



## LEARNING STYLES: WESTERN APPROACH AND BUDDHIST APPROACH

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### Abstract

The main aim of this paper was to examine learning styles practised by students in two different approaches: western and Buddhist. As shown in the research findings, The Buddhist classifications regarding the learning styles were much analytical and subtler when compared with western approach. It could be seen in research findings that students belonged to these two approaches have shown different styles in learning situations. Expectations of gifted, average and slow learners were also totally difference. It was seen that learning needs of these students were not exactly the same. Though western approach and Buddhist approach are two different traditions these traditions can develop insights of each other mutually. This research has been compiled through critical and comparative perspectives in combination with historical method from the study of teachings in *Sutta Pitaka* as primary source. Further, research works of educators and other scholars have been examined as secondary sources to direct the research paper towards a more critical approach. There should be more researches on these two traditions than what we see today in order to develop these two traditions mutually.

**Keywords:** Average learners, gifted learners, slow learners, learning styles, learning approaches

### Method

This research has been conducted through critical and comparative perspectives in combination with historical method from the study of teachings in *Sutta Pitaka* as primary source. Further, research works of educators and other scholars have been examined as secondary sources to direct the research paper towards a more critical approach.

### Aim

The main aim of this paper was to discuss learning styles practised by students in two different approaches: Buddhist and western.

## **Introduction**

Learning is the relatively permanent change in a person's knowledge or behavior due to experience. Nature of the process of learning depends on the students' capabilities. Students are categorized in to different types according to the way they engage in the learning teaching process. These categorizations can be seen in the western approach and the eastern approach. In eastern approach, Buddhist education has given a prominent place for the learner since the learner is in the center of the learning teaching process. These two approaches discuss students' nature in the learning teaching process from different perspectives.

## **Literature Review**

Students have different learning styles (Thompson & Mintez, 2002) and the way learner concentrates on process, internalize and retain new information is different (Dunn & Dunn, 1986). Capabilities of gifted students are outstanding when compared with other students those who are at the same age, same in experience and same in environment. And also they are in a higher pedestal in intellectual performances and creativity (Pouser & Rudnitsk). Gifted students like independent learning style compared to other non-gifted students (Chan, 2001). Average learners believe their effort in learning more than innate abilities (Glonna, 2009). Since the slow learner is capable of achieving a moderate degree of academic even though at a slower rate than the average child he is not considered as mentally retarded (Vasudaran, 2017).

## **Student classifications in Buddhist and western approach**

In the western approach, classifications of students are of three types: gifted, average, and slow. These three type students can be seen in a normal classroom. Degree of learning is the basis of identifying a child as slow learner, average and gifted (Kirt, 1962). There are differences in taking in, retaining and processing information in different levels among these students in the learning teaching process (Felder & Sivermon, 1988). Children of IQ ranges 130-144 are considered as the moderate gifted students. Highly gifted students are between 145-159 IQ ranges. Learners who are between 160-174 are considered as exceptional gifted. Those who are above the IQ range of 175 are considered as profoundly gifted. According to Wilms (1886), gifted students are the hope of the future. Gifted students are leaders. They are models for others. They act as assistants to teachers (Persson, 1998). As Chan, (2001) reveals, gifted students take the responsibility of providing information out of the class. They share the learning experience with others. Teachers are able to take the assistance of these students to meet the expected learning outcomes. Moreover, these students much prefer independent leaning situations when compared with non-gifted students. And also they seek participative and cooperative learning situations lavishly (Mustafa, 2013). Children who are between gifted and slow learners can be considered as average learners. They work in the classroom steadily and unassumingly. These students do not expect much attention of the teacher. They are able to achieve learning outcomes for their age and developmental stage. And also they believe their effort in learning more than innate abilities. Followings are some other characteristics of average learners.

- They believe that teacher should know their interests
- Teacher should be one who discovers the learning style of each student
- Teacher should provide opportunities to learning varied modalities that match those styles
- Teacher should ask complex questions and students should be able to answer them
- Works given by the teacher should be challenging, meaningful and respectful (Glonna, 2009)

Slow learners are students those who show academic performances below the average level of their age group (Vasudaran, 2017). These children cannot be considered as mentally retarded because they are able to achieve a moderate degree of academic even though at a slower rate than average children. Students become slow learners due to several factors: low intellectual abilities, personal factors, environmental factors, and emotional factors. Illnesses, absence from schooling over long time, unidentified physical defects are some examples for personal factors. Poor academic environment of the home, not having enough food and food rich in nutrients, lack of sleep are the determinants of environmental factors. Problems with self-confidence, lack of teacher attention and negative attitudes of parents are emotional factors that influence the slow learning (Ibid). Slow learners seek direct instructions and guidance. They want to correct their errors by teachers. Remedial measures should be implemented for the betterment of them (Bruyckere & Hulshof, 2015).

