

Buddhist-Based Learning as a Tool for Building a Peaceful Society*

Kridtika Chanakun

Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand

E-mail: sixvegas@gmail.com

Received 9 November 2024; Revised 5 December 2024; Accepted 7 December 2024

Abstract

This article explores Buddhist-based learning as a holistic approach to peacebuilding at both individual and societal levels. By integrating mindfulness, ethical conduct, and compassion into educational settings, it fosters inner peace, social harmony, and moral responsibility. Case studies from Thailand and international contexts highlight successful applications, while the discussion addresses challenges related to pluralism, pedagogy, and policy. Recommendations emphasize inclusive curriculum development, teacher training, and alignment with global peace education frameworks.

Keywords: Buddhism, Peace education, Mindfulness, Ethics, Social harmony

Introduction

In the 21st century, societies around the world continue to grapple with escalating conflicts, polarization, and moral crises. These global challenges have sparked renewed interest in the role of education in fostering peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Peace education—defined as the process of promoting knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to bring about behavioral changes that enable individuals to prevent conflict and violence—has emerged as a key pedagogical response (UNESCO, 1998). It aims not only to cultivate external social harmony but also to nurture inner peace and self-regulation among learners.

Religious and ethical teachings have historically served as moral compasses for human societies. In particular, Buddhism offers a rich philosophical and educational foundation for peacebuilding, emphasizing non-violence (*ahimsā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), mindfulness (*sati*), and ethical living (*sīla*) as essential to individual and collective well-being (Harvey, 2000). The integration of such teachings into educational curricula can play a transformative role in conflict resolution and community building by encouraging introspection, emotional regulation, and prosocial behavior (Weber, 2011).

Citation



* Kridtika Chanakun. (2024). Buddhist-Based Learning as a Tool for Building a Peaceful Society. *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Innovation*, 2(1), 57-67.;

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14456/ajhsi.2025.5>

Website: <https://so14.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/AJHSI>

This article explores the role of Buddhist-based learning as a mechanism for building a peaceful society, with an emphasis on both individual transformation and social cohesion. It examines how Buddhist principles—such as the Noble Eightfold Path and the cultivation of *mettā* (loving-kindness)—can be operationalized in educational settings to develop peaceful mindsets and harmonious communities. The article also analyzes pedagogical models that incorporate Buddhist practices, including mindfulness training and contemplative education, and evaluates their effectiveness in fostering empathy, resilience, and ethical consciousness.

The research is guided by the following key questions:

1. How do Buddhist principles contribute to peace education at the individual and societal levels?
2. What models of Buddhist-based learning have been implemented, and with what outcomes?
3. What are the challenges and policy considerations in applying Buddhist-based learning in diverse educational contexts?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to demonstrate that Buddhist-based learning is not only compatible with modern educational goals but also essential for cultivating the internal and external conditions necessary for sustainable peace.

Theoretical Framework

Buddhism offers a deeply rooted and holistic conception of peace that extends beyond the mere absence of conflict. In the Buddhist worldview, peace begins with the transformation of the mind. The attainment of inner peace (*ajjhata santi*)—characterized by mindfulness, detachment from craving, and emotional balance—is seen as the foundation for social harmony (*bahiddhā santi*) and non-violent living (*ahimsā*) (Galtung, 1996; Thich Nhat Hanh, 1991). In contrast to Western models that often focus on institutional frameworks for peace, Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of individual ethical behavior and mental discipline as prerequisites for sustainable societal peace.

Central to the Buddhist path are the threefold trainings: *Paññā* (wisdom), *Sīla* (moral conduct), and *Samādhi* (concentration or mental discipline). These are not only spiritual pursuits but also educational ideals. *Paññā* involves critical thinking and insight into the nature of reality, helping learners to understand the causes of suffering and the interdependent nature of life. *Sīla* refers to ethical behavior, including values such as non-violence, honesty, and respect for others—qualities essential for peaceful coexistence. *Samādhi* cultivates mental concentration and mindfulness, enabling individuals to act with clarity, compassion, and self-control (Rahula, 1974).

The Four Noble Truths provide the philosophical foundation of Buddhism, outlining the existence of suffering (*dukkha*), its origin in craving (*taṇhā*), the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*), and the path leading to cessation (*maggā*). The Noble Eightfold Path operationalizes these insights into practical conduct, divided into three categories: wisdom (*right view, right intention*), ethics (*right speech, right action, right livelihood*), and mental discipline (*right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration*). These

elements provide an integrated pedagogical framework that not only fosters intellectual development but also moral and emotional maturity (Harvey, 2000).

