

How the Buddhist Epistemology can Contribute to Contemporary Knowledge Management Debates?

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Abstract: This paper can be positioned within the ongoing debate regarding the aptness of incongruent perspectives adopted in managing knowledge within organisations. These perspectives are mainly founded on the Western originated epistemologies. Amongst them, the mainstream perspectives influenced by the epistemology of Cartesian dualism of mind-body. The mind-body dualism conceives the mind and body as two separable entities. This dualism, in a knowledge seeking context, leads to the subject-object division hence, making a separation between the knower (subject) and what is known (object). This paper argues that dominance of tacit-explicit separation within knowledge management (KM) literature arises due to this separation between the knower and what is known. Hence, due to the dualism treatment of knowledge, KM practices of the mainstream perspectives are subject to several limitations including less attention paid to a holistic and social approach to knowledge management processes. In this context, despite the existence of several Eastern originated epistemologies, they have not marked a significant presence in KM literature. Amongst the Eastern epistemologies, the Buddhist epistemology has a comprehensive theory of knowledge explicated in early Buddhist discourses. The Buddhist epistemology also include theoretical explanations to negate dualism treatment of knowledge which may underpin alternative perspectives to the mainstream. Further, the Buddhist epistemology has the potential to enhance the social process within KM. However, so far, investigations on the contribution of the Buddhist epistemology to KM virtually non-exist. Hence, this paper aims to explore the potential of the Buddhist epistemology to contribute to contemporary KM. The insights gained from this study can be incorporated into existing organisational KM practices. The aim is to advance the existing practices for better management of knowledge.

Keywords: knowledge management, epistemology, Buddhism, social processes

1. Introduction

Knowledge Management as an academic discipline became evident in 1990s subsequent to knowledge society rhetoric emerged in 1970s (Bell, 1973). In a knowledge society, 'knowledge' is the core of human life in organisational, social and economic spheres. Alongside this development, managing knowledge and knowledge workers became a critical matter in organisations. Since then an ongoing debate argues whether knowledge could be managed as an asset separated from the knower (Cavaliere, Lombardi and Giustiniano, 2015; Rechberg and Syed, 2013). This incongruence results in unavailability of a universal KM definition. However, a myriad of definitions recognises KM as practices used to capitalise on the knowledge resource which is scattered across an organisation (Laihonen, Lönnqvist and Metsälä, 2015).

These KM practices are shaped by the perspectives that organisations pursue which are in turn based on dissimilar epistemologies that deal differently with apparent oxymoronic nature of KM. For instance, objectivist perspective, epistemology of possession, knowledge as an asset, resource-based view and knowledge-based view are some mainstream KM perspectives that are influenced by the Cartesian view. Due to this influence these perspectives are based on mind-body dualism in an individual's knowledge production (Hislop, 2009). The mainstream perspectives involve several limitations including, less attention paid to holistic (i.e. individual, social and technological) perspective of knowledge and not highlighting the power issues in KM (Nieve, Quintana and Osorio, 2014; Ragab and Arisha, 2013). Despite the limitations, KM in organisations is heavily driven by the mainstream perspectives as the epistemologies behind them are well articulated. To overcome the said limitations alternatives to the mainstream are required, however, only a few studies have suggested alternative perspectives (see, for example, Schultze and Stabell, 2004; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003).

This paper argues that Buddhist philosophy has a rich epistemological tradition and if adopted as an alternative perspective in KM, it may overcome several limitations inherent in the mainstream perspectives. Thus, this study suggests that an alternative perspective informed by Buddhist epistemology has the potential to overcome the limitations of mainstream perspectives that mainly arises due to lack of concern on both social and technological

perspectives of knowledge and knowledge embodied in people. Hence, the approach taken in the study would further strengthen the neglected social process view of KM (Lerro et al., 2014).

Accordingly, this paper raises the question of ‘what epistemological views could be derived from early Buddhist discourses which signify the potential contributions to contemporary KM?’. To address this question, the paper first reviews KM perspectives and how different epistemological stances influenced KM perspectives. Next it interprets the Buddhist epistemology. This interpretation will unveil the potential contributions of the Buddhist epistemological knowledge for the advancement of contemporary KM. Finally, the paper develops the link between contemporary KM and Buddhist epistemology which is currently missing in literature.

