

# Perfection of Knowledge



Barbara O'Brien | Posted on [February 6, 2017](#) | Posted in [Uncategorized](#) — [1 Comment](#) ↓

We don't talk about knowledge all that much in Buddhism. The emphasis is on wisdom, which is something else. But in the [Mahayana](#) Ten Perfections, the Perfection of Knowledge — Jnana Paramita — is number ten.

Before we plunge into a discussion of jnana, let's clarify the difference between wisdom and knowledge. In his book *What the Buddha Taught*, the Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula wrote,

*“According to Buddhism there are two sorts of understanding: What we generally call understanding is knowledge, an accumulated memory, an intellectual grasping of a subject according to certain given data. This is called ‘knowing accordingly’ (anubodhd). It is not very keep. Real deep understanding is called ‘penetration’ (pativedha), seeing a thing in its true nature, without name and label. This penetration is possible only when the mind is free from all impurities and is fully developed through meditation.”*

In the more commonly known Mahayana [Six Perfections](#), the sixth and last item is Prajna Paramita, or the Perfection of Wisdom. In Mahayana Buddhism this is equated with realization of the truth of [sunyata](#), or emptiness. It's understood that sunyata is not something that can be completely understood intellectually.

Later, Mahayana Buddhists would add four more perfections to the original six. These are [skillful means \(upaya\)](#) ; aspiration or vow, especially [bodhisattva vows](#); [spiritual power](#); and knowledge — to make a list of ten.

Knowledge does have a place, then, in Buddhist practice. So let's look at what that place is.

## What Do We Mean by Knowledge?

In his book *Faces of Compassion: Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression* (Wisdom Publications, 2012), [Soto Zen](#) teacher Taigen Dan Leighton wrote,

*“Knowledge (jnana in Sanskrit, etymologically related to the Greek gnosis) is contrasted with wisdom, as this knowledge refers to practical understanding of the workings of phenomena in the conventional world — not useless knowledge just learned for knowledge's sake, memorizing facts and information by rote as is*

*done for regurgitation on tests in some unimaginative educational systems. As the flip side of wisdom, the perfection of knowledge can be seen as the function or implementation of wisdom — but fully informed by wisdom’s insight into the essential. This knowledge, also referred to as the perfection of truth, is at the service of wisdom, putting wisdom to work in the world.”*

An example of jnana in this sense would be knowledge of medicine, to heal people. As the last of the Ten Mahayana Perfections, knowledge ties together the rest of the perfections — [generosity](#), [morality](#), [patience](#), [energy](#), [meditation](#), wisdom, skillful means, vow, and powers — to help relieve suffering in the phenomenal world.

## Knowledge of the Teachings

This may not be a traditional understanding of Jnana Paramita, but I’d like to add that it doesn’t hurt to study what the Buddha and other great Buddhist teachers have taught. As interest in Buddhism has grown in the West, much of the focus has been on meditation and mindfulness. And that’s fine. But there’s more to Buddhism than meditation and mindfulness.

It’s sometimes the case that we don’t appreciate doctrines such as the [Four Noble Truths](#) right away. But if you’re reading this I assume you have some interest, so don’t hold back. Knowledge of doctrine by itself isn’t the Buddhist path, but the doctrines act as markers on the path. They can sometimes lead you and sometimes show you you’ve gone off into a cul-de-sac.

*[This is an article I wrote for the Buddhism section of About.com. However, since About.com has removed it from their servers, all rights revert to me.]*

### About the Author

Barbara Hoetsu O'Brien is a student of Zen Buddhism and a journalist who covers religion in American politics and culture.

O'Brien began her formal study of Buddhism in 1988, upon her acceptance as a laity student at the Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Temper, New York. In the intervening years, O'Brien has actively engaged in meeting Buddhists from other traditions and cultures to learn about the many forms of Buddhism. O'Brien also practiced at the Empty Hand Zen Center in New Rochelle, New York, as well as the Zen Center of New York City.

O'Brien previously covered Buddhism and other religious-themed topics for ThoughtCo. Through her blog, Rethinking Religion, she wrote primarily about Buddhism and religion in general. She also wrote extensively about religion in America, looking at how religion helped to shape the nation's politics and culture. Her work includes several books such as *Rethinking Religion* (TenDirections, 2014). Her articles have been published by The Guardian, Tricycle.org, and elsewhere.