Consideration of individual differences is an important feature in Buddhist education too. Learning situations were planned by the Buddha according to the intellectual capabilities of the learner. In *Anguttara Nikaya*, there are many explanations about individual differences, and, according to *Tika Nipata*, there are three types of students.

- Some students listen to the teacher, from the beginning to the end, but do not keep the teacher's words in mind. Such learners are called *Avakujjapanna (the empty head)*.
- The second types of students listen to everything the teacher says, in the beginning, middle and end but they retain nothing once they leave the classroom. This type of students is referred to as *Uccangapanna*.
- The third type of student listens to everything carefully and grasps it in the same manner. This type of student is known as *Putupanna (ANIII: 10)*

*Catukka Nipata* in *Anguttara Nikaya* presents four more types of students, namely;

- *Ugghatithannu* (enough to understand the lesson when they are given a short guidance)
- *Vipacitannu* (students are able to understand the lesson when it is explained to a certain extent)
- *Neyya* (these students understand the lesson when the lesson is analyzed in detail in addition to learning much from peers to apply what he/she has learned from the teacher)
- *Padaparama*. These students are not in a position to grasp the lesson though it has been explained descriptively (ANIV: 3)

In another division in *Anguttara Nikaya*

- Some students can understand the lesson but they cannot apply what they have learned in practical or real life situations (*yuttapatibhano na muttapatibhanao*).
- Some students can make use of their learning experiences for problem solving but they are unable to grasp the lesson meaningfully (*muttapatibhano na yuttapatibhano*).
- There are some students who can construct knowledge as well as apply learning experiences in real world problem solving (*yuttapatibhanoca muttapatibhanoca*).
- Students who can neither understand nor use in practice are introduced as *nevayuttapatibhanoca nevamuttapatibhanoca* (ANIV: 2).

Another two divisions can be seen in *Catukkha* (ANIV: 5) and *Tikha Nipata* (ANIII: 10) in *Anguttara Nikaya*.

*Mahakkhandhaka in Mahavagga Pali* presents about eight types of students who had come to the Buddha:

- *Apparajakkha* (beings whose mental eyes were darkened by scarcely any dust)
- *Maharajakkha* (beings whose eyes were covered by much dust)
- *Tikkhindriya* (beings sharp of sense)
- *Mudindriya* (blunt of sense)
- *Swakara* (of good disposition)
- *Duvakara* (of bad disposition)
- *Suvinnapaya* (easy to instruct)
- *Duvinnapaya* (difficult to instruct).

*Visuddhi Magga*, which is considered as a Buddhist book written in a later period, distinguishes individuals according to their intellectual qualities with:

- *Raga* (lust)
- *Dosa* (hatred)
- *Moha* (ignorance)
- *Saddha* (faith)
- *Buddhi* (intellect)
- *Vitakkha* (reflective thinking) (Vis: 157).

## Discussion

Both western approach and Buddhist approach believe that intellectual capacity of the gifted students is very high when compared with other students: average and slow. Gifted students grasp the intended learning outcome very easy and fast. They are able to relate the learning experience with past, present and future easily. It implies the learner relates the past experience with the present and present experience with the future (Maker & Nelson, 1996). It is a good turning point of western psychology since it places the student in a proper place. *Ugghatithannu* is the word implies the

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meaning “Gifted” in Buddhist education. According to the Buddha, these types of students are able to understand the lesson when they are given a short guidance. When the Buddha met such gifted students they were given freedom to begin and continue any task until they reached the expected outcome (*Armbha dhatu, Nikkhama dhatu, Thama dhatu, Thiti dhatu and Parakkhama dhatu*) (ANII: 23). In meditation, gifted students were directed to practice *Vipassana* meditation since they were in a position to see the nature of impermanency (*Anicca*), the source of suffering (*Dukkha*) and the non-self (*Anatta*) in a short guidance. These two approaches accept that the problem solving ability of the gifted child is very sound. The case of *Angulimala* is a fine example to prove this statement. When *Angulimala*, who followed the Buddha to collect a finger, asked Buddha to stop, the Buddha replied ‘I have already stopped, you stop’. *Angulimala*, who heard this answer started to think ‘while he was going, he asked me to stop’- what does it mean? Finally, he understood that it was because the Buddha had stopped the rebirth, he said ‘I have stopped’. Still, I am to end rebirth (*samsara*). Therefore, he asks me to stop. The statement made by the Buddha motivated *Angulimala* to complete his understanding to its maximum. The life of ascetic *Gotama* too is a great example to prove the nature of gifted students in Buddhist education. According to *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, the ascetic *Gotama* is a gifted learner (MNI: 160). And also he is a model to present students.

