



The role of reason in Buddhism

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Reason plays a more important role in Buddhism than perhaps in any other of the world's religions. An underlying assumption in Buddhist thought is that the truth – even truths that are ultimate and beyond words – can be pointed to in rational language. In the case of ultimate truths, rational language will only be able to convey an approximation of those truths at best, because the ultimate is indescribable and beyond words, by definition. Yet the principle remains that nothing can be accepted as true if it is irrational, illogical or somehow goes against valid reasoning. In other words, truth is always compatible with reason.

How can we account for the prominent role of reason within the Buddhist religion? It is connected with the fact that neither the doctrine nor the scriptures of Buddhism are considered divine in origin, and consequently there is nothing intrinsically non-human about them, and nothing in them that is inherently inaccessible to the human mind. There is therefore no justification within Buddhist thought for arguing that ultimate truths must inevitably be unfathomable mysteries.

The Buddhist understanding of enlightenment is that it is the attainment of freedom from ignorance. This implies that once ignorance has dissolved then knowledge will arise and indeed knowledge, along with the qualities of limitless compassion, is one of the characteristics of both nirvana and buddhahood. For human beings, knowledge is intimately related to reason and, even for philosophies that acknowledge the limits of reason, reason is nonetheless an indispensable tool for gaining at least some degree of knowledge. Buddhism is therefore internally consistent in the way it sets out the limits of reason for knowing ultimate truths, while at the same time valuing reason on the conventional level as a method for helping us reach the point when we can transcend reason altogether.

Zen Buddhism, and especially Rinzai Zen, may be exceptions to some of these points. The Zen approach tends to be one that does not accept the value of rational discourse as a stepping stone for understanding higher, non-conceptual truths. Instead, when language is used it employs paradox and riddles which, on the face of it at least, are far from logical and rational. This Zen approach to language also extends to the Buddhist scriptures themselves. Only that which directly expresses the ineffable truth can ultimately be considered authoritative.

Establishing truth and validity

'Dharma' is a Sanskrit word used to refer to the teachings of the Buddha so we talk of the 'Buddha Dharma'. 'Dharma' also means the truth, so the understanding is that the Buddha taught the truth of all things: how things function and what their true nature is. Many of us might feel quite jaded when we hear anyone claiming to teach the truth. But Buddhism is not dogmatic: it does not claim to teach truths that are exclusively Buddhist and that nobody else understands, nor does it teach truths that all Buddhist must believe in. On the contrary, the truth of the Buddha Dharma is universal, it belongs to nobody in particular and to everyone in general, whether Buddhist or not. Rather like scientific truths, the truths of the Dharma are open to everyone.



In these days of fake news and social media this point can be problematic. Often these days we're not quite sure what the truth is, or who is telling the truth and who isn't. Buddhism is surprisingly helpful in this regard. Unlike most other religions, Buddhism uses a combination of faith and reasoning to establish its truths. In fact, it says there are **three criteria** that can be used to determine whether or not anything can be counted as true.

First, it must be consistent with human experience – in other words, if we experience that the sky is blue and not green, then it's true to say that the sky is blue. If we perceive something through the senses in a situation where our faculties are fully functioning and there is no physical distortion, then our sense perception can be said to be true. On the other hand, if what someone states is contrary to what we see and hear, it cannot be accepted as true.

The **second** criterion is that truth must be consistent with correct reasoning. Whenever we can't perceive things directly we can use correct reasoning to understand the truth of a situation. For example, I might be sitting in my flat in Kyiv and hear a very loud explosion outside which leaves a big crater in the ground. Because I know that the Russian army is nearby, and I know they have missiles, and I also know that nobody else has missiles that would be used to target my block of flats, I can infer that the explosion was caused by a Russian missile. By using satellite images and drones one may be able to prove that was the case, but on the ground direct perception is not possible, and only inference can be used.

