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# Right Knowledge

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**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

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# Right Knowledge

**T**

he Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha is sometimes presented in the Buddhist teaching as leading to two further steps called Right Knowledge (*sammā ñāṇa*) and Right Emancipation (*sammā vimutti*). In the context of the teaching of the Buddha, Right Emancipation is the supreme goal of Buddhism, which is nothing short of liberation from the cyclic process of suffering (*dukkha*) in *saṃsāra*. Such emancipation is possible by the development of a certain kind of insight, knowledge or understanding referred to in Buddhism as *paññā*, *āsavakkhayañāṇa*, and *vimutti-ñāṇadassana*.

The Buddha is called the enlightened or the awakened one because of his claim to have attained knowledge relating to the Four Noble Truths. The Buddhist canonical scriptures represent the Buddha as making the claim that the knowledge and vision that he gained when he attained enlightenment was regarding truths that had not been handed down in the existing sacred traditions. [1]

The reference to persons, including the Buddha, who have won such knowledge as those endowed with 'knowledge' and 'good conduct' implies that

such knowledge is invariably connected with wholesome conduct. Right knowledge is the knowledge of the Noble Truths. According to Buddhism, it is knowledge that brings about a radical transformation of the person. There may be numerous other varieties of human knowledge that cannot, from the Buddhist perspective, be referred to as right knowledge, because those forms of knowledge do not lead to the consequence of self-transformation and liberation.

The noble knowledge (*ariyaṃ ñāṇaṃ*) of Buddhism is invariably connected with liberation of the mind from unwholesome qualities. Contemporary man boasts of his achievements in the sphere of scientific and technological knowledge. However, such knowledge cannot be reckoned as conducive to the reduction of human suffering. On the contrary, scientific and technological knowledge have on occasion led to the consequence of increasing human suffering. This shows that there is a justification for the Buddhist evaluation of knowledge by making a distinction between right or noble and wrong or ignoble knowledge.

The process of the acquisition of knowledge is usually associated with learning. With the progress of civilised social life people usually go through a socially accepted process of systematic learning or

education with a view to acquiring a certain body of knowledge as well as skills. There are socially recognised institutions such as schools and universities, and numerous other media that provide people the opportunity to acquire knowledge. However, the right knowledge envisaged in the Buddhist teaching cannot be acquired by any of the above means alone. Persons who have acquired much book learning, obtained university degrees, trained in numerous technological skills, and earned a high reputation for their academic distinctions may not truly claim to have acquired what Buddhism conceives as right knowledge.

According to what is reported in the Buddhist scriptural sources, people joined the Buddhist community from very low walks of life. Among them there were even menial labourers, and people of the lowest castes who had no access whatsoever to what the then Brahmanical tradition considered to be opportunities for acquiring knowledge. Such people claimed to have attained right knowledge through the practice of the Buddhist path. Therefore it is important to consider what the distinctive characteristics of this Buddhist concept of right knowledge are which entitled those who acquired it to be called persons endowed with *vijjā* (knowledge) and *carāṇa* (good conduct).

In terms of the prevailing Brahmanical tradition that dominated most major aspects of the life of the Indian people at the time that Buddhism emerged, those who were well versed in the three Vedas were considered as the persons endowed with the highest knowledge. The term Veda is derived from 'vid' meaning 'to know'. The Buddha, like some other independent thinkers of sixth century India questioned the Brahmanical concept of knowledge. The Brahmanical view about knowledge is referred to in the Caṅkī Sutta where, through an effective Buddhist critique of that view, a clear account of the Buddhist concept of knowledge is presented. The Caṅkī Sutta mentions an encounter between the Buddha and a brahmin youth named Kāpaṭhika who had a high reputation among the brahmin community for his learning. Kāpaṭhika is represented as making the claim on behalf of the brahmin teachers that only whatever is found in the three Vedas handed down by Brahmanical teachers in a long successive tradition contained truth, and that all else is false. When the Buddha was called upon to give his response to this Brahmanical view, he pointed out that since no brahmin teacher had "directly known and seen" the truth of the statements found in the Vedas there is no validity to their claim. They, like in the case of those who adhere to other dogmatic religious systems, believed that every statement

contained in their sacred scriptures that were traditionally handed down contained genuine knowledge and that these scriptures were the most authoritative sources of knowledge of what is true. The Vedas were believed to have the authority of a revelation. This is what the Buddha called *anussava* in the Caṅkī Sutta, the Kālāma Sutta and numerous other instances.

