

The Miracle and Adventure of Understanding

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„Even a common act like a persuasion which has convinced a man against his former convictions, may rightly be spoken of as a miracle. [...] Hence, in Buddhism, the miracle of teaching [...], which makes one realize the immortal Dhamma is regarded as far superior to other sorts of miracles.“ (B. Buddhadasa, *Christianity and Buddhism* (Bangkok: MitrNara Printing, 1967), 101).

According to this quotation a moment, in which teaching, learning and understanding take place, in which convictions change, is on the one hand something quite ordinary and on the other hand a miracle. This short essay is following this thought and reflects its relevance for Christian theology. What does it mean to understand a religious insight and in what way can we support such processes of understanding?

In the first part of my article I want to show in what way we can think of a link between spirituality and epistemology, between our faith practice and our capacity to understand. The second part presents a few insights from the Buddhist world (from the Thai monk Ajahn Buddhadasa) which seem to be relevant for the chosen topic and in the third part I give a short response to these Buddhist thoughts from the side of Christian theology.

1. Spirituality and Epistemology

In order to open the question of the connection of spirituality and epistemology I want to share two experiences which continue to make me think. The first one happened in an academic theological research group which was working predominantly according to the paradigm of an analytical philosophy. The discussions focussed around the question if the propositional content of the conviction “Jesus Christ is resurrected” is true or false and the group looked for (appropriate resp. inappropriate) epistemic justifications for that conviction. Personally I experienced great difficulties to follow the discussion, as the word “resurrection” provoked in me the question what we actually mean by it. Were we speaking about the same, when we used the expression “resurrection”? Were we looking for the same kind of understanding?

The second experience, which I want to share, had its origin in a simple photography, which a journalist must have taken in a Muslim country and which I encountered one morning in a newspaper. It showed an assembly of people, who held a rally and who carried banners on which one could read the slogan “Jesus Christ is not the son of God. He is a prophet of Islam.” Is this statement correct or false? Am I as Christian obliged to protest against it and to claim that Jesus Christ *is* the Son of God? Or is it first of all my life-long duty to try to understand, what the mystery of God-becoming-man can mean for me and for us?

These are just two small incidents taken from my own life, which confront me with the question of what it really means to understand religious insights. How does the process of understanding take place? What can be conducive in this process, what is an obstacle and in which way is the process of understanding related to a spiritual practice?

I start my research on the presupposition that the relationship between spirituality and epistemology does not merely indicate that spiritual practice serves as a means in order to

internalize insights one has already rationally understood, but that spiritual practice itself can mean to learn how to understand.

2. Inspirations from the Buddhist world – Ajahn Buddhadasa (1906-1993)

As a young Thai Buddhist monk Ajahn Buddhadasa reached in 1928 for the first time and a few years later for a second time Bangkok in order to study there the Buddhist teaching, because an academic degree was regarded as a requirement for a career in the community of monks (*sangha*). But both times he did not stay there for long, as he felt that he could not encounter the Buddhist teaching in an adequate way in the academic Bangkok milieu. Therefore in 1932 Ajahn Buddhadasa left Bangkok for good after he had experienced a deep conversion. He withdrew to a forest area in the south of Thailand close to his home town and changed his name into Buddhadasa (“servant of the Buddha”) giving the following explanation „I owe this my life and this my body to the Lord Buddha. I am a servant of Buddha, the Buddha is my master. For this reason my name is from now on ‚Buddhadasa‘. (28th August 1932)“. After several years of living there in nature and solitude a few monks joined him. Gradually the place developed into a monastery (Wat Suan Mokkhabalarama, engl.: The garden of liberation) and was visited by lay people and by people from the West. Ajahn Buddhadasa interpreted the entire Theravāda-teaching in the light of contemporary understanding and in the light of life experiences. He linked the role of a traditional forest monk who focuses on the ascetic practice with the role of a city monk who focuses on the teaching. Ajahn Buddhadasa died on the 8th July 1993.¹

In the following three epistemological relevant issues which one finds in Ajahn Buddhadasa’s teaching are presented: (a) the spiritual illness and the observation of one’s own spirit, (b) people-language und *Dhamma*-language and (c) *suññatā* and the empty spirit.

(a) The spiritual illness and the observation of one’s own spirit

Ajahn Buddhadasa speaks of a spiritual illness, from which all human beings are suffering. The cause of this illness are mental impurities and first of all the perception of I/my and we/ours. As a consequence people feel either attracted by something (greed, desire, craving), repelled by something (hatred) or are torn between these two mental reactions (delusion). The further consequence is then that people see things falsely and thereafter think, speak and act falsely. So first of all this illness affects the epistemological skills of a human person. The cure of the illness comes through the *Dhamma*, which has to be received internally and not just externally.

