

## Awareness as a Means of Learning: A Buddhist Perspective

**Ven. Galle Dhamminda**

### **Preface**

In a broad sense, it is evident that Buddhism is full of pragmatic sources that can build for a better livelihood even in this world existence. Education is also an important category which denotes cognitive side of the awareness. Awareness is defined as “noun the fact or state of being aware, or conscious, especially of matters that are particularly relevant or topical”<sup>1</sup> on the other hand; it sates understanding of something in a particular situation. With reference to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary it fundamentally defines two varieties of means;

- I. Having knowledge or realization of
- II. Well-informed; interested; especially in current events<sup>2</sup>

All together these two definitions mean an idea that ‘having a vigorous knowledge on particular matter/matters in a given situation’. This is further illustrated by Oxford English Dictionary thus: ‘the quality or state of being aware; consciousness.’<sup>3</sup> The dictionary has given many examples from various texts regarding its usage in different contexts. The annexed sentences are totally meant by a specific attention or knowledge on a current situation.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that the selected topic defines this area with its essential sense of ‘awareness’ related to the potentiality of learning with a Buddhist perspective.

Although it is concerned on educational sciences, it is not in that sense, of course such an educational finding. In this writing it is collected and elaborated the ideas regarding awareness as a means of learning with reference to the Tipiṭaka. In the Tipiṭaka literature it is not much available such an educational concept as equivalent in modern concept. So it is not to compare both Western and Buddhist approaches in any category of subjects. It is of course, separately two major paths that promote both physical and mental empowering. Although Buddhism promotes the noble way to Nibbāna, for ordinary ones it is full of life lessons which can be used in the sense of living under secular life style. In this paper, it is not comparing Buddhist facts with the West or to get rid of Western thoughts from the Buddhist stand point. It is high time to discuss that ‘awareness’ as a way to learn in a given incident.

Prof. Howard Gardner has written on ‘Existential Intelligence’ with its objectives thus;

- I. A concern with ultimate life issues
- II. The place or demand that you are in, in this world
- III. Through introspection if one can realize the world that is existential intelligence<sup>5</sup>

For his further elaboration he has pointed that this type of multiple knowledge is included with seven dimensions which are strictly presented the theory that he raised as well.

- I. Cultural Values
- II. Human Development History
- III. Symbol Systems
- IV. Exceptional Individual

- V. Psychometric studies
- VI. Evolutionary Plausibility
- VII. Brain Research<sup>6</sup>

In his article he has collected 20 ways of improving existential knowledge among the students. Out of those 20, five points are directly based on Buddhist teachings and the other points are also; based on Buddhist educational teachings though they are allied to western thoughts. Abraham Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs what is referred to as humanistic psychology points that a number of basic needs, which can be grouped into perhaps three basic categories: (1) self-preservation, (2) self-enhancement, and (3) self-actualization.<sup>7</sup> According to Maslow self-actualization means one's inner thoughts regarding potentiality or greater acknowledgement.

### **Maslow writes:**

“The stage of self-actualization represents the ultimate in one's psychological strivings. With our basic needs for self-preservation and self-enhancement satisfied, we can now go on to actualize our greatest potential.” In his argument he has paid attention on many individuals whom he considers to be in the stage of self-actualization. Albert Einstein, Albert Schweitzer, Eleanor Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln are some of individuals who have attained the level of self-actualization as Maslow mentioned.<sup>8</sup> The most valuable part of his theory relating self-actualization is metaneed sregarding above individuals who satisfied with their basic needs and sought truth, beauty, justice, and the higher values and goals of humanity.<sup>9</sup>

### **Buddhist Approach**

In this regard Buddhist approach is totally different from the Western view. But in a broad sense, as it is an actual way to

live in the society, livelihood is problematic due to one's needs and wants. Ven. Narada states:

Buddhism has a practical specific purpose – the cessation of suffering and with that goal in view all irrelevant side issues are completely set aside. Nevertheless every encouragement is given to keen investigation into the real nature of life.<sup>10</sup> It is of course clear that both mundane and supra-mundane life teachings from Buddhist point of view are also pragmatic and practical for a better life style. Even in the Western thought it is recorded that educating is one of resplendent ways of learners that creates in the learner a desire to achieve it.<sup>11</sup> This type of desire that focuses towards the final goal is having the sense of awareness in an objective frame. That is what explains in the story of Nanda who was guided by the Buddha. Prince Nanda did not concern the first object given by the Buddha but later he concerned the object that gave the Buddha and finally attained Nibbāna.<sup>12</sup> In this manner, it is somewhat special to analyze that prince Nanda when he attracted with goddesses was not aware the reality of physical body as it is in impermanency. He was much contented on the divine figures than Janapadakalyāṇī who was his beloved partner at the household. Here, Prince Nanda condemned Janapadakalyāṇī and appreciated those five hundred divine females.<sup>13</sup> It is called that the feeling with awareness towards positive direction but in the sense of secular knowledge. Although it is different from the object visually the utterance of Dantikā is probably similar with the story of Nanda. Dantikā, a nun who saw the guidance of mahout on an untamed elephant who then, mounted the elephant as the elephant stretched forth its foot, and having seen this incident she concentrated on her mind and attained liberation.<sup>14</sup> In this manner it is applicable that the understanding or concentration is regarded with awareness. For Nanda it was difficult to find the emancipation.

But for Dantikā it was easy to find her liberation as gifted by the Saṅsāra. Even in the utterance of Paṭācārā it is found that Therī Paṭācārā was aware on two events. One was she paid her attention to the water and seeing the water used for washing flow down from high ground to the low ground contemplated on it and two was taking a lamp she entered her cell, then she drew out the wick and finally contemplated on decaying fire and attained Nibbāna.<sup>15</sup> The first and the second events were helpful her to find the final liberation that can be recognized as awareness that was used by Paṭācārā as a means of learning. As recorded in the Ambalaṭṭhika-rāhulovāda-sutta there, Ven. Rāhula also got attracted with four examples which were shown by the Buddha.

- I. A little water in the water vessel to be compared with lack of quality of recluseship
- II. Water that was thrown away to be compared with far away from the recluseship
- III. Water vessel that turned upside down to be compared with turned the recluseship upside down
- IV. An empty water vessel<sup>16</sup> to be compared with hollow and empty recluseship

Though this sutta has been compiled with the purpose of upgrading a reliable monkhood;<sup>17</sup> it has many instructions to be followed with one's final liberation. But this time Ven. Rāhula had no such an innate trait like Paṭācārā and Dantikā had. As well at the end of the sutta Ven. Rāhula did not attain Nibbāna and he had to remain with his delight as he listened to the sutta.<sup>18</sup> According to the Apadānapāḷī Ven. Rāhula was an arahant at that moment. If it is possible to say that the reference of the Apadānapāḷī is not older than the Amabalaṭṭhika-rāhulovāda-sutta, it would not be problematic that Ven. Rāhula was not

aware on what the Buddha taught in the sutta at the moment.<sup>19</sup> However, this was somewhat different from previous examples in relation to awareness that was fundamentally directed the emancipation.

Sīhā who wanted to commit suicide, finally when she was at her death realized the truth.<sup>20</sup> This incident shows that the deepest awareness at the moment. As referred the Therīgāthā, Sīhā attained Nibbāna after the incident which was more influenced with her liberation. In the Theragāthāpāli, the utterance of Vītasoka thera is also somewhat applicable with this context. There the venerable concentrated on his body from the mirror as it is an empty entity.<sup>21</sup> A mirror is not a tool for realization the truth. As well it perfectly means that the truth can not be revealed from a mirror. But the awareness has purposely centered to the Nibbāna and then; object is supportive with the purpose. It is of course one of developed skills that one can receive as a Samsāric gift. It is evident that the reference related to Ven. Sandhita who was a worthy one due to his past deeds 31 eons ago.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly Kisāgotami's story at the very beginning she did not concern and attain Nibbāna when she was advised by the Buddha to bring mustard seeds from a family where no one had died. She could able to realize and attain Arahantship after she realized that there is no house free from mortality. So this would be a quick understanding or a sudden awakening due to her past meritorious deeds.