According to the Buddha, a claim to knowledge cannot be based solely on one's strength of belief or faith in any authority, personal or otherwise. It is for this reason that the Buddha advised the Kālāmas not to depend solely on revelation (*anussava*), tradition (*paramparā*), hearsay (*itikirā*), sacred scriptures (*piṭakasampadā*), seeming capability of a person (*bhabbarūpatā*) and the respect for a teacher (*samaṇo no garu*). [2]

Another method by which people usually attempt to arrive at the truth is logical or speculative reasoning. The method of pure intellectual reflection was considered by the Buddha in the Kālāma Sutta under the employment of logic which mostly degrades into sophistry (*takka*), the employment of a theory or a standpoint (*naya*), superficial reflection (*ākāraparivitakka*) and the preference developed towards a particular view after contemplating on it (*ditṭhinijjhānakkhanti*). Speculative reason merely

rationalises existing preferences and prejudices. All the above mentioned methods of arriving at truth were subjected to a common criticism by the Buddha. People often depend on subjective factors such as individual preference, inclination, prejudice, faith, trust and/or confidence alone as the means of determining what is true. The Buddha pointed out that perfection in any of the above mentioned methods does not ensure the truth of the statements derived by means of them. [3] They can often lead to untruth. Therefore, one is not entitled to say solely on the basis of one's strength of faith or preference etc. that what one believes to be true is in fact true. What has been very faithfully handed down for generations in a sacred revelation may turn out to be empty and false, while what has no relation to such sacred revelation may be true and corresponding to facts. Therefore those who depend on personal preference, faith, etc. are not entitled to claim knowledge, although they are entitled to state that they have a particular preference, faith etc. [4]

In the contemporary stage of mankind's intellectual development, all genuine human knowledge is required to be based on a valid rational foundation. This widely accepted requirement has disqualified many spheres of traditional belief from acquiring the status of knowledge. Modern science is widely



accepted to be the only sphere in which there is genuine cognitive activity. Discourse in the spheres of religion and ethics is considered to be non-cognitive, subjective or emotive. This is to say that discourse in these spheres as well as activities connected with them are non-rational. A strict demarcation is made between faith and reason, resulting in the denial of any cognitive status to our beliefs about desirable goals, the good life and moral or spiritual attainments. It is believed that those who seek knowledge and truth have to turn to science, and those who seek to commit themselves to a particular faith, a creed, a way of life, a system of non-cognitive beliefs may turn to religion. Buddhism is usually identified with the latter, leading to the consequence that questions about knowledge and truth in the context of Buddhism can have meaning only within the body of believers who have committed themselves to the Buddhist faith. The assumption is that Buddhism does not deal with facts, with truths, or with human knowledge in the genuinely scientific sense of the term. It is this assumption that will be questioned in our examination of the Buddhist concept of right knowledge.

The teaching of the Buddha affirms that it is possible to have knowledge and insight into truths relating to what is right and wrong and what is conducive to the greatest human well-being.

Traditionally such truths have been associated with the dogmas of religion. The dogmas of religion have usually been grounded on revelations and faith. Religious dogmas have often been contradicted by the findings of empirical science. Despite such contradictions, believers have continued to hold them as being central to their religious beliefs. This has resulted in the modern distinction between reason and faith. The question is whether this distinction applies to Buddhism also in such a way that it too could be relegated to the sphere of faith alone without attaching any cognitive content to its teachings. It is to be noted that in the original teaching of the Buddha too, a distinction between faith and knowledge has been maintained, and the importance of transcending mere faith in order to attain personal knowledge and insight has been emphasised. In the Buddha's criticism of the Vedic tradition, instead of dependence on the knowledge of the three Vedas, the Buddha emphasised the importance of developing the three *vijjā*, (three forms of knowing). The three *vijjā*, according to Buddhism, consist of *pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa* (knowledge based on the memory experiences of past lives), *cutūpapātāñāṇa* (knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of other beings) and *āsavaakkhayañāṇa* (knowledge of the destruction of the defiling traits or cankers of the mind). The last of these

