



Decolonizing the Canon of Indigenous Knowledge through Buddhist Education

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ABSTRACT

Decolonizing the canon of indigenous knowledge has become an important focus in education today, particularly in efforts to preserve, recognise, and revitalise indigenous knowledge systems. This paper explores the role of Buddhist education in decolonizing the canon of indigenous knowledge. The study is guided by three objectives: first, to explore how Buddhist education can decolonise the canon of indigenous knowledge; second, to explore the indigenous teaching methods of Buddhist education in transmitting the knowledge; and third, to study how Buddhist education promote cultural identity and social equality within the canon of indigenous knowledge. The research is solely based on secondary sources. A qualitative approach is used, applying documentary analysis, review of books, scholarly articles, historical texts, and interpretations of the Buddhist canon. This method allows careful study of existing knowledge to understand how Buddhist education can provide alternative ways of learning, thinking, and organising knowledge. The study is significant because it highlights the potential of Buddhist education to restore marginalised indigenous knowledge, strengthen cultural identity and promote social equality. By integrating culture, philosophy and education, this research provides insights that can guide contemporary educational reforms and decolonial practices. It emphasises the value of culturally grounded learning frameworks in preserving indigenous



epistemologies while supporting inclusive and ethical approaches to education.

INTRODUCTION:

Education is not only about learning facts or passing examinations; it is also about how people understand their world, their community, and their cultural values. In many countries that were once ruled by colonial powers, education has been shaped by western system of knowledge. This process often ignored or replaced the wisdom and traditions of local people. Many indigenous ways of learning and teachings were forgotten or treated as less important. In recent years, teachers and scholars have recognized that this situation is unfair. They have begun to call for the decolonization of education so that indigenous knowledge can once again be respected and included (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2012).

Decolonization of education means freeing learning system from the dominance of outside ideas and making them more connected to local knowledge, values, and experiences. It means that schools and colleges should also teach the culture, language, and wisdom that belong to the people of that land (Battiste, 2013). In this sense, Buddhist education provides an important example of how knowledge can be both spiritual and local. Buddhist education is deeply rooted in Asian cultures and reflects the values of compassion, mindfulness, moral disciplines, and the search of wisdom (Gamage, 2019; Schouten, 2022). It encourages learning that helps not only the mind but also cultivates moral, discipline, and wisdom, guiding them toward harmonious living with others and with the environment.

The term canon refers to the accepted body of knowledge or the standard ideas often taught in schools and universities. Many of these ideas come from western traditions (Connell, 2019) Indigenous knowledge systems on the other hand, are built from the experiences, environments, and cultural practice of local people (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). Buddhist education offers a bridge between these two worlds by giving importance to community life, ethical values, and personal experience. One of the unique features of Buddhist education is the use of storytelling as a teaching method. The *Jātaka* tales, which describe the previous lives of the Buddha, play a central role in this process. These stories teach moral lessons and also reflect local wisdom. Many *Jātaka* tales highlight compassion, honesty, respect for nature, and the importance of community. These are not only religious values but also parts of indigenous culture that teach people how to live in harmony with others and with the environment (Appleton, 2010). By including such stories in education, learners can connect lessons with real life and with their own cultural identity.