### **Potentiality in different contexts**

Appamatto which means thoughtful, heedful and zealous<sup>23</sup> is referred to someone who has keen attention on something. They are hurry to concentrate their mind from Jhānas and finally attain the entire freedom as early as possible.<sup>24</sup> It is better to point out these types of people are very quick and aware

with the stimulus and then; quickly possible with response as well.<sup>25</sup> In the Kīṭāgiri-sutta it is evident that a very significant sentence which remarks two kinds of bhikkhu categories as:

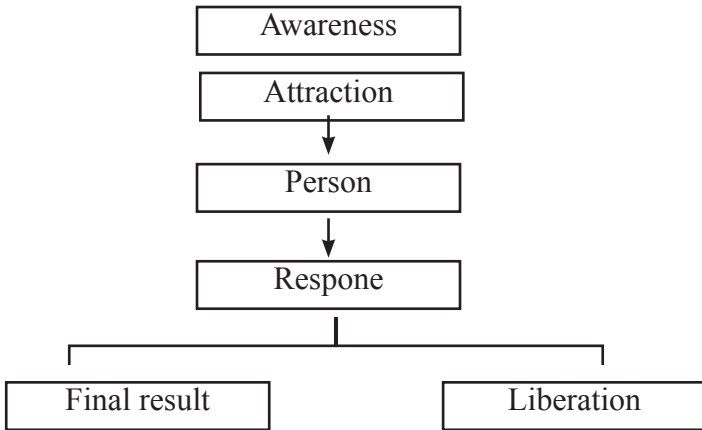
- I. Bhikkhus who are arahants with taints destroyed
- II. Bhikkhus who are in higher training

In the sutta, Buddha did not emphasize all the bhikkhus to be vigilant as well not to be delayed in their way to Nibbāna.<sup>26</sup> But from the next line, Buddha has clearly denoted that the bhikkhus who are in higher training have to do with diligence. Bhikkhus who have the awareness on their goal still are in the frame of aspiration with diligence.<sup>27</sup> In this regard it is of course, explained that they can realize the truth in these ways.

- I. Use of resting place
- II. Associate with good friends
- III. Balance their spiritual faculties<sup>28</sup>

After completing all these components they may find the truth as they wish. In this path to the realization they would realize this by the direct knowledge which was forwarded by saṃsāric habit.<sup>29</sup> In the sutta it is perfectly mentioned that the knowledge with awareness that came from the Saṃsāra.<sup>30</sup> This kind of attribute is somewhat special significance among the heedless ones,<sup>31</sup> sleepy ones and foolish ones. In the Dhammapada, the excellence of heedfulness is led the Noble Path.<sup>32</sup> Even in the Loka-vagga it is recorded that heedfulness is one of eminent facts to be appreciated as one's own characteristic.<sup>33</sup> For the word bahussuta (erudition) it is obviously proved that a kind of various understanding on various areas, subjects and facts. Buddhism interprets the term bahussuta in the sense of a person who is intelligent.<sup>34</sup> In brief, the term refers that it is allied to the

fully functioned person. The term bahussuta is of course, a very meaningful term which signifies awareness in any category of knowledge. The term may denote some of influential knowledge from the Saṃsāra which had obtained due to one’s meritorious deeds. Further realization of the fact raised here this idea can be presented in a diagram as follows:



**Conclusion**

The above mentioned diagram is pointed that the person who is at the center receives attraction with his own awareness toward the goal. As well he is at the center of the diagram; his knowledge (awareness on particular matter) is also centered with his cognitive compound. Later he will find his final answer which is much connected along with the response. The Bodhirājakumara-sutta (M) denotes very practical reference of distinction (visesaṃ) on the Dhamma what has heard by Prince Bodhi from the Buddha. This is probably said that clear understanding on the dhammat that was obtained from awareness of particular subject-matter. Finally, it is suggested that awareness as a means of learning.