The concept of Engaged Buddhism, popularized by Thich Nhat Hanh, extends this framework to social transformation. It emphasizes applying Buddhist principles to address contemporary issues such as violence, injustice, environmental degradation, and social inequality. Engaged Buddhists advocate for compassionate action in society, community service, and non-violent activism, reflecting the belief that peace must be lived and enacted, not merely theorized (King, 2009). Education grounded in this perspective encourages learners to see themselves as agents of change who contribute to peace not only through contemplation but through compassionate engagement with the world.

By synthesizing these teachings, Buddhist-based learning serves as both a spiritual practice and a practical strategy for nurturing the values and competencies essential to peaceful living. This theoretical framework lays the foundation for examining educational applications that promote peace at both the individual and collective levels.

Buddhist-Based Learning: Definitions and Pedagogical Approaches

Buddhist-based learning refers to an educational paradigm that incorporates the principles, values, and practices of Buddhism—such as mindfulness, ethical discipline, compassion, and insight—into learning processes and environments. It is not limited to religious instruction but extends to holistic human development, aiming to cultivate both cognitive understanding and moral-ethical consciousness (Somboon, 2012). The essence of Buddhist-based learning lies in its transformative objective: the alleviation of suffering and the realization of wisdom through direct experience, ethical behavior, and mental training.

Across Buddhist societies, various educational models have emerged to integrate these teachings. The monastic education system represents the oldest and most formalized model. In countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, monastic schools provide instruction not only in Pali and Buddhist scriptures but also in general subjects, offering disadvantaged youth access to basic education grounded in moral discipline (*sīla*) and mindfulness (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2010). These institutions emphasize a disciplined lifestyle, community service, and meditative practice as core components of learning.

Lay-based education models have also gained prominence, especially in modern contexts. These include Sunday Dhamma schools, community-based learning centers, and adult education programs that offer Buddhist ethical training, meditation workshops, and life-skills education rooted in compassion and non-attachment. These lay institutions serve as bridges between spiritual traditions and secular life, promoting ethical citizenship and social responsibility (Suksamran, 2003).

In recent decades, school-based programs have emerged that incorporate Buddhist principles into mainstream education. For instance, in Thailand, the “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy” (SEP), inspired by Buddhist moderation and self-reliance, has been adopted in public school curricula to promote sustainable living and

moral reasoning (UNESCO, 2014). Other examples include the integration of Buddhist moral teachings into values education and character development modules within both public and private schools.

A defining feature of Buddhist-based learning is its emphasis on mindfulness and meditation (*sati* and *samādhi*) in educational settings. These practices are used to train attention, develop emotional awareness, and cultivate calm and clarity—qualities conducive to peaceful learning environments and social empathy (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Studies show that mindfulness-based interventions in schools can enhance students' emotional regulation, reduce aggression, and improve focus and interpersonal relationships (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014).

Finally, experiential and contemplative pedagogy forms the backbone of Buddhist-based learning. Unlike didactic instruction focused solely on rote knowledge, Buddhist education promotes direct experience, reflection, and insight through lived practice. Learning is viewed as an inward journey as much as an intellectual endeavor. Methods such as journaling, silent sitting, storytelling, group reflection, and compassionate action projects are commonly used to engage both head and heart in the learning process (Zajonc, 2013). This approach encourages learners to internalize values, question assumptions, and apply teachings in daily life.

In sum, Buddhist-based learning encompasses a broad array of models and methods that place human development, ethical mindfulness, and social harmony at the core of educational practice. These approaches provide meaningful pathways for peace education by fostering self-awareness, compassion, and moral clarity in learners of all ages.

Buddhist Learning and Peacebuilding at the Individual Level

At the heart of Buddhist education is the belief that peace in society begins with peace in the individual. Buddhist learning emphasizes inner transformation through mental discipline, ethical conduct, and contemplative practice. This process fosters not only personal well-being but also contributes to reducing violence, prejudice, and social tension at the communal level.

One of the most widely recognized tools in Buddhist education for cultivating inner peace is the practice of mindfulness (*sati*) and meditation (*bhāvanā*). These practices aim to develop awareness of the present moment, observe thoughts and emotions non-reactively, and train the mind to be calm and focused. Daily mindfulness helps individuals recognize and interrupt negative thought patterns before they manifest in harmful behavior (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Through sustained practice, learners develop the capacity for patience, forgiveness, and emotional balance, which are essential for peaceful interaction with others.

