

Evidence-based?

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Early Buddhism is sometimes said to “empirical” or “evidence-based.” It teaches that we should only accept a teaching or view after trying it ourself (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*) and observation (*ehi,passika*) and not accepting only theories. What does all this mean?

Note that the Pali for “accept ... after trying it ourself” is “*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*,” which means “to be known” (*veditabba*) “by the wise” (*viññūhi*) “for himself” (*paccattam*). We must ourself have some **wisdom** to be able to know what all this means: empirical etc. It means that we must **understand** it for ourself – no one else can do this for us.

To know; to understand

There are so many things we can **know** today: this is Google knowledge, McMindfulness, Zen wisdom, like some packaged instant noodle. Not really efficacious, unhealthy, disastrous, in the long run. It is not enough to know; we need to understand what we know.

To **know** is simply to collect facts. To **understand** is to directly see what “it is really about”: in short, its meaning. I may “know” a lot of Buddhism. To “understand” it means to see it in daily life as a universal truth. When we carefully look around us, it is undeniable that everything is **impermanent**.

Knowledge, wisdom

Next, we ask something like “What do this knowledge **mean**?” When all things are impermanent, they change. In that case, we can never “have” them: we cannot hold on to or own any thing or anything.

I take in food, absorb its goodness and pass the rest out.
I drink water, absorb it but it all goes out again as urine, sweat, etc.
I generate and take in heat, and transfer it back all around me.
I breathe in some air but must give it back to live.

To understand this is **wisdom**.

Truth

All this is worth knowing because it is **true**. Here, what we know or say describes a state that is actually occurring. What is described **corresponds** with the thing or event. The statement and the state concur.

However, if I say that there is a Unicorn (a fabulous horse with an ivory horn). But it does **not** exist. What I say is untrue: a unicorn does not exist. Similarly, I can say there is God or an Eternal Buddha or a Paradise somewhere. I may even claim that someone holy or powerful said this or it is written in some holy books.

But, it remains that I have never meet such a person or thing. We may tell stories or write about how these are “real,” but they are never true. They do not **really** exist.

Reality

“They do not **really** exist” means that I have created my own **virtual** reality, an imagined being. They are not real in the **true** sense of reality. They are false: we do not see or experience them in the real world.

Now, it’s all right – even entertaining and educational – when we talk of such imaginative people, beings, things and places in literature. We know that they are **fiction**. We love them because we feel good reading them, and we often learn something about ourself and life from literature.

Hamlet is a character created by Shakespeare. He does not exist, even when we see a character called Hamlet on stage: it is a play. So, too, the Monkey God: he is a character in Wu Cheng-en’s “Monkey” story who came to be worshipped as a god. It’s like worshipping any of the Greek gods: Zeus, Apollo, and so on. They all have something good to teach us, but they do not exist like we do.

Sense-based evidence

Simply put, whatever is **real** can only be experienced through our physical senses: what we see (sights, colours, etc), hear (sounds, voices), smells, tastes and touches (feelings). Our mind makes **sense** of these sensations. But our **mind** also creates its own realities of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches: we call them dreams, hallucinations and so on.

Something can seem real but does not really exist. We see a **rainbow** (from a certain angle) but there is really no rainbow out there where it seems to be. No one has found any crock of gold at the end of a rainbow. We see a **mirage** in a desert: it looks real enough, but it does not exist.

Nowadays we have special devices that can create **virtual reality** environment for games, training and entertainment. But we know that none of this is true reality. It is necessary to understand this vital difference between virtual reality and true reality.

Seeing the mind

For this reason, the Buddha teaches us to understand the **mind**. This is our real **creator** of virtual realities, but it is also able to see true reality. It depends on how we train and use our mind. This is what Buddhist training and meditation are about. We begin by carefully examining **impermanence** because this is the easiest universal reality to see.

When we understand this, it frees us from being tricked by countless virtual realities we see around us in other people, in advertisements, and in religion. Indeed, most religions want us to **believe** in the virtual realities they have created. The Buddha teaches us to see true

reality for what it is, and so be unconditionally free: then, we are no more **conditioned** by them.

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