

Knowledge limits

[Revised version of “Living the Dharma,” Early Buddhism Facebook, fb170801.]

We may know something, but it seems to stop there, freezing the objects of our knowing into some kind of fixed ideas. This is what often happens to us—we know a lot, and keep wanting to know more, but there seems to be no end to it. This is samsaric knowledge.

It is better when we understand something. It means that we look deeper into the roots and context of what we know. We see the causes and effects of what we know, and also why we know it the way we do. This is not easy if we lack self-confidence or have fixed views.

Those of us who are professionally successful, or see ourselves as having surplus wealth and nothing else, by the time we approach or pass middle age, we seek consolation in having new relationships with people – but this is difficult since we have past our prime and lost our charisma. So, we seek relationships with things; we see knowledge as things.

Knowledge as things cannot respond to us. So, it is not really a relationship, but a collecting, an acquisition (*upadhi*). Apparently, only samsaric knowledge can be accumulated: we claim to study, even know “all” the religions or some fields of knowledge. But we are so caught up in our soliloquy that we do not, we cannot, really relate with people, even when they want to relate with us. (I’m imagining a worst-case scenario—we normally want to step back when we notice this.)

As another decade passes, when we begin to notice some of our vital faculties failing, then, we start to notice the difference between samsaric knowledge and clear wisdom – again, maybe not. But if we have been following the Dharma with some sincerity, we are more likely to have a broader and happier vision of life. That’s when we are able to smile at our past follies and present joy: to that extent we have known ourself. We may even know our self – that there is none. This goes very much deeper into reality, but we leave this discussion for another time.

The key reason that samsaric knowledge exists and predominates our pre-mediaeval life is because things can be all things to all men. Knowledge is a construction, not really the learning of true reality. We see something that connects with our latent tendencies or unconscious habits, we chase after it and capture it in our net of views, squeeze it in the thorax so that it faints or dies, and does not fly away. Then, we pin it with our sharp mental pin onto our setting-board, and label it to our satisfaction. Now we can show off our proud collection of dead and titled specimens to whomever is willing or unwilling to listen.

But what we know of samsaric knowledge is only what our mind constructs of what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Often enough, the mind itself constructs its own realities out of nothing (none of the physical senses) – like what think of God or we make God do. We think of a unicorn, define it expertly, and Lo! we declare that IT exists. We love unicorns: they are rare and beautiful – if we admire them from afar with stories to enthrall, but not behind the cages of our samsaric minds.

To know without understanding is to get caught in the raging currents and murky depths of views. To understand is to see the conditions behind our knowing and what we do with such knowing, and why—and to be truly happy. If we feel naked without our knowledge, then we are

ashamed of our natural self – the clothes make the man. Our clothes, we wear and tear them, and soil them; so, we need to change them. When we change our clothes for a better fit, a better look and greater comfort, then our clothes serve their purpose. We have understood the nature of clothing. We have started to conceive the child of understanding: wisdom.

R520 Revisioning Buddhism 191

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2017