Language and the Pursuit of Knowledge: A Buddhist Philosophy Perspective

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Received: 27 December 2024 I **Revised**: 28 February 2025 I **Accepted**: 28 February 2025

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between language and knowledge acquisition from a Buddhist perspective. In Buddhist epistemology, language is seen as a skillful means to convey the Buddha's teachings, or *dhamma*. While language is crucial for transmitting knowledge, it is limited in expressing ultimate truths. This paper highlights the distinction between the language of conceptual understanding and direct experience, examines the relationship between language and dependent origination, and discusses the practice of Right Speech and meditation as paths to achieving the final goal of enlightenment. A middle-way approach to language is also emphasized to encourage the intelligent, balanced, and skillful use of language. Moreover, the article investigates the interconnected and mutually reinforcing relationship between language, knowledge acquisition, and epistemology. This examination clarifies the knowledge acquisition process and supports the spiritual path. Collectively, these themes challenge the assumption that language can fully encapsulate reality, highlighting its intrinsic limitations, particularly when conveying ultimate truths. By analyzing these perspectives, the article underscores the importance of transcending linguistic patterns to engage with deeper forms of understanding.

Keywords: Language, Pursuit of Knowledge, Buddhist Philosophy Perspective

Introduction

Language is a primary medium for communication and expression. It enables people to converse, exchange ideas, and build on the intellectual achievements of others. Through language, we ask questions, seek answers, and express the complexities of the world around us. It serves as a bridge between ideas and understanding, playing a crucial role in advancing knowledge across various fields, including science, philosophy, literature, and culture.

The structure of language not only shapes how we perceive and understand the world but also influences our thought processes, creating conceptual frameworks that guide how we categorize and interpret reality. In this way, language and knowledge share a reciprocal relationship. While language facilitates the pursuit of knowledge, it also imposes limits, as not all knowledge can be fully articulated in words. Some experiences, feelings, and insights—especially those deeply spiritual or personal—are often inexpressible.

The connection between language and knowledge acquisition is a complex and significant topic in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism employs language to articulate key

concepts such as the Four Noble Truths, impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anattā*), and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). These ideas are central to the teachings found in foundational texts like the Pāli Canon and the Mahāyāna Sutras. Rather than rejecting language outright, Buddhism advocates for a Middle Way approach. The Buddha, known for his use of *upāya* (skillful means), was meticulous in his language, often employing parables, metaphors, and analogies to guide his followers toward enlightenment. However, he also emphasized that the teachings themselves were tools to be discarded once true knowledge is attained. In this sense, language serves as an intermediary, essential for transmitting the *dharma* and guiding beings toward enlightenment, but not the final goal.

According to Buddhism, words and concepts can point toward the truth, but they often fall short of fully capturing it. Buddhism prioritizes experiential wisdom over conceptual knowledge, and as a result, language is viewed as a double-edged sword. It is essential for guiding beings toward enlightenment, yet inherently limited in conveying the deeper, non-conceptual understanding needed to overcome suffering.

In addition to the previously mentioned elements, the role of language and the pursuit of knowledge are fundamental aspects of Buddhist philosophy. Therefore, this article will explore these themes in greater depth, aiming to offer a clearer and more practical understanding. It will also help readers both apply and gain knowledge simultaneously.

This article examines language and knowledge acquisition from the perspective of empiricism in Buddhist epistemology. In addition to its role in expressing the Dhamma or ultimate truth, language has limitations in guiding individuals on the path to enlightenment. The paper explores the distinction between language and direct experience, the relationship between dependent origination and language, meditation, insight beyond language, and the Middle Way approach to language.

Language and Knowledge Acquisition from the Buddhist Philosophical Perspective

The following six themes are the focus of this section: (1) the function and limitations of language in expressing ultimate reality, (2) the distinction between language (conceptual knowledge) and direct experience, (3) dependent origination and its relation to language, (4) meditation and insight beyond language, (5) the middle way approach to language, and (6) language, epistemology and knowledge acquisition. Together, these six themes explore the intricate relationship between language, thought, and direct experience. They challenge the assumption that language can always capture the fullness of reality, and instead suggest that there are limits to what words can be conveyed, particularly when it comes to ultimate truths or direct experiences.