2. Knowledge management perspectives

The existing KM perspectives can be identified into two broader categories, namely direct and indirect, based on their common characteristics (see Table 1 and Table 2). The direct perspective follows Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based methods while the indirect perspective is more inclined towards social processes. Social processes place centrality on human interactions rather than on ICT in managing knowledge (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001; Hislop, 2013). Accordingly, KM practices within organisations vary depending on the perspective adopted.

Accordingly, many scholars have introduced different strategies to manage knowledge which can be identified as complying with the direct and indirect perspectives. For instance, Hansen (1999) introduce two strategies to KM as ‘codification’ and ‘personalisation’. Codification aims at managing knowledge through codifying knowledge, reuse, and enabling KM through ICT. Thus, this complies with the direct perspective. The personalisation strategy focuses on improving social processes to facilitate KM within organisations. Therefore, it takes an indirect perspective. According to Alvesson and Karreman (2001) “there is a strong divide between those interested in the technology aspects, and those emphasizing the ‘people side’ of knowledge management (p. 996).

Table 1: Direct perspective

Perspective	Author	Characteristics
Objectivist	Hislop (2013)	Entitative view on knowledge
Neo-functionalist	Schultze and Stabell (2004)	Explicit privileged over tacit knowledge
Critical		
Knowledge as Theory	Werr and Stjernberg (2003)	Reduction of uncertainty
Knowledge as an asset	Empson (2001)	Decontextualization
Techno-structural	Alvesson and Kärreman (2001)	Generally acceptable theories
Knowledge as truth	McAdam and McCreedy (2000)	Codification
Epistemology of possession	Cook and Brown (1999)	Explicit tacit distinction
Content theory of knowledge	Scarborough (1999)	Maintain a body of knowledge

Literature reveals that out of the two broad KM perspectives, the direct perspective dominates KM literature as well as the KM practices in organisations. Thus, it is the mainstream perspective in KM. According to Hislop (2013) the direct perspective (the objectivist perspective according to the author) is the mainstream perspective on knowledge. This perspective adopts an objective view of knowledge, thus, trust that direct management of

knowledge is possible by separating between the knower (subject) and what is known (object). The dominance of tacit-explicit separation within knowledge management (KM) literature mainly arises due to the overshadowing of this perspective (Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). A similar view is implied by Alvesson and Kärreman (2001) when it is stated that despite the awareness of most executives regarding the highly people-based nature of knowledge, they are stuck in a management system which is highly inclined towards technology implementations. Further, the authors believe that ‘knowledge management is people’ camp is marginalised in KM literature and KM practice.

Table 2: Indirect perspective

Perspective	Author	Characteristics
Practice-based	Hislop (2013)	Creation of multiple knowledges
Constructivist	Schultze and Stabell (2004)	Shared contexts
Dialogic		
Knowledge as practice	Werr and Stjernberg (2003)	Continual development
Knowing as a process	Empson (2001)	Socially constructed and culturally embedded knowledge
Social perspective	Alvesson and Kärreman (2001)	Contestability
Knowledge as socially constructed	McAdam and McCreedy (2000)	Explicit tacit unity
Epistemology of practice	Cook and Brown (1999)	Manage ways of knowing
Relational view of knowledge	Scarborough (1999)	

The theoretical foundation of the direct and indirect perspectives is rooted in different epistemologies. Hence, the next section would examine epistemological thoughts relevant to KM and how such thoughts are reflected in KM perspectives.

2.1 Epistemological influences on knowledge management perspectives

Different epistemological stances greatly influenced different KM perspectives within contemporary literature. These epistemological stances differ in the way knowledge is conceptualised and the way knowledge is managed. This section would elaborate the various KM perspectives and their relationship to the broader discussion of epistemology.

Schultze and Stabell (2004) divide KM literature into two camps as a) mainstream literature that advocates explicit management of knowledge, and b) alternatives views which state that knowledge and management are contradictory concepts. They identify four discourses [perspectives] of KM, namely, neo-functionalist, constructivist, critical and dialogic. Amongst them neo-functionalist and critical discourses are influenced by Cartesian view. The neo-functionalist discourse views knowledge as an asset keeping in line with the resource-based and knowledge-based views of the firm (Grant, 1996). Critical discourse also categorises knowledge as an asset which gives rise to issues of power relations between managers and workers in the effort of managing the knowledge resource (Schultze and Stabell, 2004). On the other hand, dialogic and constructivist discourses believe that people resist totalising knowledge exists within organisations and that knowledge is embedded in work practices respectively (Schultze and Stabell, 2004). Thus, the oxymoron nature is not addressed in neo-functionalist and critical discourses. Based on oxymoron nature, knowledge and Management are apparently contradictory when used together. This is because knowledge is an asset that lies within people, therefore, its

management is challenging. However, dialogic and constructivist discourses consider the mutually constitutive nature of tacit and explicit knowledge (Cook and Brown, 1999).