When examining Buddhist education, it is important to recognize that Buddhism is not the same everywhere. There are different traditions such as Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Tibetan), each with own way of teaching and interpreting the Buddha's message. This study focuses mainly on the Theravada tradition, which is based on the *Pāli* canon and is practiced widely in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar. Focussing on Theravada helps avoid mixing ideas from other Buddhist traditions that have different methods and philosophies. Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhist ideas are mentioned only when needed, and their differences are clearly explained so the discussion remains accurate.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY: The study is significant because it deepens the understanding of how Buddhist education serves as a decolonizing force within the canon of indigenous knowledge. By exploring Buddhist educational philosophies and practices, it challenges the dominance of western epistemologies that have long defined what counts as valid knowledge. This contribution is crucial in restoring respect toward local wisdom traditions that were historically marginalized by colonial education systems.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To explore how Buddhist education can decolonize the canon of indigenous knowledge.
2. To explore the indigenous teaching methods of Buddhist education in transmitting knowledge.
3. To study how Buddhist education promote cultural identity and social equality within the canon of indigenous knowledge.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: The review of literature focuses on studies connected to Buddhist education, indigenous knowledge, and educational decolonization. It aims to understand how earlier scholars have looked at these areas and what ideas or arguments are most relevant to the study. The discussion also highlights the research gaps that, makes this investigation important. Previous research on educational decolonization emphasized the need to move away from systems built on colonial knowledge. Smith (2012) and Battiste (2013) Explained that colonial education often reduced the value of indigenous wisdom by giving higher importance to western science and methods. They supported this claim by reviewing colonial education policies and curricula that placed western ideals at the center. Their work created a foundation for decolonization education today. However they did not pay much attention to spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism, that can also offer indigenous ways of knowing. This missing focus provides a strong reason for further research.



Studies on Buddhist education provide useful insights for understanding moral and cultural learning. Gamage (2019) and Seneviratne (2019) described Buddhist education as a system that combines discipline, mindfulness, and moral values with community life. Through field studies in South Asia, They showed that Buddhist learning supports equality, peace, and social growth. Their studies helped explain how traditional learning can strengthen cultural identity, though they did not directly connect it to the idea of decolonizing knowledge. This gives another opening for deeper investigation.

Appleton (2010) and Schouten (2022) explored how *Jātaka* stories in Buddhist education serve as moral lessons that shape values such as compassion and honesty. Their studies show that story telling is not just a spiritual practice but also a teaching method that helps preserve local wisdom and ethical learning. However, both authors focused mainly on moral and cultural aspects, without connecting these stories to the larger goal of decolonizing education. This gap opens an opportunity to study how Buddhist narratives can also act as tools for reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems. The works of Semali and Kincheloe (1999) on indigenous education revealed that traditional communities use oral stories, shared experiences, and participation to pass on knowledge. Their arguments are supported through case studies from Africa and North America. These traditional ways of teaching are similar to how Buddhist education uses storytelling and teacher-student relationships to share values. This similarity shows a strong link between Buddhist and indigenous teaching methods.

Connel (2019) observed that modern academic knowledge often reflects western traditions and systems. Her analysis of university curricula showed that many academic subjects still depend on western frameworks. This argument supports the need to integrate Buddhist and indigenous perspectives into education, helping balance global and local knowledge systems. Although these studies give many insights, most of them either focus on moral education or cultural identity alone. Very few combine Buddhist education and decolonization in the same framework. The connection between Buddhist learning and social equality also needs more attention. This study seeks to fill those gaps by exploring how Buddhist education can help decolonize the canon of knowledge while supporting indigenous culture and fairness in education.

Overall, most studies agree that education should give value to local culture and wisdom. Some writers talk about changing the whole education system, while others focus on moral growth and inner learning. Both views shoes that decolonizing education means more than replacing western ideas. IT also means bringing back balance between knowledge and culture. Buddhist education, with its focus on moral values, mindfulness, and community life, can guide this process in a peaceful and practical way.



RESEARCH METHOD: This study adopts a secondary research method based on the analysis of existing academic and textual sources. The data consists of books, journal, articles, and Buddhist scriptures related to education, indigenous, knowledge, and decolonization. The study primarily draws on materials from the *Pāḷi* canon and *Jātaka*_stories, as they represent the educational and ethical foundations of Theravada Buddhism. Each source was examined to understand the evidence and reasoning used by the authors to support their conclusions. Comparing different viewpoints helped establish links between education and the broader aim of decolonizing the canon of indigenous knowledge.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Objective 1. To explore how Buddhist education can decolonize the canon of indigenous knowledge.

