

Early Buddhist epistemology

An excerpt from SD 60.1e Delusion and Experience © Piya Tan, 2023b (forthcoming).

1.8.1 Validity of knowledge

1.8.1.1 Buddhism started with Siddhattha Gotama's quest for liberating knowledge. At 29, the spiritually precocious Siddhattha saw the 4 sights: an aged man, someone afflicted with a deadly disease, a corpse and a renunciant. Struck with an "existential shock" (*sarṁvega*) upon seeing the first 3 sights, he followed the example of the 4th sight. He left home as a seeker of liberating knowledge.¹

In due course, he sought the teachings of the 2 leading teachers of the day—Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāma,putta's son—but, even after mastering their teachings and meditation, he still found neither liberation, nor resolution to his shock, nor any answer to the questions of the 4 sights. He then went on to spend 6 years of painful **self-mortification** (as was then the religious tradition). He ritually starved himself until he collapsed into a near-death faint.²

Having lived a pleasurable life in his palatial home, and now experiencing the fruitlessness of self-mortification, he concluded that he must now turn to **a middle way**. There was no middle way then, that is, until he turned to one! He recalled a profoundly blissful dhyana experience when he was only 7.³ This, he realized must be his path to awakening, and indeed it was. He went into dhyana and came out of it with a calm, clear and ready mind. He attained awakening knowledge (*bodhi,ñāṇa*): he *is* the Buddha.⁴

1.8.1.2 The Buddha's story is that of a quest for awakening, which he gains, and spends the rest of his 45 years wandering all over the central Gangetic plain of north India teaching that awakening knowledge and how to attain it. From his own experience, he saw how physical pleasure simply exists in the absence of pain; and that pain is suffering. But by understanding our body-mind existence, we will be able to transcend the lusts and limits of the body to attain profound light and joy that lessen, even free, the mind from suffering.

The liberating knowledge realized by the Buddha is conceived neither as an insight into religious metaphysics nor as some grand revelation of divine lordship. He teaches us to look deep into our lives for what it really is, to discern the conditions that make it so, to understand and transform the mind by breaking the chains of conditionality, and then to take that path of self-awakening.

The Buddha's liberating knowledge is that of wisdom into the true nature of suffering, and how to fully and finally end suffering. Our spiritual liberation comes neither from some heaven-bound God nor priestly rituals and promises. Instead, the Buddha teaches us to discipline our own body and speech with moral virtue; with the body calmed, we learn to

¹ On the 4 sights and his subsequent quest for liberation knowledge, see [SD 52.1 \(7\)](#).

² On the episodes of the 2 teachers and Siddhattha's self-mortification, see [SD 52.1 \(12 f\)](#).

³ On Siddhattha's 1st dhyana, see [SD 52.1 \(5.2\)](#).

⁴ On the Buddha's great awakening, see [SD 52.1 \(17\)](#).

master our mind; freeing the mind from being enslaved by the body, we gain wisdom into the causes and conditions that shape our experiences.

The early Buddhist texts give detailed accounts of how we perceive and project our own virtual worlds. Even at the highest levels of knowledge, the Buddha teaches only a **spiritual psychology** to remove these worldly habits and defilements that corrupt and stifle our mind. Such is the knowledge that we should cultivate to reach the path of awakening that leads to the highest goal, nirvana.

1.8.1.3 According to early Buddhism, there are many different ways of knowing;⁵ hence, there are many ways of classifying knowledge. The most natural classification of knowledge is, however, that based on the 5 aggregates (*pañca-khandha*) since they provide a comprehensive teaching on our body-mind existence. The aggregates are also closely related to the 18 elements (*aṭṭharāsa dhātu*), that is, the 6 sense-faculties (internal sense-bases), the 6 sense-objects (external sense-bases) and the 6 consciousnesses [Table 1.7.4].

In fact, **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), as we have seen [1.7.1.4], states that:

- all (*sabba*) that we *can* know, (the 6 sense-faculties)
- all that there is *to* know, (the 6 sense-objects)
- all that is *known*, (the 6 sense-consciousnesses)

are these 18 elements in their 3 sextets. The 6 sense-faculties are our only means of knowing; the sense-objects are all there is to know; and the 6 consciousnesses are all the known, that is, our learning processes. This is how we *know* things, and progressively purifying this knowledge, we awaken to true reality. But once it becomes glorified as epistemology, it holds us back in the world, and prevents us from awakening.

Just as the Buddha has discovered this truth by his own experience, he teaches us to experience this true reality for ourselves: through our direct experience of that reality, not by philosophizing about it. This is the Buddha's way of self-verification, as he declares in **the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38), thus:

“Come now, bhikshus, do you speak only of what you have known, seen⁶ and understood for yourselves?”

“Yes, bhante.”

“Good, bhikshus! So have you been guided by me with this Dharma, seen here and now [to be realized in this life], timeless, for one to come and see, accessible [leading onward], to be personally known by the wise. (M 38,24 f/1:265), SD 7.10⁷

R812 Inspiration 470

TAN Beng Sin ©2023

⁵ This section on types of knowing and knowledges is inspired by P A Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, 2021:51-96. Some of the presentation here, however, differs significantly from Payutto's helpful study.

⁶ “Seen,” *ditṭharā*, ie, seen with the eye of wisdom (*paññā,cakkhu*) (MA 2:309).

⁷ SD 7.10: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/7.10-Maha-Tanhasankhaya-S-m38-piya.pdf>