

Linking theory and practice through study, reflection and meditation

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The Buddhist wisdom teachings serve as a template for contemplation and insight meditation. In this course I therefore make a point of linking theory and practice as often as possible all the way along by including guided contemplations. If you are not a Buddhist practitioner you may fail to see the need for reflections in what would otherwise be a straightforward logical presentation. In other words, you might believe that one should be able to study Buddhist wisdom in a rational way without a spiritual agenda. This is how most Western books and universities have approached the subject until very recently. I have deliberately set out to do something different because it is my experience that there are many aspects of Buddhist wisdom that remain opaque or outright fanciful if one approaches them solely on an intellectual level. It is only when we go deeper through contemplation and meditation that these truths become true for us. I have found that the traditional Buddhist approach to learning is the best one to follow, an approach that combines 'three forms of conventional wisdom': wisdom that comes from hearing/reading, from contemplating and from meditating, in that order.

The Buddha pointed out that the Dharma is not merely a matter of sharing ideas. He says in the *Dhammapada* (19:259):

Dharma is not upheld by talking about it. Dharma is upheld by living in harmony with it, even if one is not learned.

The Dharma – referring to the teachings of the Buddha – is not just the spoken truth, it is the embodied truth. And, for Buddhists, the assimilation brought about through reflection and meditation is what turns information into personal knowledge and personal knowledge into wisdom. And it is wisdom that frees.

To be effective in its spiritual objective of pacifying the mental afflictions, the study of Buddhism needs to comprise these three forms of conventional wisdom. First, we listen, read and learn; second, we reflect upon or contemplate what we have learned; and third we meditate on what we have understood through our reflection. The first gives us intellectual understanding of the subject, which brings clarity. The second gives us a personal understanding that is connected with our own life experience, and this will bring conviction. And the third stage anchors our understanding into our mindstream so we have full confidence in that understanding and it becomes the way we see things.

This approach to learning is, of course, quite debatable. In modern culture knowledge gained through contemplation or meditation is considered subjective because it cannot be verified by a third party. In your view my insights are just my opinions and do not necessarily have more validity than that. Each person has their own point of view and the world is experienced differently by different people. To go

beyond the limits of subjective knowledge we need knowledge that is based on proof and verification, and only this 'objective' knowledge has broad validity. If we hold this outlook, that is commonly accepted in the West, then the three so-called wisdoms of Buddhist learning produce nothing more than individual perspectives that are very far from universal truth. This Western position directly opposes the Buddhist view I am describing here.

I shall put forward three arguments that can serve to refute the Western approach that I have characterized above.

Firstly, the very notion of a Buddhist path that can be followed by anyone, and that has stages of realization that are shared by all those who follow it, rests on the principle there is commonality of experience and insight between individuals. In other words, experience and insight are not necessarily or merely subjective.

Secondly, certain advanced states of meditation give rise to the ability to see into other people's minds thereby overturning the idea that one can never know the experience of another person.

And thirdly, Buddhism is founded on the premise that contemplation and meditation bring about knowledge of reality. Rational thought and meditation are seen as complementary, not contradictory. In Buddhism, intellectual study and meditation work hand in hand, and both are effective in fostering the non-conceptual, intuitive knowing that is critical for liberation to occur.

These are all important points to reflect upon because the value of so-called objective truth, together with the corresponding devaluation of subjective truth, are ubiquitous paradigms in our societies and in our education system.

How exactly do contemplation and meditation lead to knowledge?

The benefits of contemplation are eloquently explained in Andy Karr's *Contemplating Reality*. He makes four important points. Firstly, "profound teachings can clarify themselves simply through the process of repeated examination". Secondly, "with contemplation, you can understand the implications of the material, not just what is actually said". Thirdly, "profound teachings don't really penetrate until you make them part of your personal experience – take them in, chew on them, reflect on them, and ask yourself, 'Is this true?'" And finally, he points out that contemplation does not contradict the Buddhist emphasis on non-conceptual understanding because "we need to use thought to get beyond thought".

With respect to meditation, one of the most important processes, both philosophically and practically, is dis-identification. It is meditation that helps one dis-identify with thoughts which are seen clearly as uncontrolled and involuntary, in the same way as it helps to dis-identify from the recurrent patterns of thought and emotion on the basis of which we define character and personality. It is meditation that allows one to stop seeing what is not self as a self or as belonging to a self. Repeated meditation practice leads to short periods of freedom from habitual patterns. It weakens them by

reducing both their emotional intensity and their ability to take us over and control our actions. Buddhists claim that in this way, through meditation and mindfulness, it is possible to dismantle habitual patterns altogether. In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, Charles Goodman identifies a key that makes sense of these claims. The psychological processes that lead to suffering require distraction in order to function and they cannot operate in the presence of stable, clear attention. The more mindful and aware one is, the weaker habitual patterns will be. In describing what is meant by wisdom based on meditation, Goodman says this:

One form of wisdom based on meditation is a thorough assimilation and incorporation of a truth into your entire way of relating to the world as a result of having rested the mind on that truth during meditation, letting it sink deeply into the lower levels of awareness... It is plausible that through a practice of this kind, your way of thinking can become more aligned with the way things actually are and, therefore, more realistic and accurate. (page 555)

This course is a personal invitation to question the way you think and the way you see things. My hope is that it will stimulate deep reflection on life and a re-evaluation of your beliefs and assumptions. On the conceptual level, this is surely what Buddha Dharma is about. In this way we will avoid the pitfall of taking wisdom on the level of theory without really connecting it to life, a pitfall that the Thai master Ajahn Chah warns us against:

There are many scholarly and scriptural approaches to elucidate and help people see (this) clearly. Some of you have no doubt studied the sutras and the abhidharma. They talk extensively about the mind, and you may have gotten the idea that you need to learn all of this. It seems like a good thing, but you can get stuck in the discussion without really knowing what it is pointing out. You merely learn to enumerate the things that the scriptures say. (Being Dharma, p.11)

Abhidharma is the corpus of wisdom teachings in Buddhism, and ultimately it is supreme wisdom itself. Wisdom is a different way of knowing.