

What can we really know?

[Revised version of fb180116 posted on the Early Buddhism FB page.]

Social media, like this Facebook page, are a great place to see how we can see or study our self in its most uninhibited way. Despite our ignorance and delusion, we are willing and able to express ourself most sublimely and certainly of truths and realities which even the Buddha does not venture into.

The question we should ask ourself is: How certain am I that I fully understand what I have written, spoken or conveyed? Why do I even have the courage or hubris to quarrel with others—not even having met them—even denounce them, as if I am so certain of what I know of persons and things? What can I know if I do not learn; how can I know if I have stopped learning? Or if I limit my learning?

EXPERIENTIAL AND BENEFICIAL

If we carefully survey the teachings and truths of the early Buddhist texts, we mostly see teachings can be based on our personal experience (such as impermanence and suffering), or what is worthwhile whether by faith or by wisdom (lovingkindness, joy and peace). We don't even have to believe anything that we do not understand—such as the miraculous aspects of the Buddha and his saints. We only need to see how they point to experiences of true reality that are verifiable.

In the suttas—when we are touched by the spirit of the Dharma—we hear the Buddha asking us one key question: WHAT can I really experience? WHY do I experience it in this way? HOW can I grow from this understanding? WHEN am I really freed by this understanding?

WHAT CAN WE EXPERIENCE?

What we can experience are only what our physical senses present to us: what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch. These experiences arise in our mind. But our mind, too, creates its own “inner” realities of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Often, what we see outside is really from inside our own mind.

In other words, what we can know are only what our senses present to us, and how our mind interprets them. To “interpret” means to “see” them in our own mind. We create our own inner realities of these sense-experiences. This is ALL we can really know.¹

WHY DO WE EXPERIENCE IT IN THIS WAY?

We suffer because we think that sense-pleasures are desirable, and that what is not pleasurable are undesirable. We see them as if they are separate realities. They are, in reality the same kind of experience, separated in time. Here “separated”

¹ See **Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), [SD 7.1](#).

means “conditioned.” The past conditions the present, and both condition the future. The present, in a sense, conditions the past and future. We tend to construct our past and be selective in our memories, and we dream of some kind of impossible future.

Feelings condition one another.

Pleasure is pleasant when it persists, painful when it changes.

Pain is unpleasant when it persists, pleasurable when it changes.

Neutral feeling is pleasant when we know it, painful when we are ignorant of it.²

When we only see life as these two opposites, then we fail to see that they arise from the same place: our mind. When we try to run away from it, we are actually running back into it—we are caught in a samsaric circle of pleasure and pain on account of our liking and disliking: our mind seeing them as two separate “things.”

HOW CAN WE GROW WITH THIS UNDERSTANDING?

True peace, free from suffering, is found neither in a holy place nor in a forest; it is not given by a teacher nor by looking for it outside of ourselves. The source of all our unsatisfactoriness lies within our mind: how can we find the solution outside? When we realize this, we are free from the wiles and guiles of teachings and religions that want us to look up to external sources of power, succour and salvation.

Salvation is a path in the sense we must make the journey. There is no path when we do not make the journey. Our awakening in the journey itself—in this sense, the goal is not a destination, but the completion of the journey. It’s just like we enjoy a meal mindfully to stay healthy and fit, not for the sake of leaving a platter clean.

WHEN ARE WE REALLY FREED BY THIS UNDERSTANDING?

The “illiterate” of our time (to rephrase Alvin Toffler’s famous quote) are not those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.³ In simple terms, if we do not habitually reflect on the impermanence of self and things, we would think that our views are final, fixed and permanent. Hence, we are hindered from changing because we are burdened by our views.

This does not mean that we should follow the flow of views and move with the crowd. This would be the other extreme—to be like dead fish that cannot swim against the currents. The MIDDLE WAY is like watching the sunset or listening to a great piece of music—we take in every moment without missing anything. We fully live the moment—neither dragging in the past nor shoving it into the future. This is unconditional embrace of the moment that we are with someone or some experience.

² See **Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44,22), [SD 40a.9](#).

³ [3] See “Learn, unlearn, relearn,” fb170117a: <https://www.facebook.com/piyatan/posts/10154349929046325>.

We are not an entity, doomed to stand fixated like a rock in some hot dry desert. We are but moments in between other moments—the past and the future.⁴ The past has shaped us to some extent, and the future remains open to us. It is the present—only the present—that is here for us to live and love, and hence to grow. In this sense the Dharma is “timeless”: it is always there before us. We should not miss any moment of it.

Or we would be left behind, with no life, fettered to the spot with our views—like a proud rock, but still a rock, slowly worn away by the weather of change.

Only in understanding and accepting change are we ready for the beginning of wisdom and liberation. Notice this is only the BEGINNING: we need to start right away.

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⁴ We are “in-between moments,” see **(Karaja,kaya) Brahma,vihara Sutta** (A 10.208,2 etc), [SD 2.10](#).