

A study of sources of knowledge in Myanmar Thought

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Abstract

The objective of this research paper is to present the sources of knowledge in Myanmar thought. It will attempt to show the importance of sense experience, reason and understanding in Myanmar thought. The Descriptive Method, the Evaluative Method and the Reflective Method are to be used in this research. The problem of sources of knowledge is one of the most prominent problems in Epistemology. Philosophers throughout the ages suggested many discussions to determine “What are the sources of knowledge?” The most important problems in philosophy concern the nature of human knowledge. This paper can contribute to having more knowledge that everyone can pursuit true knowledge.

Introduction

Epistemology, the study of the problems of knowledge, is an important part of philosophy. Philosophy is essentially a search for knowledge and wisdom. Philosophers of the East and the West have discussed about the problems of the sources of knowledge seriously. They proposed various kinds of sources of knowledge. Generally, sense experience, reasoning, authority and intuition are alleged sources of knowledge. Even though they agree with the fact that these sources of knowledge are reliable sources of knowledge, they cannot agree with the fact that which ones are the most reliable sources of knowledge. Generally, Men can get knowledge with perception, reasoning and testimony.

1. Sources of knowledge in Western Philosophy

There are many sources of knowledge which have been claimed by philosophers, scientists, artists, religionists, and other representatives from various cultures down through the ages. It is important to examine these sources and then critically evaluate them for their reliability in making our knowledge claims. In Western philosophy, generally the sources of human knowledge are sense experience, reason, intuition, authority, revelation and faith, and tradition and common sense.

1.1. Sense Experience

Sense experience is one of the most obvious ways we gain knowledge about the external world. There are two types of sense experience: external sense experience and internal sense experience. Men perceive the factual world around them through their five

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senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch), they gain experiences of what things, sound, smell, taste, and feel look like which are external sense experience. Almost all the knowledge we have about our own inner states (what we think, what we feel, what we imagine or wonder) are gained through our internal sense experience.

1.2. Reason

Reason or reasoning is the central factor in knowledge. There are two types of reasoning, inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning moves basically from the particular instance to a general conclusion. Deductive reasoning moves from a general true premise to a particular conclusion. Rationalist believed that knowledge is found in concepts, principles, and laws, not just in raw sensations.

1.3. Intuition

Another source of knowledge is intuition. Intuition is a direct apprehension of knowledge. Intuition is a kind of quick, direct, or immediate perception of knowledge and insight.

1.4. Authority

Authority or testimony is one of the sources of knowledge which have gained through the thoughts of other men and the facts in the special fields of the various sciences. Authority or testimony as the sources of knowledge has gained neither by intuition nor personal experience.

1.5. Revelation and Faith

Revelation is considered as the source of knowledge which is found in the Bible and Koran or some sort of supernatural sources. Religious people see faith as a source of knowledge because they gain knowledge about God, the soul, afterlife, and other supernatural things through their faith.

1.6. Tradition and Common Sense

The last source of knowledge is tradition and common sense. As human beings are born into social groups, their types of opinion or beliefs based mainly on custom and tradition.

The question regarding the sources of knowledge is answered throughout the history of philosophy. Among these, the two are mainly discussed, rationalism and empiricism.

2. Sources of knowledge in Eastern Philosophy

In Eastern philosophy, there are many conceptions of sources of knowledge. Mostly in Eastern philosophy, sources of knowledge found in Indian philosophy and Chinese philosophy.

2.1. Sources of knowledge in Indian Philosophy

The problems of sources of knowledge are dealt with by all the schools of Indian philosophy. Indian schools of thought are divided into non-orthodox and orthodox. The non-orthodox schools are the Buddha, the Carvaka and the Jaina. The orthodox schools are the Nyaya Vaisesika, the Sankya Yoga, the Purva Mimamsa and the Vedanta. The Carvaka School holds that perception is the only source of knowledge. According to Jainas school, there are three different forms of mediate knowledge namely perception, inference and testimony. In Nyaya philosophy, valid knowledge is divided into perception, inference, comparison and testimony. In Mimamsa school of thought, there are five valid sources of knowledge. They are inference, comparison, authority or testimony, postulation and non-perception.

2.2. Sources of knowledge in Chinese Philosophy

There are many schools of thought in Chinese philosophy. Among these six most important schools are the Confucianist, the Monist school, the school of Names, the Yin Yang, the Taoist and the Legalist. The Chinese philosophy does not primarily aim at knowledge for the sake of knowledge but rather for the sake of cultivating the self; it is not for the search of truth but for the search of good. Chinese philosopher Chaung Tzu distinguished knowledge into lower level and higher level. The lower level of knowledge is knowledge learn through the senses. The higher level of knowledge is knowledge which is reflected in one's own mind.