The Function and Limitations of Language in Expressing Ultimate Reality

In the Buddhist context, language plays a crucial role in conveying the *dhamma*, or the Buddha's teachings. Rather than being an end in itself, language serves as a tool that guides practitioners toward ultimate reality. A key concept in Buddhist epistemology related to language is *upaya* (skillful means). This idea suggests that the Buddha adapted his teachings according to the abilities and circumstances of his listeners. His teachings take various forms depending on the audience's level of understanding, ranging from simple metaphors to complex philosophical discussions. In the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, the Buddha is described as using diverse expedient means to reach different people: "The Buddha speaks in accordance with the minds of living beings, using one voice to proclaim all teachings" (Robert A. F., 1976). This illustrates how Buddhist language is fluid and adaptive, with words functioning more as tools to promote awareness than as doctrinal absolutes.

The oral and written transmission of Buddhist teachings via sutras highlights the vital role of language in preserving and spreading the *dharma*. In particular, the Pāli Canon is regarded as the authoritative source for early Buddhist teachings. Within these texts, the Buddha often used conversations, comparisons, and parables to make complex concepts accessible to the average person.

For example, in the Dhammapada, it is said: "Better than a thousand hollow words is one word that brings peace". This quote emphasizes the significance of meaningful language. What matters is not the quantity of words spoken, but their ability to foster understanding and peace.

The teachings of the Buddha assert that the Dhamma, or truth, transcends the limitations of language and cannot be fully captured in words. Nevertheless, language remains essential in guiding individuals on the path to enlightenment. As the Buddha himself said, "I teach only suffering and the cessation of suffering" (MN 22). This statement underscores the Buddha's pragmatic use of language—not to establish metaphysical dogmas, but to alleviate suffering and promote understanding.

Buddhist epistemology cautions against becoming too attached to words. In the *Heart Sutra*, we encounter the notion that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (Hanh, 1988, p. 15). This paradoxical statement suggests that, ultimately, nothing exists inherently—not even the categories and divisions created by language. While language serves as a guide, it must be transcended in order to realize the ultimate truth.

This is clearly illustrated by a saying of the Buddha recorded in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: "In 49 years, I have never said a single sentence or word" (Cleary, 1993). This statement points to two key meanings: 'nature' and 'appearance.' First, the Buddha referred to the true 'nature' of each person. Why? Because this true nature transcends the understanding of worldly intellectuals and cannot be expressed through conventional language. By denying his words,

the Buddha encouraged others to realize their own true nature. Those who understand this teaching comprehend the Buddha's message, which leads to enlightenment.

The second factor concerns 'appearance.' In the scriptures we study today, the languages and images of this world serve as tools for sentient beings to learn and practice the Buddha's teachings in order to attain liberation. It is important to recognize that these Buddhist scriptures are considered worldly "forms." Because of this, the Patriarchs often use the metaphor: "When crossing the river, leave behind the raft." Here, the raft symbolizes the scriptures, or more profoundly, language itself. In this sense, we rely on these temporary means to practice and ultimately attain enlightenment.

This is similar to the famous Zen metaphor of "the finger pointing at the moon," which highlights the limitations of language. In this analogy, words and concepts are compared to a finger that points toward the moon, symbolizing ultimate reality. As the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* puts it, "Truth is not in words but in the experience beyond words" (Suzuki, 1932). If one becomes too focused on the finger—on language and conceptual thought—they miss the moon, or the truth that lies beyond those concepts. This idea is further emphasized in Zen koans, paradoxical statements or questions designed to defy logical resolution and push the practitioner beyond conceptual thinking into direct, non-dual experience.

