

Gross National Happiness in the Classroom: A Teacher's Thoughts

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Abstract

Inspired by the values embedded in GNH teachers can attempt to practice aspects of the four pillars of GNH (environmental conservation, socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and good governance) in their classrooms through creating educational activities that promote GNH philosophy. Education is much more than imparting knowledge and skills and the values embedded in Gross National Happiness can promote an ethical and ecological outlook that has the potential to make our world a better place for all its inhabitants. Compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, harmony and social responsibility must be taught in schools. Teachers must find ways to transmit these values so that they are not just dogmatic assertions. School administrations must make them a priority. This is the only way we can be witness to an era of renewed hope.

If western civilization is in a state of permanent crisis, it is not far-fetched to suggest that there may be something wrong with its education. No civilization, I am sure, has ever devoted more energy and resources to organized education, and if we believe in nothing else, we certainly believe that education is, or should be, the key to everything (Schumacher, 1999, 59).

In the past few months, India has been rocked by numerous bomb blasts fuelled by fundamentalist thinking. New Delhi alone has been the sight of five deadly attacks in the past months injuring more than 100, killing close to 25, causing our school to cancel all fieldtrips for the semester. On the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, I accompanied my teacher, Vietnamese Zen Buddhist

Monk, Nobel Peace Prize Nominee, and founder of the “Engaged Buddhist” movement, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, in a walk for Peace from Vijay Chowk outside of Parliament to India Gate. As we walked in silence trying to cultivate peacefulness within so that we can be peaceful in the world, I felt a deep sense of hope even amidst all of the bloodshed and violence my adopted city has faced and my mission as an educator became crystal clear.

The values of compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, harmony and social responsibility should be taught in schools and modelled by teachers. Teachers must find ways to transmit these values so that they are not just dogmatic assertions and school administrations must make them a priority; this is the only way we can be witness to an era of renewed hope. Educating is much more than imparting knowledge and skills. In the words of Parker Palmer, “to educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world” (Palmer, 1997).

For me, teaching is not a job—it is a calling. I did not choose to become a teacher, teaching chose me and I am an educator because I sincerely believe that it is how I am meant to make the world a better place. Change can be affected at the grassroots level. Teachers are not only a vital link in creating “the change we wish to see in the world” but fundamentally embody this Gandhian vision.

It is crucial that educators place their role as teachers in the larger context of the world situation. When teachers view their vocation as a “sacred task” then their classroom can transform into a community of mutual understanding, love, peace and compassion. Education is much more than imparting knowledge and skills, and the values embedded in Gross National Happiness can promote an ethical and ecological outlook that has the potential to make our world a better place for all its inhabitants.

No matter what our situation is, we all desire to be happy. Our schools teach young people so many things yet they never learn,

“how to be happy.” I was first introduced to the concept of Gross National Happiness in June of 2007 by Sulak Sivaraksa at a Spiritual Ecology conference in London. His discussion of GNH inspired me to reevaluate my educational philosophy and create a unit in the Psychology course I teach and in the “Systems of Belief” unit in the Indian Studies course I teach on “Happiness.” The unit consisted of three main activities: The Happiness Lab, Project Happiness, and “Ethics for the New Millennium” by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The happiness lab

Sam Shapiro, a teacher at the Athenian School in Northern California introduced me to the Happiness Lab. Students chart moments of satisfaction and dissatisfaction for one week and each night they evaluate their moments of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the following questions:

Why were you feeling satisfied/dissatisfied?

Did expectations, desires, needs, or demands have anything to do with your feeling?

Did you do anything mentally to either plan a way out of the suffering or fantasize about a more pleasant existence? Did you do anything to distract yourself from feeling fully the dissatisfaction? Did you do anything mentally or physically to try to prolong your state of satisfaction?

After one week, students handed in their examples of satisfaction and dissatisfaction along with a one page analysis detailing “what makes you happy” for my Psychology class and for my Indian Studies class their analysis answers the question: “Did your experiment prove or disprove the Buddha’s First and Second Noble Truth thesis?”

Students found this to be one of the most eye opening and meaningful assignments they have every completed because it gave them the opportunity to really reflect on what makes them happy which is something they rarely have the space to do.

Project happiness

Project Happiness (www.projecthappiness.com) is an initiative that seeks to inspire young people to create greater happiness within themselves and in the world. Students read *Ethics for the New Millennium* written by his Holiness the Dalai Lama and study the relationship between ethics and happiness. An excellent study guide is available at (www.dalailamafoundation.org/members/en/documents/enm-study-guide-2007-09-07.pdf). While reading this text they create films or multimedia presentations on the “nature of happiness.” One of the central tenets of *Ethics for the New Millennium* is dependent origination and the understanding that nothing has an absolute reality, only a present, contingent reality. Teaching dependent origination to students has really opened up their world-view. I call dependent origination the philosophy of “I am Thou” and it resonates well with my students.

