, self-esteem, mindfulness, and humility. Other studies (Shah, Levy, Moriates and Arora, 2015; Sharma and Dewangan, 2018) further throw light on the eastern characteristics and their consistency with universal wisdom components. Unanimously, prominent wisdom academics bring forth measurable (Gluck,2017) and wisdom reinforcing capabilities (Bruya and Ardelt, 2018) of this rapidly increasing research discipline in the contemporary education. Another study (Parboteeah, Paik and Cullen, 2009) draws on the role of different religious beliefs and their effects on the individual work values in organisations in dealing with daily work place issues. Interestingly, enough has been drawn on how wisdom can be measured but less on how some of the religious and spiritual values/beliefs contribute to holistic wisdom development and how these values/beliefs can be implicated as pedagogical tools in modern educational interventions.

Conclusion

As we have seen, there is a growing body of scholars who have been drawing attention to a pressing need for wisdom development as part of the business of teaching and learning in modern, globalised, education. We have also seen that common understanding of wisdom can be contentious and this paper forwards several suggestions. These are cognitive and affective, interpersonal and intra-personal approaches and include reflection, imitation from others' experiences, self-regulation, self-assessment, commitment to ethical values. These can be expressed through journal writing, reading texts that might challenge beliefs, and fostering a community of inquiry (Beare, 2010; Bruya & Ardelt, 2018).

Here in Australia, Hinduism and Buddhism are proliferating besides other major religions (2016 Census Data Summary: Religions in Australia, 2019). Hence, it is timely, indeed, necessary to include these ways of knowing as integral in current education. While Ma Rhea (2017) cites the work of Ma Rhea (2012), Smith & Seah (2008) and Smith, (2010; 2013) as shedding light on the development of some of the first materials with Buddhist content and Buddhist-inspired teaching and learning in Australia, the contributions remain at a nascent stage. The Bhagavad Gita inspired values system and its compatibility to modern wisdom fostering techniques, further complements this work. Narasimhan et al., (2010) mention that "the ancient texts define values as the very essence of an individual and hold that the enduring worth of a human being lies in his values commitment (Bhagavad Gita 17.03)." Genuinely,

“integrity, appropriate action and inner peace are considered as the bases of values-based existence”.

Already, mindfulness, yoga and meditation are being increasingly employed in classrooms around the world. We suggest that teaching and learning that draws from various wisdom traditions, as discussed in this paper, can forward learning for wisdom in classroom teaching and learning practices. Through referencing back to the ancient Hindu and Buddhist wisdom traditions we are reminded of deeper, more profound and expanded possibilities for education. Yoga and meditation, and their propensities towards open mindedness to embrace these methods of self-development and self-regulation. The exploration of wisdom pedagogy presented through this Hindu Buddhist dialogue provides an exemplar of how diverse religious notions can be navigated, and also remain inclusive and relevant to secular voices and priorities.

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