

Buddhism and Modern Methods of Education

By V.F. Gunaratna

Buddha was also a teacher - a perfect teacher - in that he knew not only *what* to teach but also *how* to teach. His teaching was characterized by perfect skilfulness. It should be of interest to Buddhists to know that some of the methods of teaching adopted by the Buddha over 2,500 years ago are the very methods adopted in the classrooms of today as so called modern methods of education.

Bertrand Russel in his book on Education poses the question of what should be the attitude of a teacher when he addresses a class. In Chapter 2 of this book, entitled "Aims of Education", he himself answers the question. He says that however clever a teacher may be, the character of the pupil and the intelligence of the pupil can never develop freely and fully unless there is *love* in the mind of the teacher towards the pupil. Developing this theme further, he goes on to say - "The parental instinct of love is not confined to one's own children. In its diffused form, it can exist in a teacher towards his pupils though not his own children". This same view is held by subsequent writers on Education. Two educationists, Davies and Shepherd, in their book "Teaching: Begin Here", in the very first chapter pose the question, "Why do you want to Teach?" They deal with possible answers to this question, such as the necessity to earn a living, and the teacher's special interest in the subject he teaches, and explain that these do not constitute the highest motive for teaching. They feel that the most effective teacher is not merely interested in his subject but is far more deeply interested in his pupil's intellectual and moral development. It is this attitude of *love* towards the pupil that makes a successful teacher.

Over 2,500 years ago, it should be interesting to know, that the Buddha held the same view. In the Sagatha-Vagga of the Samyutta-Nikaya, it is recorded that when the Buddha was instructing his disciples, Mara attempted to distract their attention. The Buddha's remark to Mara in this connection not only indicates the futility of Mara's sinister attempt, but also brings to light the Buddha's practice of radiating *love* towards his disciples whenever he instructs them. He commences thus:

"Hitanukampi Sambuddho yadanca anusasati"

Mrs. Rhys Davids has aptly translated this :

"Love and compassion doth the Enlightened feel
Towards another when he teaches him".

Modern educational theory stresses the necessity on the part of the teacher to appreciate that there are different levels of understanding among pupils who are grouped together in one class. This is necessary because the grouping is according to age and not according to comprehensive ability. Ryeburn in his "Principles of Teaching" refers to George E. Hill, another educationist as having once issued a questionnaire to a large number of teachers in order to ascertain what they considered to be their greatest difficulty. He made it clear that he was referring to instructional difficulties and not other difficulties like lack of equipment or unsuitable environment. Ninety percent of the answers revealed the greatest difficulty to be the existence of different levels of understanding among pupils of one and the same class. What is said by the class teacher is understood by a few only, whereas the rest of the pupils variously misunderstand what is said. The teacher must therefore be alive to the possibility of these various misunderstandings and evolve a method that will yield the maximum results to the maximum number, namely the method *of presenting the identical theme in diverse ways*.

Now the Buddha himself realized this same difficulty and prescribed the same remedy. In the Catukka-Nipata of the Anguttara-Nikaya, the Buddha has therefore divided learners into four categories :

- (i) Ugghatitannu - he who is quick to comprehend;
- (ii) Vipacitannu - he who comprehends after further points have been clarified.
- (iii) Neyyo - he who has to be led all the way, every step being watched and guided, like a child who has to be led by the hand all the way;
- (iv) Padaparamo - the dullard who is not capable of comprehending.

To meet this difficulty of the presence of various levels of understanding, the Buddha had devised a method. The method devised by the Buddha was

followed by Venerable Sariputta who explained it thus to the other monks: "*Anekapuriyayena acikkami* (I explain in diverse ways). The diverse ways are then explained :

- "Desemi" - I discourse on it. (Lecture method).
- "Pannapemi" - I enunciate it. (Theorem method).
- "Patthapemi" - I establish it firmly. (Revision method).
I analyze it. (Analytical method).
- "Vivarami" - I open it out. (Exploratory method).
- "Uttanikaromi" - (literally) I place it upwards. (Method of clarifying obscure points).

