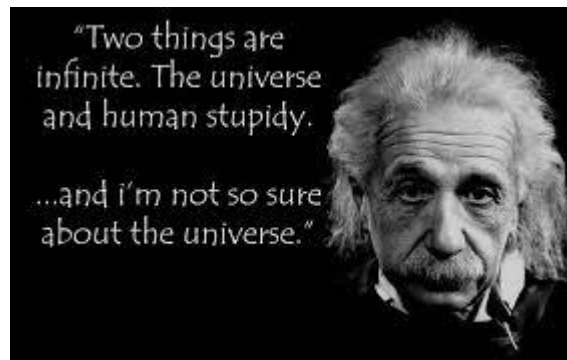


## Can a Person be Ignorant and Intelligent at the Same Time?



A few years ago, we made the decision to add a new dimension to our role as Buddhist monks by immersing ourselves in Western academia and undertaking research into the health benefits of meditation and Buddhist philosophy. After having devoted decades to the study, practice, and teaching of Buddhism (that is obviously based on Eastern philosophical principles), and despite the fact we are both originally from the West, the move into the Western academic setting has – for various reasons – been an eye-opening experience. This doesn't so much relate to the challenges of writing for academic journals (because in just the last two-years we have accrued over 100 academic publications – including numerous articles in leading peer-reviewed psychology and medical journals), but relates more to coming to terms with what many Western academics appear to perceive as desirable qualities for the modern scholar.

As regular readers of our blog will know, Buddhism places a great deal of importance on the generation of wisdom. Wisdom is that which overcomes ignorance, and ignorance is that which prevents people from realising their enlightened nature. Therefore, according to Buddhist thought, the amount of respect awarded to a practitioner or teacher should be based on how much spiritual wisdom they have accumulated. Essentially, the meaning of wisdom – at least in the sense that we are contextualising it here – is identical to the meaning of the word enlightenment. Thus, from the Buddhist perspective, the wiser a person is the more enlightened they are and vice-versa.

There are lots of definitions of Buddhist wisdom but we would briefly define it as the extent to which an individual accurately apprehends and understands both themselves and reality. A wise person knows every inch of their mind. They know why it exists, where it exists, and how it exists. Not only do they know their mind, but they also know that part of them that knows that it knows the mind. They appreciate fully that they are both the observed mind as well as the mind that observes. Because they know their own minds, they also know every inch of everybody else's minds and they are

fully aware that all minds are interconnected. They are aware that their mind is without limitations and they know that all other sentient beings also have the potential to have a mind without limitations. In short, their outlook is vast and unconditionally compassionate – everything is encompassed in it.

Although the wise person has realised the full potential of their mind, they are in no way conceited or boastful about this. In fact, the wiser a person is, the more humble they are. Wise people don't have goals or agendas *per se*, and they place no importance on being recognised for their efforts or successes. Their main objective is to simply be, and from this state of simply being, profound tranquillity and lucidity arises that allows them to act in a way that is inconceivably skilful yet completely uncontrived.

An interesting observation concerning the Buddhist construal of wisdom is that intelligence is not a prerequisite for being wise. Obviously, there are lots of different types and interpretations of intelligence, but here we are using the term 'intelligence' as per its popular (and Oxford English Dictionary) definition of: *the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills*. Thus, although there is a strong probability that a wise person will be intelligent or academic in the conventional sense, there is also the possibility that they won't be. Intelligence is a tool that wise people can cultivate and make use of if they wish to, but wise people understand that intelligence needs to be developed and handled carefully. This is because in the absence of wisdom, intelligence can significantly limit the mind. It can become an obstacle to enlightenment and therefore an obstacle to the ongoing development of a dynamic and fluid wisdom.

In effect, what we are saying here is that incorrectly handled, intelligence can actually make you more stupid. This is quite a strange thing to say but it does seem to us that there **are** quite a number of people – including many academics - who are thought of (or think of themselves) as being intelligent, but who seem to think and act without any wisdom. In Western academia, it is often the case that people obtain their PhD and then continue to develop knowledge and expertise in what is often a relatively narrow field of study. In fact, in many cases, academics often end up shaping the terrain, rules, and boundaries of their given field of study.

In our opinion, what seems to happen reasonably often is that academics (and indeed many other professional groups) live in a bubble that they themselves have created. In this bubble, they are the masters, the game developers, and rule keepers. Living in the bubble means that they can command respect from people that are not in the bubble – from people that don't really have a clue what they are talking about but just presume it is tremendously complicated and important. However, when one looks at the crux of what is actually being proposed within a given scholarly theory, it can more often than not be reduced to some very simple themes and ideas. And for those instances where things cannot be explained in simple terms, then, in our experience, it normally means

that the bubble owners have got so caught up in the language and rules of their own self-created reality that they have begun to lose sense of how their research or sophistry relates to the real world.

Since such individuals (and there is quite a lot of them) are more interested in being intelligent than wise, the thinking and reasoning skills that they develop become useful only within their own (often very narrow) field of study. Consequently, when they are presented with a completely new idea or way of working, they have difficulty in assimilating it – principally due to their own ego construct. This is particularly the case when a bubble-dweller meets with a wise person. The bubble-dweller's normal reaction is to feel threatened by the wise person and to reject them and/or their ideas. Because the wise person is just simply being and is not trying to be somebody in particular, their wisdom is very powerful, unshakeable, incredibly piercing and absolutely logical. By piercing, we don't mean that they have a smart retort to everything, we just mean that their basic presence – even when they aren't saying anything – is very penetrating. The wise person's wisdom gives the intelligent person's ignorance a sudden and massive shake. The intelligent-ignorant person (or, if you prefer, the ignorant-intelligent person) starts to feel threatened because they know that if they remain in the presence of the wise person, they will be forced to accept that they have created and are living in a very small bubble. They know that the wise person's wisdom will burst their bubble and they will no longer have any ground to stand on.

Please don't misunderstand what we are saying here – we are not saying that contemporary academics are actually quite stupid. Indeed, we are fortunate to know some very wise people – from both the East and West – that are also incredibly intelligent. However, in our humble opinion, it does seem that there are increasingly fewer and fewer “true” scholars – people that can think freely and with a big mind, but who also know the limitations of their intelligence and can therefore transcend it.

### **Further Reading**

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