

Tung Lin Kok Yuen International Conference

Buddhist Canons: In Search of a Theoretical Foundation

for a *Wisdom-oriented Education*

Introduction

Our current knowledge-oriented learning has definitely produced very able men and women in all localities. However, a question that has been raised in all circles concerning this learning is: was it able to produce people with wisdom, compassion and self-discipline, who radiate inner peace and outer peace? The Buddhist causality of dependent origination teaches that the lack of wisdom is one of the critical conditions for the loss of both the inner and outer peace. Those who do not experience inner peace tend to breed violent conflicts and in turn damage themselves, the society and the environment. Before the advent of modern science and digital technology, the lack of wisdom perhaps did not matter as much because in those days we lacked the means to do so much irreversible damage to ourselves and our world. But now, as we possess unprecedented technological powers, the lack of wisdom of even a few, even for a moment, is a grave threat to all the life forms of planet earth. Therefore, in this technologically advanced age of ours, it is urgent that we devise and pursue a course of action, a way of life, a philosophy of life, and a system of education that confers upon us more wisdom and makes us more civilized.

Buddhist traditions for over 2500 years have been claiming to contain in their canons the wisdom and the means to wisdom that the world truly needs for living in peace and with happiness. Wisdom, as defined in the Buddhist traditions, is the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others. It is the knowledge combined with compassionate application. The wise, those who possess wisdom, understand the problems of life and living and also ponder on the solutions to these problems. They are practical and pragmatic people for they understand the conditionality, insubstantiality, interconnected and interdependent nature of all living things and the planet as a whole. They look at an issue from different angles and do not make one-sided judgments. Wisdom drives one to pursue a moderate and simple life, to distinguish need from greed, to promote pluralism and democracy, to be positive and productive, energetic and dynamic, tolerant and peace-loving, and to plan and line up actions in an orderly and structured manner to achieve goals of personal and communal fulfilment.

If the wisdom of Buddhist tradition matters, then we need to search for that wisdom by critically examining the canonical depositories of Buddhism. Every Buddhist tradition, whether Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and their sects and schools, has its own primary scriptural corpus comprising of a substantial number of texts defined as authoritative. As there are many Buddhist traditions, there are also many Buddhist canons. Since their origins, these traditions have made an enormous effort to protect and defend their canons and the texts of those collections by delimiting them from the extraneous, immunizing them from change, and preserving their meaning by writing commentaries and treatises. Moreover, in different historical periods and across geographical regions, the monastic elites and masters of each tradition selected specific texts from their primary canon and appropriated

them to their social, historical, and cultural contexts through interpretation, translations, teaching and preaching. While canonization or canon formation has continued in different regions and cultural contexts, the Buddhist traditions have passed down from one generation to the other a vast number of canonized texts and authoritative collections. Some of the canonical texts that the later generations also found to be more relevant to their contemporary social and cultural contexts have survived to this day; but some others, particularly those that lacked relevance to the next generations, disappeared for good. Taking into account this long ‘canonization’ process, this conference on ‘Buddhist canons’ refers both to the traditional canons and also their secondary canons, commentaries and treatises that developed in various historical and geographical contexts by different Buddhist masters, which were at times considered by those traditions to be authoritative and immutable. These numerous canons and canonical texts preserve not only an enormous amount of religious knowledge and expertise but also religious wisdom passed on by the wise that those traditions identified as the Buddha, buddhas, bodhisattvas, siddhas, arahants and masters.

The aim of the proposed conference is to invite leading scholars in Buddhist Studies and Education to dig into these diverse Buddhist canons and canonical texts in search for the wisdom and means to attain wisdom for developing a theoretical foundation and practical guidelines for a *wisdom-oriented education* appropriate to the modern world, in contrast to its current knowledge-oriented education. They will explore a Buddhist definition of ‘*wisdom-oriented education*’ and the need for introducing such a system of pedagogy in modern education and for blending Buddhist wisdom with contemporary knowledge. They will examine the Buddhist methods for developing our human capacity to think and act using knowledge, experience, and common sense, and investigate how the acquired knowledge, understanding and skills need to be applied with a universal concern for the betterment of all living beings and care for the natural and social environment. They will discuss the roles of learners and teachers in a *wisdom-oriented education* and the importance of developing in the learners the invaluable attributes of unbiased judgment, critical thinking, kindness, compassion, experiential self-knowledge, non-attachment, virtues, and ethical conduct. They will investigate how a *wisdom-oriented education* facilitates rewarding experiences and benefits in life, as compared to knowledge-oriented education. In brief, the scholars of this conference will present canonical discussions on the process of acquiring not only the theoretical knowledge (*pariyatti*) and practicable skills and attitudes (*paṭipatti*), but also human realizations, attainments, experiences, and fulfilments of wisdom and peace (*paṭivedha*). As all Buddhist traditions have pointed out, one can gain knowledge of the Four Noble Truths by recognizing four tasks: The problem must be understood without prejudice and bias, the causes of the problem must be identified and abandoned, and the solution must be realized while the path to the solution must be tread. However, wisdom implies that people complete the four tasks with the aim of benefiting oneself and others. It is the expectation of the conference to weave together Buddhist theoretical approaches and practices leading to a comprehensive set of guidelines for a *wisdom-oriented education*.