**End Notes :**

1. Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, Allied Chambers Limited, New Delhi, 1996, 91p.
2. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989.70p.
3. The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, 829p.
4. 1. My awareness of the danger of riding in such vehicles 2. No lapse of the egoistic awareness 3. The higher the organization the keener is the awareness 4. The most pig-headed Englishman and the most stolid German have an awareness of the existence and manners of foreign barbarians 5. He has the peculiar 'awareness' of a soundly cultured Catholic 6. An ultimate awareness that right is right 7. The mystical experience is an awareness of a greater significance in the universe. *Ibid*
5. See. "Existential Intelligence as the ninth component of multiple knowledge", Prof. Roland Abeyapala, Adhyapana Pratibha 6, Colombo University, 2013, 1p.
6. *Ibid*, 4-5
7. Shepard D.L., Psychology, The Science of Human Behavior, Science Research Associates, Inc. USA, 1997, 476p
8. *Ibid*.
9. *Ibid*, 479p.
10. Narada, The Buddha and His Teachings, Lever Brothers Cultural Conservation Trust, Colombo, 1987, 304p.
11. Peter, R. S., Authority, Responsibility and Education, London, 1973, p.97-98.
12. The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Part II, (Ed.), Woodward, FL, PTS, London, 1985.
13. *Ibid*, 172.
14. Elders' verses II Therīgāthā , K. R. Norman, PTS, London, 1971, 8p.
15. *Ibid*, 14-15pp.
16. Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Wisdom Publication, Boston, 1995, 523p.

17. Abstract, SIBA international Conference, 2013, 14p.
18. ‘The venerable Rāhula was satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One’s words’. Bhikkhu Bodhi, M, 526p.
19. Nikkhamitvā agāraṃhā pabbajissati subbato, rāhulonāmanāmena arahābhavissati, Apadānapāli 1, BJS, 108p.
20. ‘Having made a strong noose, having tied it to the branch of a tree, I cast the noose around my neck. Then my mind was completely released’. Elders’ verses II Therīgāthā, K. R. Norman, PTS, London, 1971, 12p.
21. The Elders’ verses I, K.R. Norman, PTS, 1969, 21p.
22. Ibid, 26p.
23. Dictionary of the Pali Language, Childers, R.C., Trubner & Co., London, 1875, 51p.
24. The Book of the Kindred Sayings, I, Mrs. Rhys Davids, PTS, London, 1950, 38p.
25. Ibid, 47p.
26. Bhikkhus, I do not say of all bhikkhus that they still have work to do with diligence; do I say of all bhikkhus that they have no more work to do with diligence. , Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Wisdom Publication, Boston, 1995, 580p.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. They may by realizing for themselves with direct knowledge here and now enter upon and abide in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from the home life into homelessness. Ibid, 580p.
30. With direct knowledge here and now enter upon and abide in that supreme goal of the holy life...ibid.
31. Appamatto pamattesu suttesu bahujaḡaro, abalassaṃva sīghasso hitvāyātis umedhaso, Dhammapada, O. van Hinuber, K.R. Norman, PTS, Oxford, 1995, 9p.
32. Ibid, 7p.
33. Dhammapada, Ven. Buddharakkhita, Maha Bodhi Society, Bangalore, 1986, 67p.

34. S IV, (Ed.), M. Leon Feer, PTS, Oxford, 1990, 210p.
35. Evaṃvutte Bodhi rājakumāro Bhagavantaṃ etadavoca: ahobuddho, ahodhammo, ahodhammassas vākkhātātā; yatra hi nāmasāyaṃ visesaṃad higamissatīti, , M II, (Ed.), Robert Chalmers, PTS, London, 1977, 96p.