The modern educationist stresses the need of audio-visual aids for educational purposes. Some pupils are better impressed through the channel of sight than through the channel of hearing. Hence some sort of ocular demonstration is considered necessary such as the use of the black board or the use of illustrated books. Now, was this method known to the Buddha and if so, did he put it into practice? If one reads the *Ambalathika-Rahulovada-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya*, he will be interested to find that the Buddha had made use of a water-jar to impress upon his son, Rahula. There that the uttering of deliberate falsehoods is not compatible with the life of a recluse. The technique adopted by the Buddha was to pour a little water into a jug. He then held it towards Rahula Thera saying, "Behold, Rahula, this water-jug. How little is the water that it contains. As little, Rahula, is the recluseship of one who utters deliberate falsehoods". Then he threw away the water and remarked - "That water is now discarded and abandoned. So discarded and abandoned, Rahula, is the recluseship of one who utters deliberate falsehoods". With a few more demonstrations of this nature, the Buddha brought home forcibly to the mind of his son that it is utterly unworthy of a recluse to utter deliberate falsehoods. In the very last chapter of *Samyutta-Nikaya*, we see how forcibly the Buddha impressed upon his disciples the alarming fact that only a very few of the human beings now living will again be re-born as human beings. Taking up a little sand on the tip of his finger nail, he enquired from his disciples - "Which is greater, the little sand I have taken up in my finger nail or this mighty earth?" When the disciples replied that the little sand on his finger nail is so trifling that it

cannot even bear comparison with the mighty earth, the Buddha then said : - "Just so, monks, few indeed are those human beings now living who will upon dying be re-born as human beings. More numerous are those who will be re-born as animals or petas". There are also other examples of visual demonstration adopted by the Buddha.

In the absence of audio-visual aids, the next best method recommended by educationists is the frequent use of similes. By means of a vivid simile, the teacher is able to create in the mind of the pupil mental pictures which have nearly the same effect as audio-visual aids. Has the Buddha given his mind to this method of clarification? It must be said that nowhere in the whole wide world of literature do we find such a wealth of similes as in the Tipitaka. There is hardly an object which has not been made use of as a simile to describe some persons, some conditions or some deeds. The sun, moon, sky, oceans, rivers, mountains, birds, flowers - all these have been often used for purposes of comparison. There are many interesting similes in the 19th chapter of the Pancaka-Vagga of the Anguttara-Nikaya. The most charming simile refers to the pleasure obtained by listening to the Dhamma preached by the Buddha. (This pleasure is compared to the great satisfaction and relief obtained "by a man oppressed by heat and wearied by thirst when he comes across a pool of clear cool and limpid water and plunges into it, bathes in it, and also drinks some of it". In the Rathavinita -Sutta of the Majjhima-Nikaya, there is pointed reference to the instructional value of the use of similes.

Religion as a subject of education in schools did not exist in the ancient past either in the East or the West. There is hardly any reference to such education in the Mahavamsa. It is something of recent origin. After religion was introduced as a subject in Western schools, Dr Jacks, an educationist, enquired from a headmaster how many hours he had set apart in his time-table for the teaching of religion. His reply was that he was not bound by the time-table for the teaching of religion although he did set apart fixed hours in his time-table. He said he teaches religion whenever a suitable occasion arises for it. It may be in the playing fields if he happens to be there while the pupils are at play, or it may be in the classroom while quite a different subject is being taught. The suitable occasion must however arise.

Now, did the Buddha make use of suitable occasions to preach a sermon apart from preaching at arranged times? He often used to do so. In the Maha-Vagga of the Samyutta-Nikaya mention is made of an impromptu

sermon delivered by the Buddha. He was walking with his disciples when they came to the bank of a precipice. One of the disciples then remarked that this was a great and fearful precipice. The Buddha thereupon said that there is a much more fearful precipice, and that those who do not understand the significance of the Four Noble Truths and take delight in the gratification of the senses, fall into this more fearful precipice from which there is no escape. He continued in this strain inciting the disciples to make an effort to realise the Four Noble Truths.

It will thus be seen how most of the important educational principles of today were anticipated by the Buddha over 2500 years ago.