These two methods, sense perception and logical reasoning, can be used by anyone to establish valid truth and in fact this **is** how we operate all the time. Every one of us relies on sense perception and basic logical reasoning to know and understand the world. The third criterion, however, is more specifically Buddhist: it is to rely on the words of the Buddha. This method is only used for truths that are otherwise beyond us – they can't be perceived through the senses and they can't conclusively be found through logic. These truths are subtle and vast in scope so difficult for humans to discern. Examples are karma and rebirth, and enlightenment itself. Buddhists believe that the Buddha was a trustworthy source of knowledge because what he said concerning sense perceptions and logic can be validated and shown to be true, so they trust him on subtle matters that cannot readily be validated.

In summary, Buddhist thought classifies objects of knowledge into three types. There are objects that can be directly perceived; there are objects that cannot be directly perceived in a particular moment but that can be inferred; and there are subtle objects that cannot be perceived or inferred. Each of the three methods corresponds to a particular category of object. The important implication that can be drawn here **is** that anything that can be an object of the senses or of logical inference **is** not a matter of faith or belief; its validity can be correctly and adequately established through one of those methods. Therefore, if faith plays any role in Buddhist thought it **is** solely with regard to the third category of objects, those that are subtle and beyond the ordinary human mind. So for instance, if the Buddha had said that the sky was green, or the Earth was flat, we would have to seriously question such statements because they contradict experience and logic; we would not simply accept them on faith. Similarly, when the Buddha speaks of rebirth and nirvana we are aware that sense perception and logic do not equip us with adequate tools to determine whether such ideas are valid or not.

Now the Buddha was a human being – not a God or a prophet – so the fact that he became enlightened and understood the truth of all things means that we can, too. In other words, Buddhists believe it's possible for human beings to learn to understand even the most subtle truths. There is no glass ceiling on what we can know when our mind is trained. The Dharma is universal, it's not a truth that belongs only to



buddhas or to saints, it's a truth that can potentially be realized by anyone. That is surely a very important point. The Buddhist vision is empowering.

The four reliances

Human beings have natural intelligence and yet we need to be educated so we know how to use reasoning correctly. Buddhism sets out guidelines that must be adhered to for reasoning and logic to be regarded as authoritative. One important set of guidelines is called 'the four reliances.' They identify the basic discernments necessary when inquiring into the nature of reality.ⁱ

1. When analysing a particular claim, we must not draw conclusions based on the renown of the person making the claim. Rather, we should draw conclusions on the basis of his or her message.
2. We should not deduce the truth or falsity of a statement from its literary merits or the quality of the writing; the content of the message is more important than its form.
3. We should not put our trust in statements that have conventional and provisional validity with respect to a particular objective, but rather we should give more importance to the definitive meaning of a text that pertains to the actual nature of reality.
4. With respect to the definitive meaning, we should accord greater importance to the observations of direct perception and not be content with conjecture or understanding simply on the level of the words.

Irrespective of the topic one is studying, and whether or not one is studying Buddhism or some other subject, these four reliances should be applied whenever we engage in analysis. Taken together, they mean that we should beware of believing in someone's words simply because they are charismatic, good talkers or famous; we should not jump to conclusions too quickly on the basis of the literal meaning alone but reflect upon it deeply; we should know how to tell the difference between a statement that is made with a particular goal in mind and one that is made about the truth of realityⁱⁱ (that is, the difference between conventional and ultimate truths); and finally, we should discern between truths that are based on direct perception and statements that are speculative and not validated in experience.

Discussion

Compare Buddhist and Christian views on the relationship between faith and reason.



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ⁱ H.H. the Dalai Lama, 'Introduction' in *Science and Philosophy in the Indian Buddhist Classics*, vol.1, p.10.



ⁱⁱ This refers to statements that are only true in a certain context but not in all contexts and cases. For example, one might tell a child that fire is dangerous because it burns, and the objective is to prevent the child from getting burned. But this statement is not universally true. Fire is not always dangerous.