The limitation of language in expressing ultimate reality can also be seen through key Buddhist concepts such as *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *tathātā* (suchness), which transcend the dualistic nature of language. *Śūnyatā*, often rendered as "emptiness," is a central concept in Mahayana Buddhism. It refers to the lack of intrinsic, autonomous existence in all phenomena. As Nagarjuna, the great philosopher of the Madhyamaka school, wrote, "All things are empty of intrinsic existence" (Nāgārjuna, 1995, p. 88). This emptiness is a rejection of a constant, unchanging essence, rather than a denial of reality. Language, which operates through concepts and categories, cannot fully express this truth, because it relies on distinctions that do not apply to ultimate reality. Similarly, *tathātā* (suchness) refers to the ultimate nature of reality as it is, beyond conceptual distinctions. The *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, foundational texts in Mahayana Buddhism, describe this state: "The nature of all things is not born, does not die, is not tainted, and is not pure; it does not increase, and it does not decrease" (Hanh, 1988, p. 1). *Tathātā* points to a state of being that defies verbal expression, as language inevitably distorts the simplicity and directness of ultimate reality.

Finally, the dualistic nature of language is one of its main limitations. Language functions by creating opposites: self and other, existence and non-existence, good and bad. While it reflects the conventional world of daily experience, this dualism cannot convey the non-dual nature of ultimate reality, as taught in Buddhism. Ultimate reality, or *paramārtha-satya*, is non-dual, meaning it transcends the pairs of opposites that language relies upon. This limitation is illustrated in a well-known dialogue between Vimalakirti and Manjusri, found in the *Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sūtra*. When asked to explain the nature of non-dual reality, Vimalakirti

says nothing. His silence demonstrates that words cannot capture the ultimate truth. The act of speaking introduces distinctions and therefore falls short of expressing the unity and indivisibility of non-dual reality. This silence serves as a powerful expression of the limitations of language in Buddhist epistemology.

The Distinction Between Language (Conceptual Knowledge) and Direct Experience

In Buddhist philosophy, language (or conceptual knowledge) is essential for conveying teachings and facilitating communication. However, it is also seen as a potential obstacle to the direct experience of reality. Buddhist teachings emphasize the distinction between these two forms of knowledge. Mental constructs, such as labels, ideas, and categories, help us navigate the conventional world, and are a part of conceptual knowledge. Direct experience, on the other hand, refers to an unmediated apprehension of reality, free from the distortions of conceptual frameworks. This form of knowledge leads to enlightenment.

In the *Sabbāsava Sutta*, the Buddha says, "What one thinks, perceives, and cogitates, that becomes the basis for conceptual proliferation. Through conceptual proliferation, perceptions and ideas besiege a person" (MN 2). This highlights how ideas and concepts can obscure one's true understanding of reality by imposing mental fabrications upon it.

The limitations of language in the pursuit of knowledge are clearly illustrated in the Kalama Sutta. In this text, the Buddha outlines ten factors to guide his disciples in avoiding attachments that may hinder their quest for true knowledge. Many of these factors are related to language, such as reports, hearsay, rumors, scriptures, reasoning, and the teachings of various masters. Rather than relying on these, the Buddha advises his disciples that:

> "When you know for yourselves that these qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them.
>
> On the contrary,
>
> When you know for yourselves that these qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and happiness, then you should enter and remain in them (AN 3. 65)."

In Buddhist philosophy, ultimate truth cannot be fully grasped through words or concepts. Instead, language serves only to guide practitioners toward direct realization. This distinction between conceptual knowledge and direct experience is essential for understanding how language functions within Buddhist thought.

Dependent Origination and Its Relation to Language

One of Buddhism's most significant teachings is the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), which offers a profound understanding of the relationship between language, cognition, and reality. It explains that nothing exists independently or intrinsically, and that all phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions. This implies that

language itself emerges in dependence on human cognition and culture, further highlighting its contingent nature. In the *Madhupindika Sutta* (MN 18), the Buddha illustrates how sense faculties and sense objects come into contact to form perceptions, which are then interpreted by the mind. This process demonstrates how language and conceptual thought arise from conditioned interactions, rather than from any fixed or ultimate truths.

