

Ways of Knowing

How do we know things? If we do not speculate too much (what if...?), it is easy enough to answer this important question. We know things because we have the five physical senses. We see, we hear, we smell, we taste, and we touch.

The tools of knowing the world are our senses. In Buddhist philosophy, we accept that there is a physical world out there, but our senses can never really know it. We can only know what we see: we call it shapes and colours. We can only know what we hear: we call it sounds and vibrations. We can only know what we smell. We can only know what we taste. We can only know what we touch: hardness, softness; smoothness, roughness; heat, cold.

But this is not the real physical world. When we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch something, we invariably comment on the experience. We only see what we want to see; we only hear what we want to hear; we only feel what we want to feel; and so on. In fact, we only experience the past. It's like when we look at a star: it's not really there. The star is already dead millions of years ago: we only see its light which is fast fading away.

In fact, most of us live mainly in the past. We see something, and without a thought we rummage through our minds for memories of such a sight. If we recall something nice about it, we "like" it; if we link in with a past sad experience, we "dislike" it; if we cannot find a past connection, we ignore it.

For some, life is very simplistic. Based on our past experiences, we react predictably. We are drawn to people and things we like; we reject those we dislike; we ignore those we find no connection with. We react to others predictably in the same three ways: they are "friends" (if we like them), "enemies" (if we dislike them), or "strangers" (if we do not know them).

We might even try to measure our experiences. When we measure the world in a systematic way, we call it science. What are we really measuring? It is not really the physical world, but we only measuring our sense-experiences of the world. We have outgrown that kind of physical science. Now we have quantum physics: the observer is part of what he sees; we are part of what we measure. So we need to look deeper.

Our physical senses, as such, are really biased. They are mostly past-oriented. Even as we read this, our mind is probably trying to find some fault with it, or maybe we already have a few ideas of our own and would be writing to the writer to point them out. Our past is measuring and judging this present thing we are reading. Apply this to our broader experiences, and we might have some more insight into how we know things.

So it is the mind that is the measurer and the judge of our experiences. Our minds decide what we experience and how we experience them. But if we go merely by our physical senses, we only exist; we are not really alive. For, our eyes blind us to what we do not like; our ears are deaf to what we do not wish to hear; our noses numb us; our tongues bore us; and our bodies tire us.

Ways of Knowing by Piya Tan

According to the Buddha, there is another way of knowing, that is, to feel. Western thinking tends to separate knowing and feeling. The reality is that knowing is closely associated with thinking. Thinking may work well if we want to measure things; but not all things are measurable.

Indeed, the more important things in our lives are not measurable. Happiness, kindness, charity and love, for example, are really immeasurable. They are best when you do not measure them. A measured love is jealousy. A measured kindness is diplomacy.

There is a better way of knowing, that is, to feel. To feel is to know without measure. To feel is to directly know someone or something. To feel is to live in the present, to be connected with what IS right now, right here. If we do this more constantly, we begin to rise above our senses, to a world of joy and peace beyond measure.

If we merely measure what we read here, or worse, judge the writer by these few words, we miss the point of this reflection. If we feel what we read, we are more likely to understand what these words are pointing to. Then we have not measured these words, and we might better know what these words are really about.

Piya Tan ©2010