The ways of treatment, which are recommended by Ajahn Buddhadasa, are the contemplation of the self in the light of the Paticcasamuppada (teaching of the conditioned arising) as well as the contemplation of sense objects and of pleasant sensations as illusion carrying the characteristics of impermanence, frustration (suffering) and not-self.

Ajahn Buddhadasa interprets the Paticcasamuppada as an innerpsychic process, which takes place repeatedly during one life and even during one single day. The spiritual illness means being a captive of that process, whereas the liberation from the spiritual illness means to interrupt this process, which is possible between the Paticcasamuppada-link *phasa* (contact) and the link *vedana* (sensation) or between the link *vedana* (sensation) and the link *tanha* (thirst resp. craving). Although according to Ajahn Buddhadasa originally the human mind is pure, it is subjected to a strong tendency to become entangled in the dynamics of the

Paticcasamuppada and as a consequence to think only within one's own sensations. Therefore the human mind has to be purified, the mental impurities have to be swept like one sweeps the floor with a broom. The observation and development of the mind is done systematically through the training according the four tetrads. The first three tetrads (observation of the body, the sensations and of the mind) are seen as preparation of the mind, so that it becomes soft enough to examine the *Dhamma* in the fourth tetrad. On the basis of this training even intellectual studies can be taken up meaningfully again.²

(b) People-language and *Dhamma*-language

Ajahn Buddhadasa's approach is based on what he calls the two worlds of perception, of knowledge and of language. Besides a colloquial language, a „people language“ or „everyday language“, which we need in order to communicate about mundane experiences, Ajahn Buddhadasa speaks of a language of religion, the „Dhamma language“ or „dharmic language“, which allows the communication about not tangible things and which presupposes a mental development. On the basis of this theory on language Ajahn Buddhadasa is able to interpret several central Buddhist ideas in a new and surprising way.

According to Ajahn Buddhadasa it is through the *Dhamma*-language that theoretical knowledge and practical skills meet. Just within the boundaries of rational understanding this kind of language cannot be spoken or understood. But even the *Dhamma*-language cannot capture the true *Dhamma*, it can only indicate the path, which leads to it.

According to the *Dhamma*-language knowledge or understanding does not mean having studied particular topics. As long as studies remain external studies, which are equated with the picking up of information, that kind of knowledge remains incomplete knowledge. Whereas in everyday language knowing and understanding is often associated with reading, listening, thinking or judging rationally, in *Dhamma*-language understanding refers to the internal realization of that which shall be understood in one's own mental process. Ajahn Buddhadasa shows this by using the example of „knowing *suññatā*“. In order to know or understand *suññatā*, this reality has to manifest itself in the human mind.

In Ajahn Buddhadasa's thinking these two languages correspond to two different ways of learning, the external and the internal learning. Ajahn Buddhadasa opts for the internal learning, for the learning from the living body and the living mind and not for the learning exclusively from books or ceremonies.³

(c) *Suññatā* and the empty spirit

Suññatā, *nibbāna* und *anattā* are three expressions which are called the heart or the essence of Buddhism by Ajahn Buddhadasa. They are closely interrelated resp. their meanings overlap. On the one hand *suññatā* can mean the fundamental nature of all things and on the other hand it refers to the quality of an advanced human mind, which has overcome craving and grasping. In the end it is only that kind of mind, which is capable of understanding *suññatā*. The quality of the mind is a necessary presupposition for the process of understanding.

Nibbāna means being cooled in the sense of not being heated up by I- and my-identifications (or we- and our-identifications).

Die teaching of *anattā* finally wants to articulate that in our consciousness no unchangeable entity which thinks and feels can be found, but that our consciousness has to be perceived as a continually changing phenomenon. Therefore it is not justified to attach to inappropriate ideas of a self.

„Nothing whatsoever should be clung to as ‚I‘ or ‚mine‘.“ (B. Buddhadasa, Heartwood, 29). Instead of this one has to develop an empty mind or – expressed more precisely – one has to realize the emptiness of the mind which actually is the basis of each human mind.

It is that kind of mind, the one, who has overcome self-centeredness, the one, who has realized – at least to a certain extent – *suññatā*, *nibbāna* und *anattā*, that is capable of deep and sharp thinking and of stress-relieved working. The empty mind is at the same time the way to understand *suññatā* and the realization of *suññatā*. Knowledge and self-knowledge are deeply linked with each other. As long as the human mind is filled with craving and attachment, the real potential of the mind is not available, the mind is being misled. In the end one has to realize what Ajahn Buddhadasa calls „doer-less doing“ or „walker-less walking“.

