

The compassion and wisdom knowledge base

Alison Murdoch, Director of the recently-renamed Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom (formerly Universal Compassion and Wisdom for Peace), introduces a key piece in the 'universal education' jigsaw puzzle:

"In Buddhism we have an incredible arrangement, universal education from beginning at birth up until death, as an old man. I feel these things could be put into a universal language. Give up religion, give up Buddhism. Go beyond Buddhism. Put the essential aspect of the philosophy into scientific language. This is my aim."

(Lama Yeshe, January 1983)

Over twenty-five years later, the late Lama Yeshe's words, and his challenge to create "a new kind of universal education," have lost none of their urgency and power. On a sunny afternoon in July 2006, as Ven. Connie Miller and I sat down to start work together, it felt as if his presence filled the room.

Back in 1981, Lama had told Ven. Connie and Jacie Keeley exactly what subject matter he had in mind for a universal education:

"Subjects: mental factors, prajna paramita subject, abhidharma and madhyamaka, also life, death, bardo, rebirth – everything. All lam-rim, all Buddha's wisdom should be put into (children's) education."

Thank goodness Ven. Connie is here, I thought to myself. Even if some of the Sanskrit terms were beyond me, I was pretty sure that they encompassed all the big "meaning of life" questions that human beings have ever asked. And this is what Lama wanted us to make relevant and accessible

to a wider audience – in the words of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, "for the people for whom the traditional presentation doesn't fit." The task was vast.

The walls of my living room gradually filled up with brightly colored post-it notes as Ven. Connie and I brainstormed and mind-mapped how the Lamas' vision could be turned into reality.

Universal human experience – the reunion of science and spirituality

It seems characteristic of Lama that his vision for a universal education would include one of the most volatile and pressing issues of our time: the gulf between spirituality and science.

"Education should bring everything together. Not be partial, not be divisive. In my opinion it's a mistake to separate religion from life or from science, or to separate science from religion. These things should go together."

Lama's analysis foreshadowed the pioneering work of the Mind and Life Institute (www.mindandlife.org), as well as recent publications such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama's *The Universe in a Single Atom* and Ven. Matthieu Ricard's *Happiness*. The challenge is now how to turn such material into practical educational programs that will bring about positive change in the world.

Lama was adamant that these programs should not draw on Buddhist sources alone.

"Every country, culture, religion, and philosophy already has wisdom. We should bring that wisdom into universal education. We can take out the dogma; we have common understanding."

This was a theme he was to return to again and again:

"We want to use universal wisdom and universal methods, which have no conflict with each other at a universal level ... the universal human experience ... That is our aim."

To achieve his aim, Lama realized that a completely new language and presentation would be necessary:

"The language we use should be scientific and completely westernized. There should not be any Buddhist terminology: no words like samsara, nirvana, or sunyata. There must not be any question: our presentation of reality has to be clean-clear and based on logical evidence and scientific proof."

Putting Lama's advice into practice

Lama's advice for the development of 'universal education' was as simple as A B C:

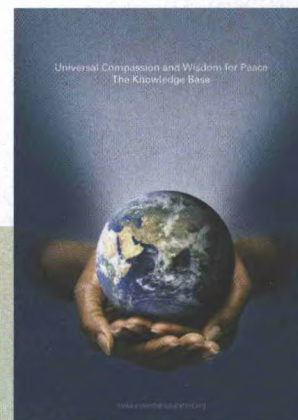
A: investigate how to do it, and produce educational resources

B: train teachers and facilitators

C: set up projects

Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way – at least, not at the international level. After Lama's untimely death in 1984, various students were inspired to get something practical underway. The fruit of their wonderful work is visible in projects such as Alice Project and Tara Redwood School. However, without A and B in place, they had to work everything out for themselves, from scratch. Some of them have told me what a lonely and difficult journey this was. It also made it very difficult to create a cohesive organization. Lama Zopa talked about the lack of manuals and guidelines being "so stuck, so uneasy." He referred to it as being "empty-handed."

