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Systems

Views from the Philosophers' Retreat

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Education is a lifelong process, and the process is as important as the end result. Life itself is a journey of personal growth and development; therefore, the classroom curriculum should reflect the world around us. It should help the learner understand what is going on around him/her. Education should be about studying to learn and not learning to study. It is liberating in some sense as it helps one attain freedom. Education is also about empowerment – creating independent, free thinking individuals and not submissive ones. The process of learning must fulfil the national relevance while looking at personal relevance. Education also needs to go beyond a content acquisition framework. There is a lot of emphasis on content, and when it becomes obsolete, you become obsolete. If you learn how to learn, then it should not matter. This is not to say that content is not needed as content too has a role in education. It is what builds a perspective. But the process of learning needs to encompass a lot more.

Schooling is a very small part of the education process. It does not prepare you for life outside of school but gives you sound academic knowledge. Learning in schools tends to happen in silos although real life does not work that way. We have become an over-schooled and under-educated society, and this is something that needs to change. Education needs to help learners actualize their potential. The education systems should impart social and relationship skills to students – values such as hardwork and rigour too need to be inculcated. Education should help learners navigate the world that is in front of them. They need to be able to sift through useful and useless information.

While we talk about what needs change, we should not wholly dismiss the current system. The purpose of the education system is to challenge you. Before thinking out-of-the-box, we need to learn to think inside the box. Certain basic skills, such as reading, writing and speaking have to be acquired even if they prove to be challenging. Struggle often brings out the best in us. Education is like a tasting menu and, therefore, traditional education is not all bad. It is a platform for you to understand what suits you and what does not. We do not know what our best is unless we stumble upon it, either intentionally or by chance. Learning in the classroom should facilitate learning outside the classroom.

Education should empower children to think about their personal philosophy. We need to make the idea of having a personal philosophy appealing. Our personal philosophy is dictated by our experience, geographical location and social environment. There are no limitations to developing a personal philosophy – the most important point is to have a philosophy. We need to ensure that learners



Mr Kapur delivering the introduction to the retreat

develop positive personal philosophies and apply this through day-to-day life. Developing a personal philosophy at a later stage is very disheartening; it should be developed from the start. Personal philosophies can help self-actualization. The government and citizens have to work in a cohesive manner in order to create a system where there is a focus on inspiring the drumbeat at an early age. Schools need to expose students to a wide variety of options so that they discover their drumbeat by the time they leave school. The system must focus on developing self-confidence. Every child must feel he/she has a song to sing. Education is about finding your internal drumbeat, and then marching in the real world in harmony with this drumbeat.

There has been an age-long debate regarding a mismatch between skills learnt through education and those required for employment that has not reached any conclusion. Most businesses do not employ university graduates as they are not directly employable – they need to complete a diploma or vocational training. Education needs to be structured in some aspects (aligned to the job market) and also unstructured in some aspects (aligned to individual needs, talents and aspirations). Students need to be given autonomy in choosing what they want. There needs to be a cycle of incentives that matches aspirations. Today, our education has become about status and comparing of skills, and we are all “another brick in the wall” – there is a strong need to break away from this.

We should not put walls around subjects. There is a need to get out of a siloized and compartmentalized system of learning that stifles creativity. All subjects are inter-related and they should be taught as such. There is also a need to contextualize this inter-disciplinary curriculum to the wider socio-economic-political state of affairs. The education system should not focus on trying to produce a perfect graduate – this will kill individual creativity.

Choice and chance play a role for every individual. Individuals need to be open-

mindful and open to opportunity despite the challenges encountered along the way. An enhanced level of awareness is essential when converting opportunities around you. Luck and coincidence can play a part in our lives but we need to have the right ingredients (being in the right place at the right time). You have to learn from your mistakes and have the skills and mindset to open the door of opportunity. The system must help prepare young people to deal with failure. Failure shouldn't be seen as unacceptable by the system – it should be viewed differently. Resilience must be nourished. Students must be taught to look at problems as opportunities. This will promote the idea of entrepreneurship. Unlearning is also an important part of dealing with failure.

“ Students must be taught to look at problems as opportunities. This will promote the idea of entrepreneurship ”

In the education system, a modern view is embraced and traditional thinking is shunned – but why? There needs to be a balance between the modern and traditional, for example, we should bring back Dzongkha poetry and traditional literature taught earlier, rather than rely completely on foreign literature – values can be taught this way. Modern and monastic education is seen as two distinct ways of education. That is not true and they do not discredit each other. In addition to Shakespeare, local literature and regional literature should be cherished. We need to be grounded but be open to outside influence.