Conversely, Werr and Stjernberg (2003) and more recent literature (Chuang, Jackson, & Jiang, 2016; Hau et al., 2013; Schoenherr, Griffith, & Chandra, 2014) have identified KM strategies in organisation as focusing on either articulated knowledge (explicit knowledge) or tacit knowledge. This complies with the dualism in Cartesian View (mind vs body and knowledge vs knowing) and demarcates between tacit and explicit knowledge. Werr and Stjernberg (2003) rightly argue that in achieving organisational competence, articulated knowledge does not replace the experience incorporated in tacit knowledge. Rather it facilitates maximum utilisation of tacit knowledge. Thus, by introducing two perspectives as 'knowledge as theory' and 'knowledge as practice', Werr and Stjernberg (2003) problematise the dichotomic treatment of knowledge. Empson (2001) states a similar categorisation of KM perspectives to Schultze and Stabell (2004) where 'knowledge' is differentiated from 'knowing'. Scaratti et al. (2017) have also addressed the importance of this difference and the necessity of having a proper interplay between them in organisations.

In light of this view, 'knowledge' perspective is said to be influenced by the mainstream resource-based view where knowledge is considered as the primary source of competitive advantage. Empson (2001) calls this view 'knowledge as an asset' and Lerro et al. (2014) refers to the same phenomenon as 'intellectual capital assets'. In contrast, 'knowing as a process' is the other perspective which is labelled as a post-modern perspective. This recognises the social nature of KM rather than its technical nature and challenges the fundamental assumptions of the mainstream perspectives. Similarly Cook and Brown (1999) identify two KM perspectives as 'epistemology of possession' and 'epistemology of practice'. The epistemology of possession represent 'knowledge' which is similar to the 'knowledge as an asset' perspective of Empson (2001). According to Cook and Brown (1999) epistemology of practice is largely ignored in literature. Also, it is viewed that these two perspectives are competing. Interestingly Cook and Brown (1999) bring into light that dominance of the Cartesian view in the West has an influence on the dichotomic treatment of knowledge.

In addition, McAdam and McCreedy (2000) state the importance of viewing KM as a social process rather than a technical process. They view knowledge as a socially constructed phenomenon and therefore, implications on employees should be highly considered in KM in organisations. Scarbrough (1999) takes a conflict based approach to KM by elaborating a 'relational' view of knowledge. His view is similar to that of Schultze and Stabell (2004) and elaborates a conflict that exists between 'knowing' and 'knowledge'. Accordingly, one perspective views knowledge as an economic commodity and the other views knowledge as part of work experience.

The above perspectives describe the KM strategies in organisations. These strategies differ in the manner they deal with the oxymoron nature of KM. Thus, the relative significance given to tacit and explicit components of knowledge varies along different perspectives. All the above perspectives are influenced by Western epistemologies as eastern epistemologies including the Buddhist epistemology are not well articulated yet to make a significant presence in KM literature. The next section elaborates Buddhist epistemology and how it could be linked to contemporary debates on KM perspectives.

3. The Buddhist epistemology

This section further elaborates the Buddhist epistemology and some of its key principles. Buddhist epistemology (Buddhist theory of knowledge) is a branch of Buddhist philosophy. It is founded on the teaching of the Buddha in early Buddhism. Contrast to the epistemological views that existed during the pre-Buddhist era, the Buddhist epistemology does not accept the objective existence of knowledge, since it believes in the importance of the human perspective in generating knowledge. The Buddha's assessment was that all the pre-Buddhist views have inherent limitations in generating true knowledge. This is because the pre-Buddhists views have taken either a rationalist or an empiricist view on knowledge like most of the Western epistemologies.

Contrary to this, Buddhist epistemology reject this either-or view. This is evident in the discourse to Kaccayana (sammaditthi) which elaborates that the world is generally inclined towards two views namely, existence and non-existence. These are two extremes [either-or views] and rejected in Buddhist epistemology which adopts the middle path. According to this discourse having 'right view' (sammaditthi) is important in understanding the reality (Kalupahana, 2007).

