

Can we know Buddhism?

Learning a religion and experiencing true reality

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Any good translator or seasoned speaker of a few languages knows that the words of one language almost never have the same meaning or range as their “equivalents” or “cognates” in other languages. We only need to try debating with someone else using his own language! It is rare that words from two languages ever match one another on a one-to-one basis.

Hence, when translating, we need first to diligently seek to understand the **meaning** of the original passage (in Pali). Then, we need to express that meaning in the target or host language (in our case, English) in its own idiom.

The sense of the Pali should convey the same sense in the English. It is rare that we can always do this satisfactorily, when the language we use is a living language that is still evolving. For this reason, Buddhist translators suggest that we have new translations, say, every 50 years.

Language as experience

To a significant extent, a language is the common experience of a people or community. English, as we well know, especially its religious words (God, soul, evil, sin, conscience—just to name a few) have a Judaeo-Christian theistic baggage. When we are wise or skillful enough to divest such words of their pre-modern or non-Buddhist bias (as far as this is possible), we are likely to be able to read the Buddhist ideas fully and correctly.

However, this is rarely the case unless we are ourself the translator or polyglot who has mastered both the original textual language and the host translation language. This is, of course, assuming that the translation has been done correctly, and that we the reader do rightly understand what the translated passage is really trying to say.

Oral tradition

An effective way used by the early Buddhists to transmit the Dharma—in the letter and the spirit—is by reciting it to the students; then, the students recite it until they have memorized it. The next stage is for the students to reflect and understand the passage or teaching. They have to go back to the teacher often enough for a growing understanding of the teaching in the text. All this will, in time, mature them into true practitioners.

The **letter** is only the container for the teaching; the **spirit** of the teaching comes from us, the diligent student, with the help of the teacher. Yet, no matter how good the teacher is, the student must himself master the teaching, **feel** the spirit for himself. This can only arise by our own practice, that is, our mindfulness and meditation practice.

Computer codes

In fact, we can imagine the suttas—the threads of teachings that go back, at least in the spirit, to the Buddha himself—to be like computer programmes. A **programme language** tends to be repetitive, a recurrent cycle often with only a change in a word, a phrase, a line; to be recursive; to be nested in layers of commands and progressions; or to be a concatenation of synonyms or words with progressive senses. We see all this in the Pali texts. **Pali**, then, is the programme language for the Buddha Dhamma.

The **repetitive passages** or peyyāla in Pali texts are vitally significant, not only in helping an **aural** (oral and listening) society to hear and remember the teachings, but, more so, to help us focus our mind on the flow of ideas that record the awakening experiences of the Buddha and the early saints.

When we abridge these repetitive cycles or omit the repetitive words, for the sake of commercial convenience of our times, we become Procrustes cutting off the Buddha's legs to fit our modernist bed! We have thrown out the food and given ourselves only the bowl unwashed, so that we are left with only food remnants.

Meditative window

Having said all that, we still need to understand that studying the suttas is not about understanding Pali passages—it is not a pious comprehension lesson. We should search and see the suttas as guides to our meditation practice. In fact, the suttas have been handed down to us so that we can **know, tame, free our mind**.

We begin to know our mind by cultivating our body (including speech) so that we are not distracted by our body's sense-faculties: this is our moral being. The suttas teach us to rise above our senses to see the mind as it is. The deeper we look into our mind, the better we understand how it works, and then use it to look directly into true reality: this is **wisdom**.

The suttas are sufficient

For this reason, wise and experienced Dhamma teachers remind, even insist, that we stay with the suttas, then close our eyes to see more. This approach frees us from merely **knowing** and measuring Buddhism (via worldly titles of BA, MA, PhD, pandita, geshe, etc) and becoming blind Guru-followers.

Further, we should not freeze and coffin up sutta knowledge into numbers and lists, as the Abhidhamma often does. Then, we are caught up with only **knowing** Buddhism, priding in it for propping up our own views, feeding our narcissism. Instead, we should be applying the Dhamma to know the mind, tame it and free it. We are then truly working to become the Buddha's disciple.

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