Additionally, language shapes and limits our perception of reality. Buddhist epistemology acknowledges that while words and concepts serve as cognitive shortcuts, helping us categorize and make sense of our experiences, they also distort reality by imposing artificial divisions and boundaries. This issue is addressed in the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*, where the Buddha says: "By and large, this world is in bondage to the duality of existence and non-existence" (SN 12.15). Here, the Buddha points out that language and conceptual thought sustain a dualistic view of the universe, obscuring the fact that ultimate truth is non-dual. Furthermore, language tends to reify—making solid phenomena that are inherently impermanent and empty of intrinsic existence. As explained in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, all phenomena are characterized by *śūnyatā* (emptiness), meaning they lack intrinsic, independent essence. However, when we use words to describe them, we often treat phenomena as static, unchanging entities. As a result, we become ignorant, unable to recognize how fleeting and interconnected everything is.

Meditation and Insight Beyond Language

Buddhist epistemology views meditation as a vital method for transcending the limits of language and conceptual thought. While language is necessary for instruction and communication, it is ultimately insufficient for understanding the essence of ultimate truth. Meditation calms the mind and allows practitioners to move beyond linguistic barriers, offering a direct path to insight. This enables a deeper understanding of reality, free from the distortions caused by conceptualization and mental conditioning.

Vipassana, or insight meditation, is a central practice in Buddhism aimed at cultivating a direct understanding of the nature of reality. Through the observation of phenomena as they arise and pass away, practitioners gain insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of all things. This practice enables practitioners to experience truth directly, without relying on language, which transcends the conceptual understanding gained through study or discussion.

The foundations of mindfulness are outlined by the Buddha in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, where he encourages practitioners to observe their bodily sensations, feelings, mental states, and mental objects. Seeing reality *yathabhutam*—"as it actually is"—entails perceiving beyond the labels and interpretations imposed by language. As the Buddha states, "One sees with wisdom, 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.' Thus, one's mind is liberated from

attachment" (MN 10). Here, the role of Vipassana is to bring the mind to a state of clarity, allowing it to perceive phenomena without conceptual distortion.

In contrast to vipassana, which focuses on insight, samatha meditation aims to calm the mind and develop concentration (samadhi). To achieve deep tranquility, samatha practice involves focusing attention on a single object for an extended period, such as the breath or a mental image. In Buddhist epistemology, this practice is crucial because it cultivates the mental clarity that allows insight to emerge. Through samatha, the mind is freed from all distractions, including verbal and conceptual thinking. As the mind settles into stillness, it transcends ordinary thought patterns that depend on language.

The Buddha emphasizes this process in the *Anapanasati Sutta*, where mindfulness of breathing leads to increasing calm and clarity. He states, "When one trains thus: 'I will breathe in calming the mind,' one dwells equanimous and clear knowing" (MN 118). In this state, the mind is no longer bound by words or conceptual frameworks, creating the conditions for deeper insight. Samatha serves as a prelude to vipassana, as a focused, calm mind is better suited to directly experience reality. Without verbal proliferation (*papanca*), the mind can witness things as they truly are. This transcendence of language allows for a purer, unmediated experience of reality, which is essential for achieving liberation.

Stillness and wordlessness are often emphasized in Buddhist traditions, particularly in Zen, as essential to genuine knowledge. Silence is a state in which the mind is free from conceptual thought and verbalization, allowing it to observe reality directly. It is not merely the absence of words. The teachings of the Buddha also reflect this, as he frequently used silence as a teaching tool to demonstrate the limitations of verbal explanations in understanding ultimate truths.

For example, in the *Cula-Malunkyovada Sutta*, the Buddha remained silent when asked metaphysical questions such as whether the universe is finite or infinite, or whether the self exists after death (MN 63). This silence, known as the noble silence (*ariya-tunhibhava*), reflected the Buddha's view that words cannot fully express the nature of ultimate reality and that such inquiries are not conducive to liberation. As the Buddha explained, "When there is no 'I am' thinking, no thoughts of 'I am this or that,' one is freed from the obsessions of the mind" (SN 22:81).

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that Vipassana and Samatha meditation fosters the development of insight and clarity that transcend language, enabling a direct experience of reality. Silence and wordlessness are key to true understanding, as they bypass the dualities and distortions introduced by language. Ultimately, meditation leads to liberation by allowing the mind to perceive reality as it truly is, free from conceptual thought.

