

Two Paths to Knowledge

by

Bhikkhu Bodhi

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MANY of the formidable social and cultural problems we face today are rooted in the sharp schism that has divided Western civilization between science and religion, where science claims invincible knowledge based on the empirical investigation of the natural world, while religion can do little more than call for faith in supernatural creeds and obedience to codes of ethics that require restraint, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice. Since religion, as traditionally understood, often rests on little more than blithe promises and pompous threats, its appeals to our allegiance seldom win assent, while the ethical ideals it advocates stand hardly a fighting chance against the constant injunction—thrust upon us by TV, radio, and signboard—to enjoy life to the hilt while we can. As a result, a vast portion of humankind today has become alienated from religion as a meaningful guide to life, left with no alternative but to plunge headlong into the secular religion of consumerism and hedonism. Too often, those in the religious camp, sensing the threat secularism poses to their own security, feel driven toward an aggressive fundamentalism in a desperate bid to salvage traditional loyalties.

The quest to establish a sound basis for conduct in today's world has been made particularly difficult because one consequence of the dominance of the scientific worldview has been the banishment of values from the domain of the real. While many scientists, in their personal lives, are staunch advocates of such ideals as world peace, political justice, and greater economic equality, the worldview promulgated by modern science grants to values no objective grounding in the grand scheme of things. From this perspective, their root and basis is purely subjective, and thus they bring along all the qualities the notion of subjectivity suggests: being personal, private, relative, even arbitrary. The overall

effect of this scission, despite the best intentions of many responsible scientists, has been to give a green light to lifestyles founded on the quest for personal gratification and a power drive aimed at the exploitation of others.

In contrast to the classical Western antithesis of religion and science, Buddhism shares with science a common commitment to uncover the truth about the world. Both Buddhism and science draw a sharp distinction between the way things appear, and the way they really are, and both offer to open our minds to insights into the real nature of things normally hidden from us by false ideas based on sense perception and “common sense.” Nevertheless, despite this affinity, it is also necessary to recognize the great differences in aim and orientation that separate Buddhism and science. While both may share certain conceptions about the nature of reality, science is essentially a project designed to provide us with objective, factual knowledge, with information pertaining to the public domain, while Buddhism is a spiritual path intended to promote inner transformation and the realization of the highest good, called enlightenment, liberation, or Nibbāna. In Buddhism, the quest for knowledge is important not as an end in itself, but because the main cause of our bondage and suffering is ignorance, not understanding things as they really are, and thus the antidote needed to heal ourselves is knowledge or insight.

Again, the knowledge to be acquired by the practice of Dhamma differs significantly from that sought by science in several major respects. Most importantly, the knowledge sought is not simply the acquisition of objective information about the constitution and operations of the physical world, but a deep personal insight into the real nature of one’s personal existence. The aim is not to understand reality from the outside, but from the inside, from the perspective of one’s own, living experience. One seeks not factual knowledge, but insight or wisdom, a personal knowledge, inescapably subjective, whose whole value lies in its transformative impact on one’s life. Concern with the outer world, as an object of knowledge, arises only insofar as the outer world is inextricably implicated in experience. As the Buddha says: “It is in this body, with its perception and thought, that I declare is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way to the cessation of the world.”

Because Buddhism takes personal experience as its starting point, without aiming to use experience as a springboard to an impersonal, objective type of knowledge, it includes within its domain the entire spectrum of qualities disclosed by personal experience. This means that Buddhism gives prime consideration to values. But even more, values for Buddhism are not merely projections of subjective judgments which we fashion according to our personal whims, social needs, or cultural conditioning; to the contrary, they are written into the texture of reality just as firmly as the laws of motion and thermodynamics. Hence, values can be evaluated: rated in terms of truth and falsity, ranked as valid and invalid, and part of our task in giving meaning to our lives is to unearth the true scheme of values. To determine the true gradation of values, we must turn our attention

inward and use subjective criteria of investigation; but what we find, far from being private or arbitrary, is an integral part of the objective order, permeated by the same lawfulness as that which governs the movement of the planets and the stars.

Affirmation of the objective reality of value implies another major distinction between Buddhism and science. In order for the liberating knowledge of enlightenment to arise, the investigator must undergo a profound personal transformation guided by inner perception of the genuine values. While natural science can be undertaken as a purely intellectual discipline, the Buddhist quest in its entirety is an *existential* discipline which can only be implemented by regulating one's conduct, purifying one's mind, and refining one's capacity for attention to one's own bodily and mental processes. This training requires compliance with ethics all the way through, and thus ethical guidelines support and pervade the entire training from its starting point in right action to its culmination in the highest liberation of the mind.

What is especially noteworthy is that the ethical thrust of the Buddhist training and its cognitive thrust converge on the same point, the realization of the truth of selflessness (*anattā*). It is just here that contemporary science approaches Buddhism in its discovery of the process nature of actuality, implying the lack of an ultimate substance concealed behind the sequence of events. But this correspondence again points to a fundamental difference. In Buddhism the impermanent and substanceless nature of reality is not simply a factual truth apprehended by objective knowledge. It is above all an existential truth, a transformative principle offering the key to right understanding and right liberation. To use this key to open the door to spiritual freedom, its sole purpose, we must govern our conduct on the premise that the idea of a substantial self is a delusion. It is insufficient merely to give intellectual assent to the idea of selflessness and turn it into a plaything of thought. The principle must be penetrated by training ourselves to discover the absence of selfhood in its subtlest hiding place, the deep recesses of our own minds.

It is to be hoped that Buddhist thinkers and open-minded scientists, by sharing their insights and reflections, can show us an effective way to heal the rift between objective knowledge and spiritual wisdom and thus bring about a reconciliation between science and spirituality. In this way spiritual practice will become an integral part of the discipline aimed at knowledge, and spiritual practice and knowledge in combination will become the tools for achieving the highest good, enlightenment and spiritual freedom. This has always been the position of Buddhism, as evidenced by the most ancient texts themselves. We must remember that the Buddha, the Enlightened One, is not only, like the scientist, a *lokavidū*, “a knower of the world” but also, above all, a *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, “one complete in both knowledge and conduct.”

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BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY
P.O. Box 61
54, Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy
Sri Lanka
<http://www.bps.lk>