3. Sources of knowledge in Myanmar Thought

In Myanmar culture, wisdom and knowledge are valued above wealth and power throughout the ages. According to Buddhist teaching it is ignorance that prompts men to do evil. So, each individual must try to acquire knowledge and understanding in order to lead a good life.

3.1. Ledi Sayadaw's View on Sources of Knowledge

Ledi Sayadaw proposed that the process of knowing, from the point of view of Buddhism, is concerned with the fifty-four kinds of mental phenomena.

Citta: mind or consciousness, *Cetasika*: mental properties, fifty-two in number and *Nibbana*: Getting out of the circle of existence.

Citta means the faculty of investigating an object or the faculty of taking possession of an object, or the faculty of knowing an object or the faculty of being conscious of an object.

Citta or **Consciousness** is divided into six classes: –

- (a) The Consciousness arising at the eye– basis is called the consciousness of sight and has the function of seeing.
- (b) The Consciousness arising at the ear– basis is called the consciousness of sound and has the function of hearing.
- (c) The Consciousness arising at the nose– basis is called the consciousness of smell and has the function of smelling.
- (d) The Consciousness arising at the tongue– basis is called the consciousness of taste and has the function of tasting.
- (e) The Consciousness arising at the body– basis is called the consciousness of touch and has the function of touching.
- (f) The Consciousness arising at the heart– basis is called the consciousness of mind.

In the *Arūpa-loka*, mind consciousness arises without any basis. The mind consciousness is again subdivided into four kinds.

These are (1) *Kāma*- consciousness (2) *Rūpa*-consciousness (3) *Arūpa*-consciousness (4) *Lokuttara*- consciousness.

Cetasikas are characteristics of consciousness, or mental properties born of mind. Mental properties are of 52 kinds. These are

- (a) The seven common properties
- (b) The six particulars
- (e) The fourteen immortals
- (d) The twenty five morals¹

In Myanmar thought, intuition is accepted as a source of knowledge. Intuition can be meant mystical insight to a higher form of reason. It is a kind of direct apprehension that comes automatic a flash of insight. In Myanmar thought, it is generally believed that, men gain such insight only if one leads a pure life, free from greed, anger and passions. Thus although intuition is accepted as a source of knowledge, it does not occupy an important role in ordinary daily life. Intuition, however, plays an important role in the

¹ Ledi Sayadaw, Mahā Thera, The Manuals of Buddhism, Yangon, Mother–Ayeyawaddy Publishing house, 2004, pp-15-25

search for liberation from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth that is for the attainment of Nibbana.

According to the Buddha knowledge (*paññā*) means wisdom; reasoning power; general knowledge; seeing things as they truly are–

Knowledge is of three kinds–

1. Knowledge gained by learning, *Suta-maya paññā*,
2. Knowledge gained by reasoning and thinking, *Ceinta-maya paññā*;
3. Knowledge gained through meditation and repeated contemplation, *Bhavana-maya paññā*

The meaning of *suta-maya* is “heard wisdom” which is wisdom learned from others, by reading books or listening to sermons or lectures. Received wisdom is not one’s own wisdom. It is borrowed wisdom.

The second type of wisdom is intellectual understanding. After reading or learning a certain teaching, one considers it and examines whether it is really rational, beneficial, and practical. And if it is satisfying at the intellectual level, one accepts it as true. Still this is not one’s own insight, but only an intellectualization of the wisdom one has heard.

The third type of wisdom is that arises out of one’s own experience, out of personal realization of truth. This is the real wisdom that will bring about a change in one’s life by changing the very nature of them. In Dhamma, however, the wisdom that comes of experience is essential, since only this enables us to become free from conditioning.

Wisdom acquired through listening to others and wisdom acquired through intellectual investigation is helpful if they inspire and guide men to advance to the third type of *paññā*, experiential wisdom.

In Buddhist thought it is stated that, everyone must live with truth by direct experience, by the practice of *bhavanā*, only this living experience will liberate the mind. At most someone else’s realization can act as an inspiration for others, offering guidelines for them to follow, but ultimately men must do the work themselves. Truth can live, can be experience directly, only within oneself.

Of the three types of wisdom, the first two is not peculiar to the teaching of the Buddha. The unique contribution of the Buddha to the world was a way to realize truth personally and thus to develop experiential wisdom, *bhavanā-maya paññā*. This way to achieve direct realization of truth is the technique of *viassanā-bhavanā*. *Vipassanā* is often described as being a flash of insight, a sudden intuition of truth.

A special kind of vision observation is *Vipassanā*, the reality within oneself. This is achieved by taking as the object of attention one's own physical sensations. The technique is the systematic and dispassionate observation of sensation within oneself. This observation unfolds the entire reality of mind and body.