Liberation, redemption and understanding are connected according to Ajahn Buddhadasa. With regard to fundamental teachings which aim at the overcoming of *dukkha* (frustration) understanding and realization go hand in hand. Understanding Buddhist teaching means overcoming I- and mine-identifications. In order to come to know the real Buddha, the real *Dhamma* and the real *sangha* it is necessary to come to know one's own mind; otherwise one is only in touch with „Parrot Triple Gems“. When Ajahn Buddhadasa speaks of the Buddha he refers first of all not to the physical body or to a historical person but to the pure, clear and calm condition of the mind of the true Buddha. Based on this approach one can claim the omnipresence of the Buddha.⁴

3. Resonance from Christian Theology

In what way can the contributions of Ajahn Buddhadasa be meaningful for Christian theology? In what way can these ideas make us theologians think anew about the gaining of Christian theological knowledge, about the theory of theological knowledge and about what is called spiritual theology? I want to name briefly three points, which surely have to be elaborated further but which also draw our attention into interesting directions.

Craving and attachment as epistemological problems or the development of the skill of understanding: The Buddhist testimonies show that the human mind might not be by itself – without being trained – capable of perceiving, discerning and understanding appropriately but that there might be a tendency or even a probability of being deceived. This skeptical attitude is linked to a great attention for the observation of mental processes and leads to the development of strategies and ways of discipline, which are supposed to guide people closer to the skill of perceiving and understanding. Especially mental processes, which from the Buddhist perspective originate in an inappropriate understanding of I – like craving or attachment – are not only seen as moral problems, but are identified first of all as epistemological problems. This seems to me a thought worthy of consideration in the development of a Christian theological style which calls itself “Spiritual Theology”.

Way out and actual practice: The second point refers to the way out of the described unlucky situation of not-understanding and to the actual practice instructions. The Buddhist reflections which have an epistemological significance do not stay abstract theory but are

combined with concrete requests to enter into the practice and with instructions how this could be done. What becomes visible is a great attention for the movements of the mind and not just for the content with which the mind is busy. In what way would it transform a Christian (spiritual) theology if the balance between content (“fides quae”) and the process (“fides qua”) would be adjusted in a way that the primary focus does not go – in an unbalanced way – to the content anymore?

Connection of knowledge, self-knowledge and liberation/redemption: Understanding in the way this expression is used in the given Buddhist approach cannot remain external. Understanding does not mean neutral knowledge, but implies an inner involvement and realization. Understanding of Buddhist insights is necessarily linked to self-discovery, self-knowledge and to questions of liberation and redemption from a state of frustration. In this sense epistemological questions are relevant for soteriological enquiries.

The phenomenon of understanding which seems to happen so commonly can be perceived as a mystery and a miracle if we have a closer look at it. Understanding religious insights or beliefs to which we might have become so accustomed that they do not look inspiring to us anymore become much more challenging through this perspective, but at the same time understanding becomes a personal adventure and theology an existential journey and quest.

¹ Cf. *Hans-Bernd Zöllner*, *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Buddhismus im Garten der Befreiung* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2006), 17- 39; cf. *Peter A. Jackson*, *Buddhadāsa: Theravāda Buddhism and modernist reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), 9-16 and 275-298.

² Cf. *Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: The Buddha’s Teaching on Voidness* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1994), 9-11 and 79-88; cf. *Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, *I and Mine* (Bangkok: Thammasapa, 2007), 307-313; cf. *Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, *Anāpānāsati: Die sanfte Heilung der spirituellen Krankheit* (München: Buddhistische Gesellschaft, 2002), 49-101; cf. *Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, *Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination* (Bangkok: Thammasapa, 2002), 1-31 and 65-66.

³ Cf. *Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, *Zwei Arten von Sprache: Eine Analyse von Begriffen der Wirklichkeit* (Surat Thani: Dhammadana Foundation ²2002), 15-18; cf. *B. Buddhadasa*, *Heartwood*, 57-64.

⁴ Cf. *B. Buddhadasa*, *Heartwood*, 4, 59-65 and 94-95; *B. Buddhadasa*, *Anāpānāsati*, 110-113; cf. *B. Buddhadasa*, *I and Mine*, 39-43; cf. *Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, *The Buddha’s doctrine of Anattā: A Comparative Study of Self and Not Self in Buddhism, Hinduism and Western Philosophy* (Surat Thani: Dhammadana Foundation, ²2002), 50-61; cf. *Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, *Doing all Kinds of Work with an Empty-Free Mind*, http://www.suanmokkh.org/archive/pdf/12_VoidMind.pdf (status: 31. Juli 2013); cf. *Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, *The three Wishes of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* (Bangkok: Thammasapa, 2005), 143.