Additionally, Buddhist learning fosters self-awareness and ethical discipline (*sīla*) as mechanisms for reducing ego-driven behavior and aggression. The Five Precepts, commonly taught in Buddhist education, encourage abstention from violence, dishonesty, and harmful speech—creating moral boundaries that guide personal conduct (Rahula, 1974). Self-awareness nurtured through meditation leads to insight into the causes of suffering, especially the role of ego, attachment, and aversion. As

individuals begin to recognize the impermanent and interdependent nature of all phenomena (*anicca* and *paṭiccasamuppāda*), they develop humility and lessen the grip of pride, anger, and selfishness (Harvey, 2000).

Moreover, Buddhist practices promote psychological and emotional well-being, which is increasingly validated by contemporary research. The cultivation of compassion (*karuṇā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*) through loving-kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*) has been shown to reduce anxiety, improve interpersonal relationships, and increase life satisfaction (Fredrickson et al., 2008). These emotional qualities not only help individuals respond to personal challenges with greater resilience but also foster empathy, tolerance, and non-retaliatory responses in social settings.

By nurturing peaceful individuals—mindful, morally grounded, and emotionally stable—Buddhist learning contributes directly to peacebuilding. The internalization of values like non-violence, compassion, and self-restraint ensures that peace is not merely imposed externally but arises authentically from within. This internal peace becomes the seed for broader societal harmony and nonviolent cultures.

Buddhist Education for Social Harmony

While inner transformation is foundational, the true societal value of Buddhist education lies in its capacity to extend those internal virtues outward—into families, communities, and broader social systems. Buddhist-based learning fosters values and behaviors that underpin social harmony, such as tolerance, compassion, empathy, and non-discrimination, which are essential in increasingly pluralistic and conflict-prone societies.

First, Buddhist education actively promotes tolerance (*khanti*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and non-discrimination, by cultivating the understanding that all beings are interconnected and possess the potential for enlightenment (*Buddha-nature*). Teachings such as *mettā* (loving-kindness) and the Four Brahmavihāras (divine abodes: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) instill in learners a sense of universal goodwill that transcends caste, ethnicity, religion, and social class (Harvey, 2000). These values are not taught merely as abstract ideals, but as lived principles to be practiced through speech, action, and social engagement.

In addition, Buddhist teachings provide a philosophical foundation for restorative justice and reconciliation, focusing not on punishment but on healing, accountability, and transformation. The principle of *kamma* (karma) encourages individuals to take responsibility for their actions, while the practice of confession and forgiveness in monastic and lay contexts demonstrates a non-punitive, redemptive approach to wrongdoing (Loy, 2008). Buddhist education, therefore, prepares individuals to resolve interpersonal and community conflicts through dialogue, mutual understanding, and ethical reflection rather than retribution. These principles align closely with contemporary restorative justice models now being adopted in schools and juvenile systems worldwide (Braithwaite, 2002).

Moreover, Buddhist-based learning emphasizes the development of empathy and altruism in social relations. Through mindfulness and meditative reflection, learners become more attuned to the suffering of others and more inclined to act with generosity

(*dāna*) and kindness. Programs that integrate *mettā bhāvanā* (loving-kindness meditation) have been shown to enhance pro-social behavior and reduce prejudice and aggression (Hofmann et al., 2011). In educational settings, this fosters a culture of care, mutual respect, and cooperation—key elements of peaceful and inclusive communities.

Thus, Buddhist education supports not only the personal cultivation of ethical values but also the shaping of collective norms and systems that affirm justice, compassion, and coexistence. It transforms schools and learning environments into spaces of peacebuilding, where social harmony is not simply taught but practiced and embodied.

Case Studies and Practical Applications

The principles of Buddhist-based learning are not merely theoretical; they are actively applied in educational and community settings across the world to promote peace, social inclusion, and moral development. A review of diverse case studies—from Thailand to Vietnam to the United States—demonstrates how Buddhist pedagogy has been practically implemented and how it contributes to building cultures of peace.

