

Light of Knowledge

The Purpose of Dharma College Curriculum

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The purpose of Dharma College is to stimulate the expansion of knowledge by encouraging individuals to extend their own knowledge: you are all well educated, well trained, some are even teachers and masters of certain western disciplines, so your knowledge is already well developed. Further extension is nonetheless possible, and I believe the wisdom tradition of the Buddha has a unique role to play in this regard. Certain preliminary ideas about Dharma have been circulating in western culture for several decades, creating some familiarity as well as some expectations about this ancient path of wisdom. My approach begins with the unexpectedly simple and moves toward deeper understanding through a sustained process of dialectical investigation.

At this moment in time, at this juncture in world history, we have an opportunity to investigate and improve the way we use our mind and energy to make it more productive. Though the classical Dharma traditions do not use the term, we might call this mind and energy our human spirit. Through observation, dialogue, and closely engaging thought to thought individually, and mind to mind among us, we directly and personally expand knowledge. Each of us has access to extensive resources including the accumulated knowledge developed by the civilizations of the world as well as the specific disciplines we have individually studied, practiced, and used in our own lives.

Classes of Knowledge

Generally speaking, three different 'classes' of knowledge can be identified, all of which are operating in the world today in varying degrees. The first class of knowledge establishes the transmission of a discipline from the past to the future via the present. The master trains the disciple in the views and methods of the discipline, and the disciple, according to his capacity, becomes the trainer of the next generation. This knowledge is founded on our learning what has been taught to us. This transmission has produced an unbelievable extension of understanding, together with the explosion of methods, tools, and technologies that we enjoy today. Improvements in our way of life, extension of life span, and control over many external circumstances are sample results of this class of knowledge, which grants us

the key to participation in the worldly ways of life according to civilization's standards and patterns.

A second class of knowledge is derived from the first but begins to work out the consequences of the extension of knowledge as disciplines multiply and technical information expands. There arises a thrust toward using knowledge to resolve more subtle human problems and more complex global problems. New specialties bring about new solutions, as well as increased productivity and greater control over the physical realm.

The volume of our current knowledge has burgeoned far beyond what a single individual could possibly master in a lifetime, while it takes half a lifetime to become expert in a single field. And so it happens that a person's time and energy is devoted to mastering a particular type of knowledge, but the outcome is not completely in line with the expectations that inspired that investment; in the end, the return is not truly worth the cost. The gap between the original vision and the actual outcome becomes more obvious with this second class of knowledge, and this stimulates intelligence to look into different dimensions to bring vision and outcome closer together.

This class of knowledge also begins to notice the knowledge gap between generations and from century to century; the new 21st century commerce engenders a way of life quite different than the 20th century, and far different than the 19th century. As knowledge progresses in time, there are remarkable gains overall, but there may also be some serious losses and the disappearance of valuable understanding. These losses may become signals that knowledge remains incomplete in important ways, though the nature of that incompleteness may not be known with certainty.

The side-effects of technological progress and the issues of predictability and controllability come to the fore, demonstrating again and again the lack of completeness. As the theoretical framework in science disciplines becomes extremely advanced and subtle, and experimentation grows more technologically complex, teams of scientists cannot always confirm each other's results; sorting out the causes and conditions of the disparities becomes a huge task. One thing does become clear—we cannot simply repeat old successes, duplicating past knowledge or implementing previously 'tried and true' methods mechanically. And so application and implementation become more important in the extension of knowledge.

While expanding in multiple directions, this approach to knowledge remains externalized, the inner subject oriented toward discovering, creating, or working upon the object of the outer realm. The second class of knowledge begins

to formulate questions about this interaction, such as how might momentary changes in the object and the subject affect the resulting knowledge. The process of observation itself is questioned, for it may also alter the results, depending on the tools used. This class of knowledge is learning at a different angle, beginning to recognize its own uncertainties and incompleteness, which stimulates further refinements and expansion.

More Fundamental Levels of Knowledge

For most of us, this external realm of physical, historical, and social phenomena, together with the knowledge transmitted in our arts and sciences, comprises our whole reality. When we question how present knowledge arose, the inquiry takes place within the context of this familiar realm. We inquire into the history of philosophy or science, we trace the lineage of current understanding back to great figures and founding fathers of different eras. But we do not probe deeply into the more fundamental level of what knowledge depends on, the building blocks of language, the labeling process, the making of meanings, perception, and identity. Where do these elements come from, how do they arise and operate, and what is their nature and potential?