The *pali* word “*Vipacitannu*” gives the similar meaning to the “average learner” in western approach. These students are able to understand the lesson when it is explained to a certain extent. In average learning learner expect instructions from the teacher. They want to understand their learning styles by the teacher. The Buddha who understood this mentality of the average learner was motivated to practice meditation “*Samatha*” (concentration) to make the mind concentrate. The knowledge gained by practicing *Samatha* meditation construct background knowledge needed for preparing *Vipassana* meditation which directs learner to achieve *Nibbana* by eradicating all defilements. If someone argues that most of the students who came to Buddha were average learners the author does not find any fault regarding that argument. According to western approach, the average learner believe that the teacher should ask complex questions in learning situations and students should be able to answer them. Most of the *Sutta* illustrate that the Buddha raised questions in learning teaching process and students answered them enthusiastically (SN: 36, DNI: 134). Works given by the teacher to average learner should be challenging and meaningful. Cases of *Alavaka* and *Kasibhardvaja* prove that learning opportunities created by the Buddha were challenging and meaningful (SN:28).

Slow learner in western education is similar to *Neyya puggala* in Buddhist education. This *Neyya puggala* understands the lesson when the lesson is analyzed in details. In addition to the explanation given by the teachers these students get the assistance of the peers to understand what he/she has learned from the teacher. When the learner is at lower level the Buddha divided the learning situation in to small parts as the learner can grasp the intended learning outcome easily. In the *Suttas*, it is referred to as “*Acikkhana* (giving a short explanation or naming what he wants to say) *Desana* (explaining the lesson descriptively) *Pannapana* (allowing the student to understand the lesson as it is) *Patthapana* (explaining relevant facts in a deep manner) *Vivarana* (presenting the lesson by showing reasons) *Vibhajana* (analyzing the lesson) *Uttanikamman*

(conducting the lesson as appropriate to the learner's cognitive level, giving total explanation)" (Ana: 546). Sometimes, learner was taken from simple to complex. Students were taught *Dana katha* (talk on generosity), *Seela katha* (Talk on good behavior), *Sagga Katha* (talk on heaven world), *Kamanan Adeenvanam* (the disadvantages, inferiority), and *Okaran Sankilasam* (defilement of sense of desires and advantages of renouncing them) before teaching the complex learning experiences to them. This gradual knowledge construction helps the disciple to understand that all fabrications are inconstant, stressful and not-self (Dhp: 277-279). As the Buddha explained this gradual knowledge construction is the path for purity. The disciple who obtained this purity by eradicating craving, ungrasping and astute in expression is called last body, greatly discerning and great man as explains in *Kuddhaka Nikaya* (Dhp: 352). At the end, such great person who attains *Nibbana* eradicates his passion, aversion, conceit and contempt like a mustard seed which falls away from the tip of an awl who attains *Nibbana* (Dhp: 407).

*Padaparama* in *Pali*, is similar to students below the IQ level of slow learners discussed in western approach. These students are not in a position to grasp the lesson though the lesson has been explained descriptively (ANIV). They are unable to construct knowledge as well as apply learning experiences in real world problem solving (*yuttapatibhanoca muttapatibhanoca*). If the learners are not in a position to comprehend both *Kusala* and *Akusala* they are unable to reach *Nibbana* (DNI: 126). To Buddhism, someone who does not engage in building cognitive skills which needs to find the way for *Nibbana*, grows like an ox. Though he became strong with the bodily growth, his discernment does not develop parallel to that bodily development (Dhp: 152). However, when the Buddhist student classifications are examined carefully it is obvious that the Buddha has identified student differences subtler when compared with student classifications in western approach.

## **Conclusion**

The classroom consists of learners with different learning styles. The western approach discusses about the types of students as gifted, average and slow. The Buddhist classifications regarding the learner are much descriptive and subtler when compared with western approach. Whatever the learning approach students show different styles in learning. Expectations of these gifted, average and slow learners are also totally difference. Their leaning needs are not exactly the same. These traditions can develop insights of each other meaningfully for the betterment of the academic development with mutual understanding. Therefore, there should be more researches on these two traditions than what we do today.

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