In Thailand, Buddhist schools and temples have long played a central role in community education, particularly in rural areas. Institutions such as Wat Pah Nanachat, a forest monastery in Ubon Ratchathani, and schools affiliated with the Dhammajarinee Witthaya School in Ratchaburi integrate Buddhist teachings into daily routines, emphasizing mindfulness, moral behavior, and social responsibility (Numrich, 2008). At these schools, meditation is part of the curriculum, and students are encouraged to practice the Five Precepts, contribute to community service, and resolve conflicts through dialogue and empathy. These programs help reduce behavioral issues, strengthen ethical decision-making, and foster harmonious peer relationships.

Beyond Thailand, there are successful interfaith Buddhist-led peace education programs in Southeast Asia. For example, in Myanmar and Sri Lanka—countries with histories of ethno-religious conflict—Buddhist monks and educators have led efforts to bring Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim students together through joint peace education initiatives. Organizations such as The Metta Development Foundation and Sarvodaya use Buddhist principles of compassion and reconciliation to facilitate interfaith dialogues, conflict resolution workshops, and youth leadership training (Harris, 2004). These initiatives highlight the adaptability of Buddhist-based learning in promoting peace across religious divides.

Globally, internationally renowned centers such as Plum Village in France and Deer Park Monastery in California, founded by Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, serve as leading examples of global Buddhist peace education. These centers offer retreats, youth camps, and mindfulness training to both monastics and laypersons from diverse backgrounds. Educational programs emphasize mindful breathing, deep listening, ethical speech, and loving-kindness meditation—all aimed at cultivating peace within individuals and in their communities (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007). Participants frequently report increased emotional resilience, reduced stress, and greater empathy after participating in these programs.

Outcomes and assessment data from such programs indicate promising results. For instance, a study evaluating mindfulness-based education at Plum Village found that participants demonstrated improved self-regulation and reduced interpersonal conflict (Lamb, 2014). In Thailand, schools that integrate Buddhist ethics into the curriculum show statistically significant improvements in student behavior, emotional regulation, and civic responsibility (Sittiprapa, 2015). These findings reinforce the effectiveness of Buddhist-based learning not only in academic environments but also in peacebuilding and emotional development.

In sum, these case studies demonstrate that Buddhist-based learning—whether in monastic schools, secular institutions, or international retreat centers—can be adapted across contexts to cultivate peaceful individuals and inclusive communities. These practical applications underscore the potential of Buddhist education to serve as a viable and effective approach to peace education in both local and global settings.

Challenges and Limitations

While Buddhist-based learning presents significant potential for promoting inner peace and social harmony, its integration into contemporary educational systems—especially in pluralistic or secular environments—is accompanied by a set of complex challenges and limitations that must be critically addressed.

A key challenge lies in integrating religious content in secular or multi-religious contexts. In many countries, particularly those with legal frameworks emphasizing religious neutrality in public education, incorporating Buddhist teachings into curricula may raise concerns about bias, proselytization, or the infringement of religious freedom (Jackson, 2004). Even in predominantly Buddhist societies such as Thailand, the growing presence of other faiths and increasing secularization call for inclusive pedagogical strategies that respect diverse worldviews while retaining the ethical and contemplative strengths of Buddhist education.

There is also the risk of dogmatism or exclusion of non-Buddhist perspectives if Buddhist teachings are presented rigidly or without critical reflection. Educational programs rooted in religious worldviews must guard against transforming values-based education into indoctrination. Without intercultural and interfaith dialogue, Buddhist-based learning may inadvertently reinforce majority dominance or overlook the needs and identities of minority groups (Gearon, 2013). To be effective in peacebuilding, Buddhist education must model openness, humility, and cross-cultural sensitivity.

Another limitation is the lack of adequate policy support and teacher training for the systematic integration of Buddhist-based approaches. In many educational systems, teachers are under-equipped to teach contemplative practices, emotional regulation, or ethical reflection in ways that align with both Buddhist principles and contemporary pedagogical standards. Most teacher training programs emphasize standardized testing and cognitive outcomes, often at the expense of moral and emotional development (UNESCO, 2014). Without institutional support, Buddhist-based learning remains marginal or dependent on individual educators' initiatives.

Lastly, the tension between traditional monastic education and modern pedagogies presents an ongoing dilemma. Monastic education often emphasizes rote

memorization of scriptures, strict discipline, and hierarchical relationships between teacher and student. While these methods have preserved Buddhist teachings for centuries, they may be less effective in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and learner-centered approaches valued in contemporary education (Numrich, 2008). Efforts to modernize Buddhist education must therefore balance fidelity to tradition with pedagogical innovation—ensuring that students not only absorb doctrine but also internalize values and apply them meaningfully in modern life.