The Middle Way Approach to Language

Language is seen as a necessary yet ultimately provisional tool in pursuing enlightenment. The Buddha taught that while language has inherent limits, it can be skillfully used to guide practitioners toward understanding. Language must be carefully balanced on the spiritual path: it can convey the truth, but it is important to recognize that it cannot fully express the essence of ultimate reality. This perspective aligns with the Buddha's teachings on the Middle Way, which emphasize avoiding extremes and adopting a balanced, well-rounded approach to spiritual practice.

Sammā vācā, or Right Speech, is a teaching from the Noble Eightfold Path that emphasizes the Buddha's belief in the ethical use of language. Right Speech involves speaking truthfully, thoughtfully, and sensibly, while avoiding lies, divisive comments, harsh language, and idle gossip. It is believed that ethical speech is crucial not only for progressing on the path to enlightenment but also maintaining harmonious relationships. In the *Abhaya Sutta*, the Buddha defines Right Speech as speaking words that are both true and beneficial:

> "A statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. It is blameless and unfault by knowledgeable people. Which five? It is spoken at the right time, it is truthful, it is beneficial, it is spoken gently, and it is spoken with a mind of goodwill (MN 58)."

This teaching emphasizes that when used skillfully, language can foster understanding and support the spiritual journey. However, even within this context, the Buddha emphasized that words are provisional tools. Right Speech is a means to an end, not the end itself. The purpose of using language ethically and skillfully is to reduce suffering, promote clarity, and guide others toward the truth. Once direct experiential understanding is reached, the need for conceptual language diminishes.

Buddhist epistemology emphasizes that language is a transitory guide—useful in the early stages of the spiritual journey but ultimately inadequate for expressing the deepest truths. The Buddha's teachings are often likened to a 'raft' that helps followers cross the river of suffering and ignorance. However, as the Buddha noted in the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, once one has crossed the river, there is no need to carry the raft any further: "When you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should let go even of dhammas, to say nothing of non-dhammas" (MN 22). In this analogy, language, and even the Buddha's teachings, are skillful means (*upaya*): useful, but not ultimate. Depending on the listener's level of understanding, different language and lessons were offered, but the goal of each was to help the practitioner reach an insight beyond words.

Lastly, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the importance of balanced language use on the path to understanding. The Buddha acknowledged that fundamental truths cannot be fully expressed in words, but he also skillfully employed language to meet the needs of different audiences. This approach is evident in the distinction between conventional truth (*samvrti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramartha-satya*), a central teaching in the Mahāyāna tradition.

Conventional truth involves the use of language and concepts to navigate the everyday world. These truths are not false, but they are incomplete—they are provisional and only useful in a relative sense. Ultimate truth, on the other hand, refers to the direct, non-conceptual realization of the nature of reality. As Nāgārjuna wrote in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: "The Buddha's teachings of the Dhamma are based on two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth. Those who do not understand the distinction between these two truths do not grasp the profound point of the Buddha's teaching" (Nāgārjuna, 1995).

This distinction reflects Buddhism's view of language as playing a balanced role in knowledge. The language is necessary for intellectual understanding, communication, and instruction—all components of conventional truth. On the other hand, language is insufficient when discussing the most profound realizations, such as the understanding of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) or the non-dual nature of reality. While language can serve as a guide along the path, the ultimate goal is to transcend it through direct contemplative experience.

The Buddha's teachings often reflect this balance. In the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*, the Buddha explains that clinging to extreme views—such as the belief in absolute existence or non-existence—creates suffering. Instead, he advocates for a middle path that transcends conceptual extremes, stating, "This world, Kaccana, for the most part depends upon a duality - upon the notion of existence and the notion of nonexistence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of nonexistence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world" (SN 12.15). Here, the Buddha illustrates the middle-way approach to language and conceptual thought. While language and concepts are necessary for navigating the world and understanding the Dhamma, they must ultimately be relinquished in favor of direct realization. Thus, the Middle Way strikes a balance between the usefulness and limitations of language in the pursuit of knowledge.