In retrospect, it seems that the group karma simply wasn't there to take universal education forward in any other way. Perhaps it has taken the intervening twenty years for us, Lama's students, to gain the necessary clarity and maturity to tackle his great vision as a team, and to grapple with its subtlety and profundity. Did he intend universal education to present a point of view, or simply to encourage personal exploration and debate? Is it possible to create something universal that isn't superficial, and doesn't taste like soup? Can we



The sixteen subject areas

Section I: Exploring Reality

Topic

What is real?	Truth and Reality
What is the nature of the universe?	Cosmology
How are things connected and why do things happen?	Interdependence
Does everything change?	Causality
What are the things that we know?	Impermanence
How do we know things?	Phenomena
What is my potential?	Nature of Mind
	Learning and Development
Who am I?	Ego and Identity
What ascertains reality?	Valid Cognition

Section II: Practicing Compassion

How can we recognize states of mind?	States of Mind
How can we behave in an ethical way?	Ethics and Behavior
How can we develop positive relationships?	Interacting with Others
How can we create a happy and peaceful society?	Society
How can we care for the environment?	Environment
How can we develop peace of mind?	Introspection
How can we sharpen our intellect?	Critical Thinking

Detailed information on the root texts of each topic is available from www.essential-education.org

honestly detach ourselves from the label 'Buddhist' – or is this something that will happen organically, over time? What do we mean by 'Buddhism,' anyway? Even if we don't yet have the answers, at least the questions are coming clear.

At the three launch conferences that I helped to organize in Europe, Australia, and North America during 2005-6, the questions were more practical than philosophical. What are the defining characteristics of this new kind of education? How will it maintain its authenticity and integrity, as it gets implemented in a range of different settings around the world? Is it feasible to provide a training that enables people to develop and run universal education projects without first studying Buddhism? This is what the Knowledge Base is all about.

The Knowledge Base takes off

It's now more than a year since Ven. Connie and I sat and pondered these issues, and the good news is that progress has been made. Supported by three extremely learned and open-minded Tibetan lamas: Geshe Tsulga (Kurukulla Center, Boston, USA), Geshe Thubten Soepa (Aryatara Institute, Munich, Germany), and Geshe Gelek Choedak (Kadampa Center, North Carolina, USA), and by a wonderful steering group from Australia, Europe, and North America, we are now ready to recruit the first set of writers for the Compassion and Wisdom Knowledge Base.

Phase One (June – October 2006) culminated in a six-day working retreat generously hosted by Kurukulla Center, Boston, USA, in which the three geshe advised on the creation of a framework for the sixteen Knowledge Base subject areas, and on Buddhist root texts for each subject area. It was exciting to observe that in line with recent advice from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, most of these texts are by early Indian masters such as Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, Dharmakirti, and Shantideva. When His Holiness agreed to be the Patron of the Foundation in December 2006, he expressed a particular interest in the Knowledge Base and asked us to come back to him with draft material.

Phase Two (March 2007- December 2008) will create a set of sixteen in-depth essays, one on each Knowledge Base subject area. The essays will be commissioned from leading scholars in universities, monasteries, and Buddhist centers around the world. Phase Two outputs will also include an Introduction to the Knowledge Base composed by Geshe



The Knowledge Base steering group, Boston, September 2006, clockwise from the left: Andrew Doust (in red shirt), Henri Nickels, Geshe Thubten Soepa, Geshe Tsulga, Geshe Gelek Choedak, Dick Jeffrey, Karuna Cayton, Andy Wistreich, Ven. Connie Miller and Alison Murdoch



Sharing ideas, Boston, September 2006

Tsulga of Kurukulla Center, Boston, and the development of a bibliography and glossary.