There is no dignity in urban blue-collar work. This needs to change – we need dignity of labour at all levels. We need to tackle issues in schools and not wait till a later stage. Traditional knowledge and skills should not be seen as a disadvantage. Education in Bhutan is seen as a means of escaping village and agricultural work. The government and education system should make the agricultural sector an attractive means of livelihood. We have been made to think that going into agriculture is a failure and taking up a vocation is mediocre. This mindset needs to change. Agriculture should be viewed as entrepreneurship and be introduced at the school level. There is a need for the system to emphasize a country's historical ties with nature. Buddhism becomes key here as it emphasizes man's relationship with nature. Business is not just about wealth building; it should be about sustainability. Businesses that promote sustainability should be a way of life too. Technology can be a great enabler of sustainable business. Business should not come at the cost of culture and tradition. There needs to be a culture and curriculum at the school level that encourage this.

People are wired differently and thus society and education should be able to cater to all types of learners and allow them to grow. We need to understand that people who ace their traditional exams are also creative individuals. Tests should be conducted in such a way that they assess what the learner knows rather than

what he/she does not know. Assessment should be about enabling students and not become about competitiveness. Competition with oneself is more important than with others. Although self-evaluation has some merit, a combination of an annual examination and self-assessment is often the best. The true purpose of assessment is to gauge whether the learner is better today than he/she was yesterday.

Teacher training institutes and systems need to change too. There is a need to improve the number of trained teachers. We should also not over-burden the teachers as they are often overworked and paid very poorly. There is a need for enlightened mentors to guide learners. We do not need people who drill ideas and knowledge into students. The education system's main objective is to capture the learners' attention. Teachers must be good storytellers. Teachers and institutions need to give importance to skills and create leaders. Skills and knowledge are two sides of the same coin. Practical experience with reference to skills courses can be very useful. There needs to be skill development outside of major cities. The biggest problems in Bhutan and India are related to jobs and unemployment. Vocational training should not be looked down upon but viewed as a respectful viable option for livelihood. Since alternative careers are coming up, there is a need to develop skill training for these vocations of the future.

“ There are some essential traits needed in a learner such as curiosity, quest for clarity, passion, awareness, integrity, respect for others, empathy, luck, unconditional love, and discernment ”

We need to build a research culture at universities and help them become eminent centres of research. Case studies are an interesting way to learn. Project-based learning motivates the individual by challenging him/her; this process eventually leads to self-discovery. Practical hands-on experiences are important as they fuel the imagination, and practical learning has greater impact.

There also has to be a good foundation of values, principles and characteristics for those who come out of this new education system. Deficiency in education is in terms of character building. Even Hitler had values; there is a need for good principles and character. Principles have to be acquired, particularly universal ones such as justice and compassion. Education should also impart skills with reference to emotional intelligence. We need to inculcate values that would bring happiness in one's life and others. The more genuinely you are able to help others, the happier you will be. There are some essential traits needed in a learner such as curiosity, quest for clarity, passion, awareness, integrity, respect for others, empathy, luck, unconditional love, and discernment. There is no need to grade values because if



The participants in deep contemplation

we do that, they become another “mark” and the purpose is destroyed.

There is a strong emphasis on early childhood development. This leads to earlier enrolment in school but compromises on family time. The family is a huge resource in South Asia – this needs to be leveraged. Schools have become a convenient way to outsource education but we need to acknowledge that parents too are an important source of education. Social, cultural and familial contributions are important. Peers play a very important role in development as well. Unconditional love is crucial too. If the goal of education is happiness, then unconditional love is the key. A different word for love could be “universal responsibility”. It has been scientifically shown that people who give love live longer than those who receive it. We need to extend the concept of unconditional love to society, community and the nation.

Governments and policy makers have a moral responsibility to address the problems of today. The remedy is through giving incentives and making the right policy decisions. The Government should match the standards of the private sector, provide both economic and social incentives, and encourage certain career options (blue-collar jobs) that are not seen as desirable. In addition to this, there should be access to everyday role models. We need people who can set an example by serving the country and showing what responsible citizens look like. School kids need real life role models who can help them and inspire them. Role models need not be famous people and can be from the local community too.

The way education is imparted is also changing. Technology gives you education for free. This is contrary to traditional education where you pay to learn. Technology has changed the way we look at skill acquisition. The concept of “free” will challenge education in the traditional sense. Now that technology can help you earn money, earning a livelihood is no longer dependent on a degree. Online courses are a great

way of learning. India leapfrogged to the telecom revolution, and India's IT status can be used to bring a similar sweeping change in education. Technology can and should be leveraged by the teachers to aid the learning process, for example 3D learning. There is a need for flexibility and unstructuring in the curriculum and subject choice – that can be liberating. Technology is one of the tools that can bring about flexibility. There is a need to look at technology as a tool. Schools will not become irrelevant because of technology, but we need to make sure that it is used in the right way with an element of fun. The school education system should teach a programming language like it does for English, Math and Dzongkha. Technology enables experiential learning.

Technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) will lead to job losses and we need to prepare for jobs that still need the human touch. There is a need to prepare for 10-12 careers at least. AI is being looked at something that we outsource our work to. We should use AI to do the mundane things but it should allow us to perform higher order thinking. Artificial Intelligence should lead to Augmented Intelligence. While the Internet is an opportunity to learn content, it is not currently used to learn compassion. This is a major opportunity. Technology can be a great equalizer and can bring about a revolution in educational affairs.

While we focus on incorporating technology and other external aspects, we must also focus on the importance of the internal processes of the learner. Meditation has become another catch phrase, but only when practised in the right manner, can it lead to peace and happiness. Your mind is controlled by negative emotions. Meditation keeps these negative emotions in check. Mindfulness as a small activity can be introduced in schools.

We listen in order to take part in a conversation but we should listen to understand. Storytelling is the medium of spirituality. The Chakra (Gandhi) is a good tool to use to bring about spirituality and mindfulness.

We also need to focus on acquiring

wisdom to secure our own future and that of the nation. We need to make our children capable of deep thinking. Buddhist's concept of "Dharma" is secular and can benefit everyone. The East should take this seriously like the West. Since life is short and we cannot do everything, there needs to be focus. There has to be a reality check and we should prioritize what is more important – not money but love, compassion, integrity and morality. Training in morality and ethics is important. Thinking about the impermanence of life will lead to more compassion and sincerity.

“ Technology can be a great equalizer and can bring about a revolution in educational affairs”

If we want to better the system of education, then we have to acknowledge the role of women and that we cannot do it without them. Women face gender discrimination as soon as they complete their education. Gender biases are also partly the result



Geshe Lhakdor
addressing the
gathering

of the education system. We need to make children aware of these biases. Females need to flourish in the system for the nation to prosper. Uniformity exists up to the college level but right after that, inequality becomes apparent. Marriage and family are sometimes deterrents to women pursuing higher education. We need to re-think the role women play in society. School needs to broaden the child's way of thinking. Change can come from children too. Kids are no longer submissive and they challenge notions and norms. Children can be agents of reform and change the perspectives of adults.

Change regarding the girl child also needs to come from social and policy interventions. We need to neutralize gender roles. Women need to be given importance in all decision-making processes. The curriculum must create equal opportunities for all. Money and power should not just be seen as belonging to men. Buddha says, there is no reason to elaborate on the shortcomings of women, because men have them as well. There is a need for ethics. Humans have the tendency to victimize those with less power. We must give women the opportunity to progress, and both men and women need to bring about this change. Women should not treat biases like they are the norm. Women need to deconstruct social constructs that have been built around them. Children's values begin from home, and therefore, there must be equality at home. But bias often begins at home. The boys are spoilt at home (mostly by their mothers) and this leads to a sense of entitlement even at the primary school level. Boys need to be educated about bias. Parents need to be on board with the notion of full gender equality. Gender should be about accepting differences and complementing each other. Issues regarding gender and sexism must take centre stage and should not be on the sidelines.

“ Technology can be a great equalizer and can bring about the revolution in educational affairs ”

While we are thinking about the changes needed in the education sector, we must also think about how prepared the world is to accept these learners. By age 18, learners should be able to get into the world of work if they want to. Till 18, one needs to build that rigour. Schools produce capable graduates but they do not get picked because the only criterion tends to be that of 99% grade average. Universities too need to change their method of admission. Institutions need to focus on creating an interesting diverse cohort. Employers of today are looking beyond educational qualifications – this is where the quality of education becomes important. Curiosity and the quest for clarity, perseverance, accountability and responsibility, analytical ability, dedication to the truth and collaborative approach are important factors in hiring. The ability to see details – and the ability to get the bigger picture and to figure out constantly how the world works – are key indicators of good employees. While hiring, it is important for employers to define company culture so that they are able to gauge individual's compatibility to the position. Today, the real challenge for an employer is to be able to hold on to people and let them move ahead. We need people who grow up to be employers who are more open in their hiring process. What we need today is a free-flowing knowledge economy.



Group Photo

Sitting, from left to right: Pranav Roach, Karma Lotey, Dasho Sonam Kinga, Kuenga Wangmo, Kavi Arya, Geshe Lhakdor , Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, Shivshankar Menon, Arun Kapur, Tashi Wangyal, Dasho Karma Tshiteem, Dinesh Singh, Anuj Kumar, Raj Chengappa
Standing, from left to right: Hemant Somasekharan, Pema Chongma, Naina Kala, Suchita Salwan, Theresa Osuska, Karishma Handa, Surya Valliappan, Leander Cascorbi, P. Mohan Kumar, Sonam Peljor