Language, Epistemology and Knowledge Acquisition

Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the intimate relationship and complementary nature of language, epistemology (particularly through sensory perception), and knowledge acquisition. Both epistemology and language are seen as crucial but transient means of knowledge transmission and access. As noted, "Language, while indispensable for communicating the Dharma, cannot encapsulate the entirety of ultimate reality" (Conze, 1967, p. 87). This suggests that language facilitates the conceptualization of the path and the transmission of teachings, enabling us to learn and comprehend through oral transmission or scripture. However, spoken and written language alone are insufficient to ensure the correctness of knowledge. According to epistemology, particularly empiricism, real knowledge

must be confirmed by sensory experience. The Buddha highlights the value of firsthand experience through the senses in the *Madhupindika Sutta*:

> "Depending on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives (labels in the mind). What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one objectifies. Based on what a person objectifies, the perceptions and categories of objectification assail him/her concerning past, present, and future forms cognizable via the eye... (MN 18)."

The six consciousness arise from the interplay between the six sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and the six sense objects (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental phenomena). This process is crucial for determining and confirming the validity of accepted wisdom and facts, laying the foundation for a deeper and more practical understanding.

The Buddha did not reject the validity of sense perception. He acknowledged that sensory data is a primary source of knowledge and understanding of the world. However, he also pointed out that sense perception tends to mislead people. This is because we naturally "papañchize" or mentally proliferate what we perceive, often interpreting it in ways that mislead us. As a result, sensory knowledge is not considered the ultimate truth in Buddhism. According to the Buddhist teachings, this process unfolds as follows: seeing the object ⟶ consciousness ⟶ sensation ⟶ perception ⟶ concepts ⟶ conflicts. This chain leads to various mental proliferations, which are influenced by our dispositions, likes, and dislikes.

Buddhism teaches that we do not stop this cycle of mental proliferation, our path to emancipation becomes clouded by craving, conceit, and fixed views. For example, we may become attached to thoughts of "this is mine" (etaṃ mama), inflated by the notion of "I am" (so 'ham asmi), or caught up in rigid concepts of the self (esso attā). To break free from this chain of ignorance, it is essential not to rejoice in or indulge in these proliferations (ettha ve natthi abhinanditabbaṃ); we should praise or give excessive importance to them (ettha ve natthi abhivaditabbaṃ); we should become deeply attached to them (ettha ve natthi ajjhosetabbaṃ).

Buddhism acknowledges the potential for acquiring higher or supreme knowledge, even in similar situations. The main challenge, however, is that our minds are clouded by obstacles. The mind can be compared to gold ore that has been contaminated with impurities such as copper, iron, lead, and silver. When these impurities are removed, the mind's natural brilliance shines through, and it gains the capacity for heightened perception, including extrasensory knowledge and insight.

In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha identifies five hindrances that obstruct vision, knowledge, and wisdom. These hindrances lead to confusion, blindness, and are detrimental to our understanding, often veiling the path to Nibbāna. They include:

1. Sensual desire (kamacchanda)
2. Ill will (vyapada)

3. Sloth and torpor (thīna-middha)

4. Excitement and worry (uddacca-kukkucca)

5. Doubt and perplexity (vicikicca) (SN 46.40).

On the other hand, the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* also outlines seven factors that nurture the growth of vision, knowledge, and wisdom, which are known as the seven factors of enlightenment (*bojjhaṅga*). These factors are:

1. Mindfulness – awareness of the Dhamma (sati)

2. Investigation of the Dhamma (dhamma-vicaya)

3. Effort and determination (viriya)

4. Joy (pīti)

5. Tranquility of both body and mind (passaddhi)

6. Concentration (samādhi)

7. Equanimity (upekkha)

By cultivating these seven factors, one can purify the mind and progress toward deeper wisdom and ultimate liberation.

Buddhism rejects any form of authority—whether blind faith or pure reasoning—as a means of attaining true knowledge. The core of Buddhist spiritual practice is a triad that includes virtues, concentration (or mastery of the mind), and wisdom, which represents ultimate knowledge. These three elements—virtue, concentration, and wisdom—can be likened to the three wheels of a chariot. For the journey to be successful, the strength and size of all three wheels must be equal. Otherwise, one cannot reach the final destination, which in this case is freedom from ignorance.

