

Have we stopped learning?

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I was born curious. While in Primary School, I was curious how my brother's old Remington portable typewriter worked. So I took it apart (yes, I unscrewed the parts). It was interesting to see how many parts it had. Then, I realized I could not put it back together! Fortunately, my brother loved me more than his typewriter, and said nothing of it. In fact, he bought a new and better model to replace it.

When I became curious about Buddhism, I wanted to know where I could learn more about what the Buddha teaches. Someone told me that those shaven-head strange-looking men covered in a blanket could teach me. I learned that they were called monks. It was really fascinating to hear them talk Dhamma. Every monk I met then, who could speak English, I asked this and that about Buddhism.

Hard questions

After a while, some of those monks began to avoid me. The cleverer ones would whisper to me that a certain visiting monk could answer my questions, and I would go to him. As the years passed, and I knew more Buddhism, I asked harder questions, and valued kind and clever monks. I even served them to learn from them.

My years in Thailand were especially beneficial to my Dhamma growth. I lived in a monastery that produced excellent young Pali students and scholars who were able to memorize texts in the traditional way. This helped my learning the Pali language as well as familiarized me with suttas.

Self-learning

Then, I was fortunate to have scholar friends in the universities: a sociology lecturer in the University of Malaya, a philosophy lecturer in the University of Singapore, and then I was invited as a Visiting Scholar by the University of California at Berkeley (USA).

Although I never actually enrolled as an official student in these great places of learning (my priority was Buddhist work), I had access to whatever I was willing and able to learn. I enrolled as an external student with the London University for a Philosophy course, to get a good grounding in the great minds. I taught myself Sociology to understand why people are drawn to religion. Then, I spent some years studying Psychology to understand the words and ideas that describe our mind, thinking process and behaviour.

Quality learning

The students, scholars and professors I met along this learning journey inspired me to question everything I read and experience. They taught me to ask questions, especially intelligent ones, and to think clearly for myself. The words of those learned professors still ring in my head: Quote your sources! Define your terms! Write down your ideas before you

forget them! The meditation teachers I met quietly taught me to look into my own mind and understand it.

It all started with my brother and sister buying me picture books and story books, reading to me, even before I went to school. And now we all have the benefit of the Sutta Discovery series, the weekly reflections, the Zoom lectures, and someone who is willing to work with your questions about Buddhism out of a common love and respect for the Dhamma.

Obstacles

On the other hand, many obstacles can arise to prevent us from learning. The most common hindrances, I notice, is that many local Buddhists think that since I am “local” and untitled I am, not as good as foreign and titled teachers. This hindrance is arrogance and belittling others. It is the greatest hindrance to learning, becoming a wholesome community; we become fertile manured ground for false teachers and cult gurus.

Another powerful hindrance is the fear that we are wrong or shown to be wrong. We Friend others on Facebook; then, because we argue over the same religion; we become enemies of one another! This is not the way of learning at all. Or, we are simply angered or terrified when we think that others think that we are wrong. By our own past conditioning, present fear and stupidity, we kicked our own butt out of a great chance to learn.

Joy of learning

It’s a great joy to teach those who love learning and respect the Dhamma. We have so many worldly monks, nuns and priests of religions who want us for themselves in their dear dulcet ways and Money Smiles. Notice how they hint to us how difficult it is to practice the Dhamma, but they (only they) will make it easy for us. This reminds us of the God-preachers who threaten us that only when we believe them we will be saved!

When we carefully study the suttas, we will discover that, even as laymen, it is so easy for us to reach the path in this life itself. We must want to do so: we need to aspire to streamwinning. When we want to go to a place, we should picture that place in our mind first, so to speak. Then, we prepare ourself for that journey: we constantly reflect on impermanence. The Buddha guarantees us that we will gain the path in this life itself: the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta (S 25.1) says so (see SD 16.7)¹.

Easy access

A generation ago, we knew so little about what early Buddhism is, if we ever heard of it. We only had an array of ritualistic, race-based, superstitious Buddhism that revolved around Teachers, Temples and donation boxes. We even look up to foreign Chief High Priests and follow their ethnic Buddhism, and slave for them.

¹ <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/16.7-Anicca-Cakkhu-S-25.1-piya.pdf>

We are just like Church-goers; we depend on them for regular blessings, transfer merits like a bank account, but still do not know what the Buddha really teaches. Their idea is that we should not know too much; they are little more than religious businesses!

Today we have direct access to the suttas, and many good translations. We can even learn Pali on our own and master the key words and teachings of the Buddha. When we have Dhamma questions, we have many people to ask; then we can think for ourselves, and meditate.

Love affair

We must not take all this for granted. We are limited by what we know: we must challenge what we know. It's better for us to prove ourselves wrong, than argue with someone and find out that we are both wrong. We are blurred and blinded by our own views. The best way of removing these cataracts of arrogance and ignorance is to search the suttas for ourselves.

Then, we compare notes with those who love the suttas, and spend their lives married to the suttas. Yes, it's a beautiful love affair that is life-long. But it's the Dhamma, so we all have the same access to it. When we love someone, we look at that person, and never tire of looking. We look at the Dhamma, into the suttas.

The more we look, the more we see: the better and more beautiful the vision. We see the truth and beauty of the Buddha's teaching.

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