How, for example, do sound and concept bond inseparably so that, once we learn the language, word and meaning arise together instantly? The first connections between given sounds and given meanings must have been made in prehistory. At some unknown point, once that linkage had taken place and was agreed upon, the label was no longer questioned. In fact, our knowledge depends on these linkages being unquestionably certain and clear.

As mind adopts the language system, it also adapts itself to language, functioning in distinctive new ways. Words allow the creation of identities with generalized names that can be applied to specific things. The identity becomes quite fixed, the thing inseparable from the name that immediately invokes it. The self too has names and labels, such as “I” and “me.” The identities of our world become interwoven with the past associations of the self and its history, so that personal experience manifests a complex tapestry of meanings. But we rarely think to ask how this tapestry is woven and who is creating the designs, who is doing the weaving. When we take the patterns and the pattern-maker for granted, the possibility for deeper inquiry disappears.

If we keep the inquiry going, we might notice how mind as an identity-user locks into patterns that are oriented toward the past, the already-known that

provides the label from the existing knowledge reservoir. Even the most sophisticated ways of using labels to create new concepts for cutting-edge thought or inventive e-commerce enterprise, for example, depend on words defined by previously defined words. All of our innovations rely on what is already in the system in order to extend knowledge further. This is part of the beauty and transmissibility of knowledge.

The reservoir of words is not static, however. Words come in and out of fashion; with overuse, they grow trite and meaningless; with disuse, they grow antiquated and are set aside completely. If a whole language falls into disuse or is not allowed to be used, eventually it disappears. Does this mean that the living culture in which the language was embedded is bound to fade away? Can the genius of one language simply be replaced by another language? Without a culture's native words, the meanings that reside in its storehouse of knowledge may not be accurately cognized in all their richness and specificity. We do need to understand this relationship because ancient languages are disappearing every day, and we do not even know how to measure the loss. When Tibet's wisdom tradition is translated into 21st-century English, how much meaning will be captured and how much will simply vanish without anyone noticing that something is missing?

The foundational interconnection of language, mind, and self, however does not seem to disappear; these interconnections are highly stable and seem to be present across the whole species. The operation of mind, as we understand it, is almost inconceivable without language. If experience is not 'translated' into words, we cannot comprehend it. Without the label and the patterns of the past, mind cannot connect to the meaning and interpret it. And yet the basic link between sound and thing appears to be arbitrary. Is our entire labeling system founded on a prehistoric whim? Does our vehicle of knowledge ride on such shaky wheels? There seems to be something important here to investigate.

But this topic has not received much attention, for researchers are intent on moving forward to expand knowledge rather than returning to the roots. And how are we to explore those roots? Must prehistoric facts about the original linkages of sounds and things somehow be accessed? Do we need to investigate the way sound vibrations bond to visual sensation? Do we turn to the anthropologists for their best guesses, based on evolutionary explanations or go to the neurologists for their theories based on the brain mechanisms for acquiring language? To suggest that these linkages are not intrinsic, but man-made, arbitrary conventions may contradict certain religious convictions and be placed out-of-bounds for investigation by believers. At some point, we may shrug off the whole exploration as too mysterious to handle,

simply beyond our ken.

Crucial Field of Study

I believe the relation between knowledge and language is a crucial field of study if our knowledge is to progress. Take, for example, the relation of the label “I” to the self we believe we are. Can we imagine this self forming if there had never been a name for it? Are distinct “things” born from language? Is it possible that the self is conceived by “I” and birthed by “me?” But are “I” and “me” different? This may seem a ridiculous question, and yet if we ask : Is “I” different from “you?” then we hurry to say “yes!” “I am” does not mean “you are,” and “mine” certainly does not mean “yours.” These are important, meaningful terms for “me” and for “you.” Though we are the ones traveling the road to knowledge, isn’t it strange that we do not know where our own names come from?

If we could move to this deeper level, little by little, and at the same time expand our scope more broadly until both the perimeter and depths of knowledge were fully embraced, nothing would remain mis-understood, and we could access global understanding. Then we could see how it has happened that the world has arrived at this particular juncture in space and time. We could ascertain the actual coordinates of the point that knowledge has reached in the 21st century. We would know where we came from, where we stand now, and what direction we are headed.

The evidence of the Dharma traditions indicates that it is possible to look more directly into mind in ways that could liberate us from limitations. When seeing with new global eyes, knowing is fully embodied so that nothing ‘other’ remains outside its scope. In the light of knowledge, the presence of knowing and the knowing of presence are indistinguishable, both tool and terrain to explore, dynamically unbounded and unsourced. Knowing in this intrinsic way opens up to illumination and innovation that is untraceable to a past and unprojectable to a future. Creating the accommodating conditions to begin moving in such new directions is the purpose of Dharma College.