Compassion meditation

When we study Buddhism in our “Systems of Belief” unit I lead my students through a compassion meditation. What follows are some excerpts from their responses to the meditation:

We went down to the bottom floor and each person grabbed a cushion and sat down on the floor. Then we were told to clear our minds completely and think of any one person that we know or we've seen that is suffering. Then from deep inside our hearts, we were to wish the best for this one person. Then we were to think of all the people in the world and do the same for them. I think this is a really good principle of this religion. When you think like this, you are basically telling yourself that every living person is in a way like you and is basically you. When you show compassion for these people, you are not only helping and caring for them but helping yourself. This philosophy is called “I am Thou.” - Anmol

I liked the idea of love and compassion meaning different things. Love meaning you want to best for someone else and compassion meaning you want to end suffering. I think those meanings are much better than

the meanings we all, know them for. You told us to think of someone we saw or remember or concentrate on sending them a blessing. This was interesting, in most religions people pray to a god, in this case it was like we were gods, but at the same time people. We were feeling for other people and sending them blessings, as if answering their prayers. - Alex

In this field trip to a Buddhist place, we meditated and thought about the suffering of other people. First we sat in a circle and breathed and then started thinking about someone other than ourselves who was suffering. We then offered them hope from our hearts that their suffering would stop. According to Buddhists life is suffering and when we discover the cause of suffering is desire or an expectation we understand that is we let go of our desires and expectations we wouldn't suffer. However, that wasn't the goal of this field trip. The goal was to move on from focusing on your own suffering and notice how much others around you suffer. The goal was to wish for the wellbeing of someone else for a chance. We were asked when the last time we wishes for the wellbeing of someone from our hearts were, and honestly I had trouble remembering a time I wished well from the heart for someone other than myself, my family and some of my friends. This really showed me that I should be happy for what I have, because there's someone out there who doesn't have anything, and is truly suffering. - Anya

While I was meditating Ms. Srinivasan whispered to us to think about someone who was suffering and to think about them from our side. She then told us to give them a blessing from the bottom of our hearts. At that moment I felt a sense of pride coming over me because I hadn't done such a deed for someone in a long time which proves how selfish we humans can be. Others who live on the streets and live in hardships every day are satisfied and are happy to a certain degree. Those people are heroes and whom I look up to and am inspired by because they hardly complain. After that Ms. Srinivasan told us to remember the last time we ever helped anyone. Honestly for me it had been awhile because I always tried or attempted to but I never ended up helping my friend or family member. As I thought of this I felt dissatisfied. Even though it was only a blessing it came from my heart and I really care for that person but unfortunately they don't know that. I hope someday they will. This experience has made me more mature and to keep a lookout to help those in need. - Kresha

When we all got into the room we all took pillows and sat on it. Ms. S then explained what the whole place was about. After that we closed our eyes and we sent happy thoughts to one person that we thought needed them the most. We did this because Ms. S said that we usually think only about ourselves. Which is true, people are very self-centred. I thought of this little street girl that I see every day at the stop light near my house. I had seen her crying the other day and I just couldn't stop thinking about her. It just made me feel really sad. So I tried to send her all of the happy thoughts I had within me. - Scott

Mindfulness in education

The creation of this unit on Happiness and these few activities are just the beginning. Close to 600 educators gathered from all over India for a groundbreaking workshop promoting mindfulness in education led by Renowned Zen Master, Poet, Teacher and International Peace Maker, Thich Nhat Hanh, from September 26-29, 2008 at the Doon School in Dehra Dun. The Doon School was founded in 1935 and it is one of India's premier educational institutions spread across seventy acres of lush greenery in the state of Uttarkhand. The aim of the workshop was to help teachers transform their own lives with the energy of mindfulness with the hopes of transforming classrooms into communities of mutual understanding, love, peace and compassion which are cornerstones of GNH. Mindfulness is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for students, teachers, school administrators, and parents to promote an individual's sense of wellbeing. The practice of mindfulness decreases stress, attention deficit issues, depression, anxiety, and hostility while simultaneously providing optimal conditions for learning and teaching.

The retreat was entirely experiential and consisted of daily practice of the following: guided mediation, walking meditation, mindful movements, Dharma teaching talks, question and answer sessions, deep relaxation, singing, Dharma groups, mindful eating, noble silence, workshops with classroom applications, and mindfulness trainings. Close to twenty teachers from the American Embassy School attended. This group of teachers has been meeting weekly

for 8 years in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. Together they have formed an “Educators Sangha.” A series of personal accounts by Sangha members from the American Embassy School, in New Delhi is available at: <http://www.aessangha.com/>. Sharing this experience was a beautiful fruition after many years of quiet cultivation of mindfulness both individually and collectively.

Educational activities like the Happiness Lab and Project Happiness are ways to transmit these values so they are not just dogmatic assertions and school administration must make this a priority, this is the only way the world will become a better place.

References

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