is what Buddhism considers to be the most crucial knowledge that ensures a person's liberation from suffering. The Buddhist position is that in matters pertaining to ultimate human goals too—matters sometimes referred to as religious or spiritual—there can be a rational foundation.

The Buddha was not a rationalist in the strictly philosophical sense of the term. Rationalism in the strict philosophical sense attempts to arrive at the truth by means of a priori reasoning. Rationalists attempt to build systems of truth on the basis of a few self-evident premises from which they seek to deductively derive other complex truths. The Buddha did not identify himself with thinkers who followed this method of knowing. However the Buddha's rejection of rationalism does not imply that he advocated some mysterious non-rational method of knowing. The Buddha's claim to knowledge was not based on any mysterious revelation. It was knowledge gained by means of a systematic training and cultivation of the mind. He criticised the contemporary brahmin teachers for their dependence on traditional authority comparing them to a string of blind men who had lined up one after another, among whom neither the foremost nor the middle nor the hindmost could see. Their religious or spiritual aspirations were compared by the Buddha to those

who constructed a ladder at crossroads to climb an unknown mansion or to those who loved a beauty queen of the country about whose description they knew nothing whatsoever.

The Buddha admitted the useful role that faith or trust (*saddhā*) in the form of confidence in a teacher could play in one's progress towards the attainment of right knowledge. Ultimately, however, one should be in a position to claim direct knowledge and insight without mere blind dependence on faith (*aññatra saddhāya*). This is the significance of the advice given to Kālāmas where the Buddha instructs them regarding the importance of direct personal knowledge (*tumheva jāneyyātha*). According to the Caṅkī Sutta, the initial trust placed on a teacher should be on the basis of some preliminary inquiry into the teacher's character. Strong blind faith does not amount to knowledge. The Buddha invited his own disciples to inquire even into his claim to have attained full enlightenment. They were called upon to test his claim by closely scrutinising his behaviour for as long a time as needed. [5] The Buddha's teaching insists that no superficial observation of evidence is sufficient for genuine confirmation of a truth. A procedure that is comparable with that of the confirmation of a scientific hypothesis, through persistent observation with a view to finding sufficient supporting evidence, is

recommended by the Buddha. [6]

The above characteristics of the teaching are expressed clearly in the standard description of the Dhamma taught by the Buddha as found in the Theravada scriptures. The standard description of the characteristics of the Buddha's teaching indicates that: the truths connected with it are to be verified here and now (*sandiṭṭhiko*); its benefits are not delayed (*akāliko*); anyone can be called upon to directly witness its benefits by putting it into practice (*ehi-passiko*); it evidently leads to the desired goal (*opanayiko*); and it could be individually tested by wise ones (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*). These characteristics of the Dhamma distinguish Buddhism from other religious systems that value faith over knowledge and reason, and make man's ultimate salvation dependent on trust in revelations and the grace of God.

One could express the essential content of the right knowledge in Buddhism in terms of its fundamental teachings: the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination and the three characteristics of being. Knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination and the three characteristics of being bring about a radical transformation of the personality of the knower. Therefore, such knowledge is described in Buddhism as the knowledge leading to the destruction of cankers (*āsava-kkhayañāṇa*).

