

Know what we believe

A belief is necessarily false. To believe something is to take it as true or real even though there is a great likelihood that it is not so. If a belief is actually true or real, then it is no more a belief: it is information or knowledge. Believing something does not make it true or real, just as believing that a unicorn exists does not make it real. Nor can we define anything into existence. We can give all the proofs for God's "existence," or define him with all kinds of amazing qualities, it still remains that we only have a highly imaginative mind, if not a deluded one.¹ God-belief is the most ancient of virtual gamings and power game we can easily be addicted to – if we do not really understand the true nature of belief.

What are information and knowledge? Simply put, information is what we hear or learn from others or from outside, while knowledge is something we know from our own experiences, especially what we have thought out or reasoned for ourselves. Wisdom is our understanding how such information and knowing arise, whether or not they benefit us, and how to use them. Wisdom makes us a better or truly happier person, and the world a better place.

What does it mean to say something is true or something is real? For our purposes here – that of self-understanding – we can say that when something is true, it simply a fact. A fact may be something that has happened or not happened. For example, if I had written this reflection, and told you so: this is a fact. If I had not written this reflection, and told you that I wrote it (say, I took someone else's work and put my name to it), it is still a fact. A fact, in other words, is something true, whether it happened or not.

Something is real when what I see, hear or sense (or simply "experience") is actually happening or has happened. In simple terms, what I see is what I get. What I hear or read about is what actually happened. What I sensed is what I had tasted, smelled or touched. This reality can also be experienced if I were to repeat the same action. In other words, it is objective and evidence-based.

"Evidence" here means that I get, or can get, the same experience whenever I see, hear, smell, taste or touch it. For example, light is bright, sound is some kind of vibration, smell arises in my nose, taste often has to do with my tongue and food or drink, and touch brings some kind of tactile feeling. These are sense-based experiences. Since the mind also makes up its own experiences (such as seeing a mirage or dreaming), it is also a sense. So we actually have six senses.

Science tries to be more accurate, and says that such evidence must not only be repeatable but also measurable. Of course, scientists can make wrong or inaccurate measurements. But as scientific instruments and methods improve, the measurements become more accurate. This also means that previous measurements were less accurate. The good thing is that science learns from its mistakes.

However, measurements only work with material things. Interestingly, the really important things in our lives are not material and cannot really be measured. Feelings cannot be measured. How happy or sad we are; how calm or angry we are; how much desire have or how satisfied we are, for example, cannot really be measured.

Of course, a scientist or expert might tell us to "measure" such experiences on a scale of, say, 1 to 10. Such measures, however, are personal and subjective. They differ from person to person. Even for the same person, such measurements of the "same" experience will vary from time to time, under different circumstances. In fact, no two experiences of ours are ever exactly the same – only thinking may make it so.

On a deeper level, we can say that only "physical" experiences – those of lights and shapes, sounds and vibrations can be measured. But smells, tastes, and touches, although to some extent measurable, are trickier. What about artistic paintings, music and dance? Can we really measure their "quality"? We can

¹ See Reflection, "Believable fiction," R202 2011: [link](#).

only at best give them critical reviews (which are some kind of measuring, but are very subjective), which reminds that the critic cannot do any better themselves.

In other words, it is the mind that measures things. But the mind itself is almost impossible to be measured – not in “real” terms, that is, in terms of any of the physical senses anyway. It is the mind that experiences the physical sense-objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches). If we take the mind as a sense, too (as in early Buddhism), we should include “thoughts” as the sixth kind of sense-object.

All this is what might be called a Buddhist “theory of everything.” Our six senses (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) are our only sources of knowledge. What we can know are no more than these sense-objects – all our experiences are those of the six senses. This is our “world.” In this sense, we create our own world (which means, then, we can shape our own world by understanding how our senses work).² This is where meditation and mindfulness are very helpful.³

It is useful to understand that our senses and sense-experiences are still evolving. We are still continuing to understand – or make “sense” – of what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. We have already noted how our memories (or perception of the past) can change. Our experiences of present actions and events, too, are never always the same.⁴

For example, we may walk or run on the same path in a park every Sunday morning, but there is always something different about it, if we really notice. Even more dramatic are our memories. We think we have the same memory of something that has happened (for example, we had a frightening experience at 5 years old). When we were 10, we might recall it as being less frightening, but as an adult, we are likely to laugh it off as we better understand what really happened. In this way, we construct and reconstruct our memories. In time, we need to deconstruct them; then we know ourselves truly better.

To scientists, if something cannot be measured, then it is not “scientific.” Such “facts” are probably imagined or mind-made, or simply arbitrary, something very chancy or biased. However, as we have noted, feelings and emotions cannot be measured, but they are real all right. We actually experience them. Science may know a lot today, but there is still a significantly great deal that it does not know, especially about our minds and how we can really be happy.

It also helps to note that some things can happen only once, and yet be real; for example, birth and death, or we went to primary school once. We were born and will die only once in this life, but it is real enough. However, if we can imagine that there are parallel universes,⁵ surely we can also understand that this is not our only life and that our actions have consequences. Unlike God-belief (which is power-oriented and glory-centred), such imaginings tend to be liberating, morally inspiring and spiritually empowering.

If we accept that we have lived before, and will be reborn (just as plants continue to perpetuate themselves through seeds and plant-parts), we too will go through many lives: we then have opportunities to learn and better ourselves. If we accept that our actions have consequences (and are not the fiat of some external agency or almighty God), then, what we do becomes truly meaningful and purposeful in themselves. We can take charge of our own lives, be accountable for our actions, so that we grow, evolve and awaken to true and joyful reality.

R356 Revisioning Buddhism 100

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

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² According to early Buddhism, the external world is real, too, but we can never really experience it or need to: see [Nibbedhika \(Pariyāya\) Sutta](#) (A 6.63,3.2/3:410 f), SD 6.11. See also [SD 40.1 \(15.4\)](#): Is everything in the mind?

³ See Reflection “Worlds of our own,” R115 2012: [link](#).

⁴ See Reflection, “Man, the unfinished,” R204 2011: [link](#).

⁵ On parallel universes, see [Kosala Sutta 1](#) (A 10.29.2/5:59 f), SD 16.15; Kvu 13.1/476.