

How to (k)now¹

How much of what we know now really comes from our direct experience of life? If we set aside all that we have known from others, or through books or the mass media, we would surely be surprised that we have really known very little or nothing at all through a direct experience of true reality.

If what we know, or most of such knowledge, comes from outside sources, then this is second-hand knowledge. Significantly, all such knowledge, like what we hear from others (such as in religious talks), or read in books and the mass media, or the internet, comes from people or sources that rely on other sources. So it becomes third-hand, even fourth-hand, knowledge.

The problem with such knowledge is that the truth (the original message) is obscured, and increasingly so, as it filters down the levels of knowing. Not surprisingly then, what we know in this way is far indeed from the truth.

We may perhaps know this original source of the knowledge if we take the trouble and have the skill to tease out or uncover the original source. As a rule, when we understand (as far as our wisdom goes) this original source, we will discover that what we have heard from others is mostly, if not all, wrong and false!

“Wrong” because it does not reflect the original message, and “false” because it is not really helpful to us. Why then do we hold on to such “received wisdom,” as it is sometimes called? Some reasons for this could be (1) we like or admire the speaker or teacher; (2) we have faith in him; (3) he supports our views; or (4) he looks or sounds very well qualified.

Despite all this, we still do not know whether what is spoken or taught actually reflects the heart and mind (that is, the goodness and wisdom) of the speaker or teacher himself. Apparently, as long as we keep our distance of respect and admiration, we see him as being respectable, kind or wise. However, when we approach him personally, he person might not be so wise or helpful at all.

Then again, if we carefully observe how such a speaker, teacher, or informant behaves with different people, we will surely learn a lot about him. Does he treat the wealthy and powerful as he does an “ordinary” person? Does he practise what he preaches? Does he really answer wisely and helpfully when we or anyone ask questions or seek help?

Sadly, a crowd is easily fooled by a good speaker. For example, when someone applauds or laughs, many others would follow, then the whole crowd might do the same. In this sense, a crowd does not think. In such a situation, those who really seek wisdom would not find any.

In 2008, I was invited to attend a “Buddhism and Science Symposium” in Singapore on the brain, DNA and the metamorphosis. The speakers were a geneticist, an engineer and a monk (all professors in their respective fields). Overall, the scientific information presented by the speakers was interesting enough, but there was little of Buddhism mentioned.

What was especially disheartening was when, during question time, a young undergraduate asked, “According to Buddhism, when did life begin?” Each of the speakers then pointed a finger at another, passing the buck. Apparently, they thought that this was a difficult question to answer.

¹ The best way to benefit from this kind of reflection is to read right through it mindfully at least once, reading again whatever we are not sure about. Then, when we are ready, go on to read the links in the footnotes. Often this leads on to a number of other layers of reflections. The idea is to be right where you are reading, and enjoy it, at peace with yourself.

When his finger-pointing went on for some embarrassing minutes, one of them then quipped, “Life begins at 40!” Yes, the audience laughed. Then, they went on to the next question. Imagine if you were that undergraduate who asked a valid question to a panel who were supposed to be experts. How would you feel?

We might then wonder a lot of things about the speaker, the symposium, or even Buddhism itself, if we take such a presentation as being representative of Buddhism. Let the wise think for himself here. Suffice it to say that if the good and the wise were to remain silent, then the foolish would be loudly heard.²

Yet, we still continue to seek to be filled and fooled by what others know, when we should be thinking and seeking the answers for ourselves. Of course, we can learn from the foolish, even from the wise in their foolish moments. For, even famous teachers may have wrong views.³ The lesson: it is best that we seek the truth for ourselves.

The suttas speak of 3 kinds of wisdom or knowing, that is, through thinking, through listening and through cultivation.⁴ “**Knowledge through thinking**” is placed first because our thoughts influence and determines much, if not all, of our knowing, including “knowledge through listening.” As such, “**knowledge through listening**” is a subspecies of knowledge through thinking, only that this second kind of knowledge is derived externally or from the past.

The Buddha reminds us not to rely only on such knowledge, as they are often wrong or we tend to misconstrue them. **The Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65), for example, famously reminds us not to rely only on tradition, reasoning, or authority. “Tradition” here means knowing through listening, lineage, hearsay or holy scripture. “Reasoning” refers to any kind of logic or our own conclusions. “Authority” means believing another on account of his charisma, out of respect for him, or because he is our own teacher.⁵

Now, let us ask: How do we think? Basically, our thinking is how our mind makes sense of what we experience through the 5 physical senses: what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch. How we make sense of them is mostly dictated by our perception of the past. As such, almost all that we know are about the past. We do not even really know the present;⁶ and the future never comes.⁷

Since it is our mind that actually makes sense of all our sense-experiences (which create our “world”),⁸ it is vital that we understand and shape how we think. Early Buddhist teachings train us just how to do this, such as in the Buddha’s final exhortation that we “dwell with ourself as refuge, with no other refuge.”⁹

Here, “refuge” – the world “island” is also used in the same sense – means meditation. This means learning to calm our body and mind so that we are able to see things truly and clearly. Our mind is capable of creating or projecting any kind of reality we want (especially those

² The least we, as Buddhists, could do here is to apologize to that young undergraduate for insulting his intelligence and frustrating his desire to learn.

³ See esp **(Ahita) Thera Sutta** (A 5.88), SD 40a.16: [link](#).

⁴ D 3:219; Vbh 324. See **Levels of learning**, SD 40a.4 (6): [link](#).

⁵ For a discussion, see **Kesa,puttiya Sutta**, also known as **Kālāma Sutta** (A 3.65) + SD 35.4a, esp (3): [link](#).

⁶ See Reflection, “Making nothing of it,” R328, 2014: [link](#).

⁷ See Reflection, “True aspirations.” R224, 2012: [link](#).

⁸ See **Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), SD 7.1: [link](#).

⁹ See eg **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16,2.26), SD 9 esp (6): [link](#).

we are used to, based on our past pains and pleasures). These are all virtual reality, a make-believe world (of which religion is often a good example).¹⁰

The purpose of meditation or mental cultivation is to calm our body (the senses) so that they do not mess up our mind, and to clear our mind so that we can see directly into ourself and the true nature of things. A calm and clear mind is also a happy mind: truth and beauty are unified in the truly meditative and mindful.

This, then, is the beginning of “**knowledge through cultivation**,” learning from life itself by allowing our mind to see directly into the present moment, seeing things as they truly are. Only then we understand the nature of life, and fully live it as we move on towards self-awakening.

R353 Simple Joys 255
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¹⁰ See Reflection, “Who’s talking now?” R346 2014: [link](#).