

I know nothing

The wisdom of unknowing

[Previously published as fb200529 Piya Tan]

Socrates, the wisest of Westerners and the westernized was reported to have said: "All I know is that I know nothing?" In Greek, *Ἐν οἶδα ὅτι οὐδέν οἶδα*, pronounced "en ee-da o-tee oo-den ee-da," which actually means "What I don't know, I don't think I know," but the paraphrase is better known. This is a Socratic paradox, found in Plato's *Apology* (21d).

One interpretation of this is that Socrates probably had what is unofficially called "low latent inhibition." This means that he started thinking from the start about anything he experienced as if he didn't know about it before. So he never "knew anything" when he started talking.

The clever tend to be mad?

It is possible that a low level of latent inhibition can cause either psychosis* or a high level of creative achievement or both, which is usually dependent on the individual's intelligence. When they cannot develop creative ideas, they become frustrated or depressive, or both. (If we observe carefully enough, we will see signs of this in any social media.)

[*Psychosis is a severe mental disorder in which thoughts and emotions are so impaired that contact is lost with external reality. A severe form is called schizophrenia or fragmented personality.]

An open mind

On the positive side, we can learn from such interesting stories that we should approach a person or a problem (they are not the same) with an open mind, as if we know nothing (yet). Often enough, for example, when I write something I thought to be insightful, someone with an inner wound thinks that I have prodded it on purpose!

So he reacts with a long dismissive tirade about right and righteousness, and so on and so forth. This is enough punishment for me, since (secret be told) I don't like reading long posts. Anyway, it's only polite to read; perhaps we may learn something from it.

Then I realize, in some cases, that the writer had perceived it just to the contrary of what I had meant. This, of course, should sort things out, but the writer sometimes became even more cross because he was then twice wrong! Moral of story: Don't be too clever; always hide behind our "2-cents worth."

No one awakens

Dhamma teachers rarely say: "I don't know!" because they are perceived as knowing everything. But a few wise or unwise speakers do honestly admit, "I don't know." If they are wise, wow! If they are unwise, ouch! It all depends on the density of the crowd. Popular and populist speakers tend to attract dense crowds.

Anyway, monastics are careful never to answer any questions about attainments, especially their awakening (if any). In fact, the 4th and last of the "defeat" (*pārājika*) rules in the Vinaya is about making such claims. Any false claim means that one is no more a monk on the spot! The problem is that an unwise monastic is unlikely to know it either way.

I'm awakened (but I'm not telling you)

Worldly monastics, however, would, as a rule, not dare to claim they are unawakened simply because they can't act in an awakened way: they don't even know what it is! So they will drop hints about how deep their meditation was, about strange encounters in the forests of their imagination and elsewhere, about seeing the light (so bright that it blinds), etc.

It would be interesting when an experienced psychiatrist or profiler listens to such talk and knows the speaker for what mental illness he may really have. Often it may be as mild as obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) or perhaps some early signs of psychosis (which leads to schizophrenia).

Not understanding the guru

However, religion is about being faithful. If faith can move mountains (just a saying), then, it should surely move followers. Cunning teachers move their faithful senseless making sure they DO NOT (always) understand their teachings. For familiarity breeds contempt. When a follower knows exactly what the teacher is going to say, he would be teaching a class of emptiness.

So the student becomes the teacher: green comes from blue (but nowadays the chemical process is easier). Hence, a Guru is judicious enough to make sure his adoring crowd does not understand him. He would say just the opposite of what he meant, or vice versa, or both, or neither. You know what I mean.

Are you awakened?

A good Dhamma teacher will, of course, be more careful and yet be instructive. If the monastic's teacher is wise, he would advise the monastic student never to answer questions about attainment or awakening. But when a direct question is asked—Are you awakened?—we should answer something to the effect:

“No one is freed! No one awakens!”

Just think about this: commentaries can be written about this. For example, Buddhaghosa wrote in his *Visuddhimagga*: “There is the path but there is no goer.” (*maggam atthi gamako na vijjatī*).¹

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¹ See SD 10.16 (1.7.1.2); SD 56.1 (4.6.1).