In summary, while Buddhist-based learning holds considerable promise, its success depends on how well educators and institutions navigate the challenges of pluralism, inclusivity, pedagogical relevance, and systemic support. Recognizing these limitations is essential to developing effective, context-sensitive models of peace education grounded in Buddhist wisdom.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Given the increasing demand for values-based education that promotes social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, Buddhist-based learning offers a culturally rooted yet globally relevant model for policy development in the education sector. For such approaches to be effectively institutionalized, a range of strategic, curricular, and systemic reforms must be undertaken.

One key strategy is the integration of Buddhist values into civic and moral education frameworks. Rather than treating Buddhism as a religious subject alone, policymakers should support the infusion of its universal values—such as compassion (*karuṇā*), mindfulness (*sati*), generosity (*dāna*), and ethical conduct (*sīla*)—into general moral and citizenship education. For example, the Thai education system’s “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy,” inspired by Buddhist teachings, has been implemented to promote responsible decision-making, moderation, and resilience among students (UNESCO, 2014). These principles are particularly compatible with democratic education, encouraging ethical reasoning and active, empathetic citizenship.

Secondly, interfaith and intercultural collaboration should be prioritized in peace education policy. In multicultural societies, exclusively Buddhist models may risk exclusion or backlash. Therefore, educational programs should draw from shared moral values across religious traditions, encouraging students to explore similarities and differences through respectful dialogue. Interfaith peacebuilding projects—such as joint workshops or community service initiatives—can help foster empathy and reduce prejudice among students of different backgrounds (Jackson, 2004). Buddhist institutions can take leadership roles in these collaborations by demonstrating humility, openness, and commitment to universal ethical principles.

In terms of implementation, concrete recommendations for curriculum development, teacher preparation, and community involvement are essential. Curriculum guidelines should include age-appropriate modules on mindfulness, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making grounded in Buddhist frameworks. Teacher education programs must provide training in contemplative pedagogy, classroom mindfulness practices, and intercultural competence to ensure that educators can deliver these modules with sensitivity and skill

(Zajonc, 2013). Furthermore, community involvement—including engagement with temples, monastic teachers, and lay Buddhist scholars—can strengthen the cultural legitimacy and grassroots support for such initiatives. Schools that function as centers of community peacebuilding can extend learning beyond the classroom into homes and neighborhoods.

Finally, Buddhist-based learning should be aligned with UNESCO's peace education framework, which promotes learning to live together, respect for human rights, cultural diversity, and global citizenship (UNESCO, 1998). Buddhist teachings resonate strongly with these goals, offering experiential tools for self-regulation, empathy, and nonviolent communication. By aligning local religious wisdom with global educational standards, Buddhist-based learning can contribute meaningfully to international peacebuilding efforts while retaining cultural specificity.

In conclusion, the successful integration of Buddhist-based learning into national education systems requires inclusive and adaptive policy strategies. With thoughtful design and collaboration, it is possible to harness the ethical depth of Buddhist teachings to build compassionate citizens and peaceful societies.

Conclusion

Buddhist-based learning serves as a powerful tool for building a peaceful society by cultivating inner transformation, ethical consciousness, and compassionate engagement. Rooted in the principles of mindfulness, moral discipline, and wisdom, this educational approach nurtures peace from within and extends it outward into communities. At the individual level, Buddhist practices such as meditation and loving-kindness help foster emotional stability, reduce aggression, and enhance empathy. These internal shifts contribute to social harmony by encouraging tolerance, non-discrimination, and altruism in interpersonal relationships. Buddhist teachings also align closely with restorative justice principles, promoting healing, accountability, and reconciliation over punitive responses to conflict. Across various contexts, including Thai monastic schools, interfaith programs in Southeast Asia, and global centers like Plum Village, Buddhist-based education has been successfully implemented to foster ethical development and nonviolent behavior. However, the approach faces challenges, particularly in secular or pluralistic societies where integrating religious content must be done with sensitivity and inclusivity. Risks of dogmatism, lack of teacher training, and tensions between traditional and modern pedagogies further complicate implementation. To address these issues, policy strategies must promote the integration of universal Buddhist values into civic and moral education, encourage interfaith collaboration, invest in teacher preparation, and align efforts with global peace education frameworks. Through thoughtful application, Buddhist-based learning offers a culturally grounded and universally relevant path toward creating compassionate individuals and harmonious societies.

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