The Buddhist method of knowledge-based empirical research is distinguished by the principle: "In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized" (Ud 1. 10). This approach contrasts with linguistically constructed labels and interpretations, encouraging practitioners to experience reality directly. In the context of mindfulness practices, Bhikkhu Bodhi emphasizes that "Meditation transforms theoretical understanding into direct realization, bridging the gap between conceptual and experiential knowledge" (Bodhi, 1994, p. 81). Therefore, practitioners are urged to observe sensations and mental states without mediation. This direct observation helps to overcome the limitations of language-based thinking. However, it is important to note that while sense perception provides raw data about phenomena, language remains essential for classifying and conveying this information.

Wisdom, or knowledge, can be classified into three categories, each representing a stage in the process of learning and understanding. These are *Suta-mayā-paññā* (wisdom born of learning), *Cintā-mayā-paññā* (wisdom born of reflection), and *Bhāvanā-mayā-paññā* (wisdom born of meditation).

Suta-mayā-paññā refers to knowledge gained through listening to teachings, studying scriptures, or learning from others. It serves as the first step toward understanding. Reading or learning from authentic scriptures helps individuals grasp the Buddha's teachings, and this knowledge can then be applied to daily life. As the saying goes, "Suta-mayā-paññā is the first step, providing a cognitive framework to begin our journey in the Dhamma" (Bodhi, 1994, p. 125). During this phase, knowledge arises from exposure to the Dhamma, which includes studying the *Tipitaka* and hearing oral teachings. However, this wisdom remains theoretical and intellectual. It is not sufficient to guide one to the highest realization.

The next stage, *Cintā-mayā-paññā* (wisdom born of reflection), involves critical thinking, contemplation, and reasoning about the knowledge gained. It requires analyzing the teachings and integrating them into one's perspective. By reflecting on the lessons and evaluating them, wisdom progresses from simple knowledge to deeper comprehension. This process results in greater clarity and personal insight. As the Buddha taught, "One who reflects wisely considers and penetrates deeply the meaning of what he has learned" (MN 19). And, "When he develops mindfulness and concentration, wisdom arises, and he knows things as they are" (SN 35.245).

The final stage is *Bhāvanā-mayā-paññā* (wisdom born of meditation). This wisdom is the culmination of practice, where the truths of the Dhamma are no longer abstract but become an integral part of one's lived experience (Rahula, 1974, p. 92). It is attained through direct experiential realization in meditation practice. Its foundations lie in *samatha* (calm meditation) and *vipassanā* (insight meditation), which allow practitioners to directly experience the impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*) that are the true nature of existence. This stage leads to a profound understanding of reality that transcends intellectual knowledge.

In conclusion, language, knowledge acquisition, and epistemology are interconnected and reinforce one another. Epistemology explores the scope and validity of knowledge, while language enables people to communicate and share information. Both linguistic and non-linguistic processes are essential for knowledge development. Despite its power, language's limitations highlight the importance of firsthand experience and other forms of knowing. This dynamic interplay shapes how individuals and cultures understand and engage with the world.

Conclusion

Buddhist epistemology provides a nuanced analysis of how language functions in the acquisition of knowledge and the pursuit of enlightenment. Central to this is the understanding that while language is essential for instruction and communication, it is ultimately inadequate for expressing ultimate truths. The Buddha's emphasis on Right Speech (*sammā vācā*) and his guidance on the moral and constructive use of words demonstrate his mastery in employing language to teach the Dhamma. However, the only way to truly transcend the limitations

imposed by words and concepts is through direct experience, which can be cultivated through mindfulness and meditation.

Language's dual role in Buddhist epistemology is paradoxical. It is indispensable for guiding practitioners, transmitting the Dhamma, and navigating the conventional world. On the other hand, it falls short of conveying the ultimate truth, as the true realization of the Dhamma lies beyond words, in direct experience. Therefore, practitioners must use language wisely and go beyond its limits to achieve the Dhamma.

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