Phase Three (from January 2009) will supplement the initial essays with material from the natural and social sciences, and from other spiritual and wisdom traditions. It will start commissioning translations into languages other than English and – most importantly – begin to create the resource materials and training programs which will underpin all the work of the Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom.

These resource materials and training programs will be made available to anyone who wants to promote compassion and wisdom in the world. The Foundation is now in regular contact with over a thousand people, and its main role will be

HOW ARE THINGS CONNECTED AND WHY DO THINGS HAPPEN?

An overview of one of the sixteen Knowledge Base subject areas

This section of *Exploring Reality* will investigate two essential aspects of how we understand the way that things work: interdependence (How are things connected?) and causality (Why do things happen?).

Is there anything that exists completely independently of everything else? If that were the case, what would that mean? Is there any such thing as independent existence? For example, if something were to exist completely independently, how could we possibly come to know it? To be *known*, must something depend on the mind that knows it?

Most things depend on their own range of particular causes and conditions. Some of these causes are clearly evident, but some are hard to fathom. What about these less evident causes? It may be that they either come from long ago, or are so deep and subtle that our ordinary perception cannot immediately discern them. How can we determine what they are?

Not only do things depend on their causes, they also depend on their parts. Can we find anything that is not made up of components or that isn't divisible, at least conceptually, into parts? Since parts depend on the whole, and there are no wholes separate from their parts, can either whole or parts be found to exist freestanding, to exist independently?

If everything depends on its own causes and conditions and/or on its parts, might it also not be concluded that it is due to mental construction that things may be said to exist? Is reality, therefore, only an illusion? When we place our hand on a hot stove burner, is the painful burn that we receive only an illusion? If things arise depending on causes, conditions, parts, and cognition, what is the significance of this in our daily lives?

The Buddhist root texts that the Geshes have proposed for this subject area are: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika – Root Text on Wisdom – plus Lama Tsong Khapa's commentary (translated into English as 'Ocean of Reasoning') focusing on the Homage and the final verse; teachings by HH the 14th Dalai Lama on dependent origination at Amaravati, India (January 2006) and in Brussels (June 2006); Pramanavarttika (Chapter 1); Abhidharmakosha (Chapter 4).

to support these network members in developing compassion and wisdom programs in schools, family camps, social and healthcare settings, prisons, and the workplace – wherever they can be helpful. We're also becoming aware that there are many parents in our network who would like educational materials to share with their children, and that our programs may also be suitable for use in FPMT centers. We're trying to go one step at a time, even if the possibilities seem endless. Through working together we have enormous potential to bring about more peace in the world.

What help do we need?

"You need good understanding of Dharma people who can work on the universal education project. Definitely you need an incredible sort of skill" (Lama Yeshe).

"The best qualified person is someone who has a background understanding of Buddhist philosophy. That correct understanding is like fuel ... Western monks and nuns and lay students, especially those who study for geshe degrees at the centers: these are the ones" (Lama Zopa).

The Knowledge Base team is now seeking to make contact with scholars and students of Buddhism who have experience, knowledge, and understanding of one or more of its subject areas, along with the enthusiasm and capacity to write in a secular and/or universal style. *Could this be you?*

Thanks to two generous donors, we are able to offer the equivalent of £1000 (approximately USD 1900) for each of the essays on the sixteen subject areas. If you would like to be considered, or have someone to suggest, please contact Ven. Connie Miller at connie@essential-education.org. The plan is to select all the writers by the end of 2008, and to have all the essays completed by the end of 2009.

If, like me, you aren't a scholar but would like to be involved in some other way, please visit our website: www.essential-education.org. By joining the mailing list you will get regular updates about what is happening and what further help is needed. We are as yet a small organization and need everyone's support to develop in a way that is worthy of our roots and has the definite capacity to create a more peaceful world.

"We can produce a new prospect, a new reality, a new world. I truly believe we can. I think we do have the capacity to enlighten the whole world. But of course it takes time" (Lama Yeshe speaking to FPMT Center Directors in 1983). ☸