

Growing old and up

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. Then, we try to defend it against others who seem to challenge it. This is samsaric knowledge.

It is better when we understand something. It means that we are looking deeper into the roots and contexts 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 were professionally successful, or see ourselves as having surplus wealth, time, ego and nothing else, by the time we approach or pass middle age, begin to struggle or seek a boost in having new relationships with people. Often, this can be difficult since we have past our prime, lost our charisma and have a track record—and also because of our status-consciousness.

By this time, we are likely to realize that those who had been drawn to us, were not really attracted to our personality or status. They were merely following the crowd of which we were but a member. People often find comfort in a sea of others, and when people are in close proximity with us in an engaging way due to propinquity, we perceive ourselves as being the actual cause of the phenomenon, rather than a passive *effect* of circumstances.

The good thing now is that age has revealed that people's reaction to us are no measure of our worth. Our wholesome qualities (or their lack) remain a very private matter. We are likely to better understand this now. Sometimes this knowledge comes early, earlier than most people.

We may not age in years, but knowledge—or, rather, the burden of knowledge—can age us. We just know too many things, and most of the time, we cannot do anything with such knowledge or about such knowledge. We are slowed down like a giant tortoise with a heavy shell. We plod along alone—like an empty boat moored to a deserted pier at the mercy of the tide and sky.

People pass us, and we simply cannot catch up; or rather, people just try to avoid us. We seem to have lost our prime and purpose. So, we try to relate to 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*). Only samsaric knowledge can be acquired: 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.)

Another decade passes and we begin to notice some of our vital faculties beginning to fail. 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 the present frailties: to that extent

we have known ourself. We may even know our self – that there is none. But this goes very much deeper into reality, and we must leave it for another time.

The key reason that samsaric knowledge exists and predominates our pre-mediaeval life is because knowledge can be all things to all to everyone. Knowledge is a mental construction, not really the learning, much less an experience, of true reality.

We see something that connects with our latent or unconscious tendencies, 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 our 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 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; so, we need to change them. As 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.

We are living the Dharma.

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