The findings from the reviewed literature reveal that Buddhist education offers meaningful ways to decolonize the canon of knowledge by challenging the dominance of western –centered learning systems and revaluing indigenous wisdom. The principles of Buddhist education such as mindfulness, moral training, and community learning-promote a holistic understanding of knowledge that is deeply connected to culture and ethical living. The literature shows that colonial education historically replaced local knowledge with western ideas of rationality and progress, often separating knowledge from moral and spiritual values (Smith, 2012; Battiste, 2013). In contrast, Buddhist education integrates intellectual learning with ethical and spiritual development. This approach encourages learners to understand knowledge as a path of self-awareness and social harmony, not just as information or technical skill. Studies on Buddhist monastic education highlight that learning within monastic communities’ values simplicity, equality, and shared experience (Gamage, 2019). Knowledge is transmitted through personal example, storytelling, and meditation, which makes it participatory and inclusive. This methods contrast sharply with the hierarchical and examination-based models introduced by colonial education. The Buddhist approach therefore restores balance by recognizing local ways of knowing as valid and meaningful. Overall, the findings show that Buddhist education supports decolonization by:

1. Restoring respect for indigenous and local knowledge.
2. Integrating ethics, mindfulness, and community life into learning.
3. Challenging western academic dominance through spiritual and moral reasoning.
4. Promoting equality and self-awareness among learners.

**Objective 2. To explore the indigenous teaching methods of Buddhist education in transmitting knowledge.**

Literature on Buddhist education highlights its teaching methods mirror those of indigenous systems that rely on observation, oral exchange, and community practice. Gamage (2019) found that early Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka functioned as moral and intellectual centres where learners gained wisdom through participation and guided reflection rather than formal instruction. His historical and ethnographic study showed that teaching took place through dialogue, meditation, and lived example. Seneviratne (2019) supports this view, stating that Buddhist education was woven into community festivals, recitations, and storytelling. By analyzing Buddhist rituals and educational patterns, he concluded that the boundary between religious and social learning was fluid, ensuring that education remained part of daily life. Appleton (2010) provides a specific example through her analyses of *Jātaka* narratives, which recount the Buddha's former lives. She found that these stories remain powerful teaching tools because they link moral lessons with familiar cultural settings. Through her comparative study of sermons and classroom use, she concluded that *Jātaka* tales help learners internalise ethical values by connecting abstract ideas to lived experience. This confirms the importance of narrative learning in Buddhist Buddhist Pedagogy. Likewise, Semali and Kincheloe (1999) explain that indigenous education worldwide relies on storytelling, apprenticeship, and dialogue to pass on wisdom. From their cross cultural research, they argued that knowledge transmitted through oral methods develops critical understanding rooted in community values. Together, these findings reveal that Buddhist education maintains indigenous learning methods—such as oral teaching, reflection, and moral storytelling—to ensure that wisdom remains experiential and culturally grounded.

Objective 3. To study how Buddhist education promote cultural identity and social equality within the canon of indigenous knowledge.

Findings from the reviewed works indicate that Buddhist education strengthens both cultural belonging and social equality. Schouten (2022) observed in his ethnographic study that Buddhist schools promote inclusion by teaching compassion, empathy, and collective responsibility. He noted that these principles reduce social barriers linked to class or caste. His conclusion was drawn from how students interacted in shared learning spaces guided by mindfulness rather than competition. Gamage (2019) also found that Buddhist education preserves local identity through language and rituals, particularly by maintaining the use of *Pāli* texts and local traditions in learning. Seneviratne (2019) confirmed this by showing that



Buddhist moral education encourages harmony and cooperation among diverse social groups. Their findings drawn from both textual and field-based studies, show that cultural preservation and social balance are intrinsic to Buddhist learning.

CONCLUSION:

The study concludes that Buddhist education offers a powerful framework for decolonizing the canon of indigenous knowledge by restoring the value of local wisdom, ethical reflection, and cultural identity. Rooted in compassion and mindfulness, Buddhist education challenges western-cantered academic systems that often separate knowledge from moral and spiritual life. Its teaching practices-such as storytelling, meditation, and experiential learning-reflect indigenous methods that emphasize wisdom through experience rather than rote memorization. These approaches preserve community values while promoting moral understanding and self-awareness. Ultimately, Buddhist education redefines learning as a process of liberation from colonial systems, ignorance, and social injustice. It builds a path toward an education model that is culturally grounded, ethically conscious, and truly human-centered

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