The Buddha Himself attained that experience by the practice of meditation and therefore meditation is what he primarily taught. His words are seconds of His experiences to practice in order to reach the goal He had attained, the experience of truth. All of the Myanmar Buddhist people believe the teaching of Buddha. They practice the way of meditation to attain peace of mind or Nibbana which is the highest goal.

In Myanmar culture, Knowledge is placed a high value, but placed greater value on wisdom. Wisdom arises from a deeper understanding of life by the knowledge men have accumulated. Men can obtain knowledge of what is true and false of the world and nature but that does not necessarily constitute wisdom. Wisdom encompasses a wide vision of the world and life itself.

3.2. Ashin Thittila's View of Sources of Knowledge

The concept of wisdom is expressed clearly and concisely as follows in the Buddhist lectures given by Ashin Thettila on Essential Themes.

The faculty of knowing is pre-eminently beyond that of ordinary mankind. It is of two kinds; one is super knowledge acquired through the carrying out of the exercises in calm. Then the second is the insight which is discerned all the things of ultimate truth mentioned in the section on the truths, together with their respective characteristics beyond the range of conventional truth. It is divided into three kinds.

- (1) Knowledge acquired by learning
- (2) Knowledge acquired by reasoning.
- (3) Knowledge acquired by contemplation.

The last of the three is again subdivided into two.

- (a) *Arubodha ñāna*, is the triple insight into impermanence, infelicity, and non-soul.
- (b) *Pativeda ñāna*, is the transcendental knowledge of the Four paths.

Parināna means profound knowledge. It is of three kinds.

- (1) Auto-logical knowledge means a profound and accurate discernment of mental and material phenomena. It discerns things deeply by means of philosophical knowledge. If Nirvana can also be discerned as shown above the function of *Nata-parināna* would be fully realized.

(2) Analytical knowledge means profound and accurate discernment of momentary phenomena with insight into waxing and waning. It means the perfect or the qualified knowledge of things mental and material as possessing the characteristics of “non-soul.

(3) Dispelling Knowledge means the perfect or the qualified knowledge which dispels hallucinations. It means of the insight acquired through the contemplation of Impermanence. It means of the insight acquired through the contemplation of non-soul.²

Ashin Thittila stated that in the book of Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures, the starting point of Buddhism is reasoning, or understanding, or in other words *sammāditthi*. To seek the truth, the Buddha taught that

do not believe in anything that is traditional just because it is old and handed down through generations; do not believe in anything because people talk about it; do not believe simply because the written testimony of some ancient sage is shown to thee; never believe in anything because the custom of many years leads thee to regard it as true; do not believe in anything on the mere authority of thy teacher or priests. According to thine own experience, and after thorough investigation, whether agrees with thy reason and is conducive to thine own well-being and to that of all other living beings, accept that as truth and live accordingly.³

So, as Myanmar is Theravada Buddhist country, Myanmar thought on the process of knowing is based on the Buddha thought. In Myanmar thought, reason, sense experience and authority, tradition and common sense are stated as the sources of knowledge. However, it stated that the most important point of knowing is reasoning or understanding.

Conclusion

The main sources of knowledge in Myanmar Thought are perception, inference, comparison, testimony and intuition. These are the facts concerning with the concept of cognition which is accepted by Myanmar Traditional Thought. Myanmar views on cognition are based upon the Buddhist teachings. The process of cognition of Myanmar’s views is different from Western views. The three concepts of getting knowledge or the origin of knowledge are classified into three kinds in Myanmar Thought as (1) Knowledge gained by learning, *sutamaya paññā*, (2) Knowledge gained by reasoning and thinking, *ceintāmaya paññā*, and (3) Knowledge gained through meditation and repeated contemplation, *bhavanāmaya paññā*.

² . Thawda Myint. Dr. Myanmar Culture and Myanmar Ways of Thinking. Yangon University of Distance Education Press.pp-50-59

³ .Thittila, Ashin. 1992. Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures. Yangon: Department of Religious Affairs.p-17

Myanmar Thought emphasizes the concept of knowledge for the liberation by using both reasoning and experiences rightfully. In studying Myanmar thought on the sources of knowledge, it can be seen that all the sources of knowledge as perception, inference, testimony and Intuition are associated. All the sources of knowledge based on sense experience, but our senses are sometime illusion and hallucination. Thus, the knowledge based on the sense experience is not reliable knowledge. To get reliable knowledge reasoning is important. One can justify that the knowledge getting from other sources of knowledge by the use of reasoning alone. So Myanmar thought emphasis on reasoning or understanding based on experience.

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13. စန္ဒာဆွေ၊ ၁၉၇၇၊ စကားပုံကပြောသော ဒဿန။ ရန်ကုန်၊ စိန်ကြည်ပုံနှိပ်တိုက်။