According to Buddhism, knowledge invariably has a connection with the objects of the senses. Sometimes the Buddha raises the question: "What is everything?" The answer given by the Buddha himself to this question is: "Everything is included under the senses and their respective objects." The senses and their respective objects are the existent things to be known. The Buddha did not admit the existence of any mysterious, metaphysical reality in terms of which a solution could be found to the problem of suffering. It needs to be emphasised that the object of right knowledge in Buddhism is not some mysterious metaphysical reality. Therefore, we cannot describe the highest knowledge in Buddhism in terms of metaphysical ideas such as the knowledge of 'the immortal Self or *ātman*' or 'Absolute Brahman' or 'Platonic Ideas' or 'knowledge of the reality of God's existence'. Instead Buddhism speaks of the highest knowledge as consisting of understanding the dependent origination of things, the transient, unsatisfactory and unsubstantial nature of all phenomena, the understanding of suffering, its origin, cessation and the path to its cessation. Right knowledge is attained not by discovering some other existent reality, which is different from what is given in our sense experience. Right knowledge involves the understanding of the nature of the empirical world

with an insightful mind free of the hindrances of craving (*taṇhā*) clinging to dogmatic views (*ditṭhi*), and false ideas of self involving the notions of 'I' and 'mine' (*māna*).

The Buddha used a variety of terms to refer to different forms or levels of human knowing. Each of these terms is derived from the verbal root *jñā* 'to know'. The reality given to our five senses and the mind can be known in different ways such as the *saññā* way, the *viññāṇa* way, the *pariññā* way, the *abhiññā* way and the *paññā* way. The first two ways of knowing the given reality is common to all beings who use their sensory and mental capacities of knowing. However, from the Buddhist point of view those two ways of knowing are inadequate to realise the goal of liberation. The understanding produced by the activity of *saññā* and *viññāṇa* is connected with all our ordinary knowledge. Human bondage is explained in Buddhism as a consequence of the unenlightened reaction to the cognitive experiences of *saññā* and *viññāṇa*. *Viññāṇa* provides us with the raw data of the respective senses. The *saññā* process organises them into ideas and concepts employed in the activity of thinking. Both *saññā* and *viññāṇa* could become traps if they are not properly comprehended. The Buddha often warns against attachment to *saññā*. A person who is detached from *saññā* has no ties. [7]

One who needs to cross over the flood to attain the goal of Nibbāna has to fully comprehend the nature of *saññā*. [8]

Unlike *saññā* and *viññāṇa*, *abhiññā*, *pariññā* and *paññā* need to be cultivated with a special effort. Right knowledge in Buddhism is connected with these latter forms of knowing that have to be cultivated systematically. There are certain prerequisites for the cultivation of these forms of knowing. The right knowledge by means of which the truths of Buddhism are directly known is attained by a systematic process of mental purification. *Sīla* or training in morality is its foundation. The perfection of *sīla* conduces to the composure of mind necessary for directing the mind to the knowledge that brings about the destruction of *āsava* (cankers). Immediately after the liberating knowledge dawned on him the Buddha observed very emphatically that such a vision of truth is not easily obtainable by people who are immersed in the delights that worldly desires afford. Such knowledge dawns only on people whose minds have been perfectly cleansed, become one-pointed and pliable and whose equanimity and mindfulness have been well established. Other lower forms of human knowledge have no such prerequisites.

Immense progress has been made today in many areas of scientific knowledge. However, it is evident



that a large part of this knowledge is used to achieve human goals motivated by greed and hatred, leading consequently to more and more human suffering. Whatever benefits scientific and technological knowledge may bestow upon mankind could be sustained only if mankind could learn to reduce greed and hatred, which are the products of confused thinking. This shows that scientific knowledge and technological skill could be self-defeating unless they are properly directed by the kind of right knowledge that Buddhism values.

# Notes

1. *Pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi vijjā udapādi ñāṇaṃ udapādi āloko udapādi* (Saṃyutta Nikāya, Pali Text Society, London, Vol. V, p. 422). [\[Back\]](#)
2. Aṅguttara Nikāya I 189. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Majjhima Nikāya II 170. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Ibid. 171. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Majjhima Nikāya I 317 f. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Ibid. 178 f. [\[Back\]](#)
7. *Saññāvirattassa na santi ganthā* (Suttanipāta v 847). [\[Back\]](#)
8. *Saññaṃ pariññā vitareyya oghaṃ* (Ibid. v 779). [\[Back\]](#)

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