According to Buddhist epistemology, to generate knowledge, a 'proper reflection' (yoniso manasikara), which involves both experience and reflection or reasoning is required. Thus, the Buddha recognised "experience, both sensory and extrasensory, and reasoning or inference based on experience as source of knowledge" (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 20). Buddhist epistemology views sensory perception [experience] as the primary source of knowledge which would be then reflected in human cognition [reason] to generate true knowledge. Thus, knowledge cannot be created following a dichotomistic mechanism where an 'either-or' view is adopted between experience and reasoning. Accordingly, there are two primary sources to knowledge as experience and reason which are not exclusive.

In the process of generating knowledge, it is interesting to note the Buddhist epistemology's critical attitude towards sources of knowledge. The Buddha criticises accepting things based on faith (saddha) and tradition without having direct knowledge on what the individual believes in. Direct perception is encouraged in Buddhism where followers are encouraged to critically investigate things before accepting. Dogmatic acceptance of the Buddha's doctrines was always discouraged. This is exemplified in the Buddhist discourse called kalama-sutta which promotes free inquiry of individuals for knowledge gaining. As mentioned earlier, there were many sources of knowledge during the time of the Buddha. The Buddha advised kalamas not to primarily depend on those existing sources of knowledge. Rather, free inquiry advises individuals to depend on their own personal experience. These own personal experiences are nothing but the sense experiences. In the advices given to Kalamas the Buddha does not mean that personal experience is the sole method in which reliable knowledge is gained. Personal experience (both gained through socialisation within a certain culture and the karmic energy), forms the foundation for knowledge, however, it should be used along with reasoning for it to be reliable knowledge.

The discourse on the honey-ball (Madhupindika-sutta) elaborates early Buddhist views on sense experience and explains why the foundation of human knowledge should be sense experience (Kalupahana, 2007). As opposed to the Cartesian dualism early Buddhism treats experience and consciousness as functioning as a complex whole where subject and object are mutually interdependent. This discourse further elaborates the basic components of experience and how they interact to form experience. This theory of experience is used in Buddhism to respond to suffering – a key phenomenon in Buddhist philosophy (Holder, 2006).

Similar to the facts mentioned earlier, Holder (2006) also identifies the empiricist nature of Buddhist epistemology. He brings in evidenced argument that the Buddha's philosophy gives a prominent place for experience. Accordingly, three instances where Buddhist philosophy values the importance of experience are highlighted. First, experience of suffering is a major discourse in Buddhist philosophy. Thus, it is the experience of sufferings of the human life that encourages human beings to put faith on a religion. Second, the Buddha taught that any justifications of knowledge claims should be based on experience. Third, Buddhist philosophy explains how suffering arises, how to control the causes for suffering and how elimination of suffering could be achieved. It is the experience that explains how this process works. Further, the Buddha has said that if one believes in something it should be verified through personal experience. Thus, empirical evidence was valued. Accordingly, any possibilities or guesses beyond empirical verifications are not valid. In such a context, 'faith' was not something accepted in Buddhist philosophy and tradition or authority of a teacher are not valid reasons to justify a belief.

Further, Buddhist epistemology has discussions regarding gaining knowledge and developing deeper understanding on such knowledge. This is discussed in the discourse on objects of knowledge (Nanassa vatthu) which contains most significant information regarding how individuals gain mere knowledge of phenomena (dhamme nana) and develop a deeper understanding regarding such phenomena – inductive knowledge – (anvaye nana). This emphasises the requirement of knowing phenomena as well as gaining a deeper understanding regarding them.

Another key concern of Buddhist epistemology is on the various sources of knowledge. The discourse to Magandhiya (Magandhiya-sutta), discourse on conflict and debate (Kalahavivada-sutta) and minor discourse on dissension (Culavyuha-sutta) broadly explain Buddhist views regarding knowledge sources. In the discourse to Magandhiya sense perception and how it leads to conflicts are elaborated. The discourse on conflict and debate mentions about the psychic (mind-nama) and physical (body/matter-rupa) as the foundation of the sense-contact. In addition, these discourses explain views regarding logic and reason. Also, the discourse with Canki

(canki-sutta) elaborates how one comes to know the truth. Thus, its discussion is on the sources of knowledge. It elaborates how some unfounded paths to knowledge would not act as reliable sources of knowledge.

The non-static nature of knowledge is addressed in Discourse to prince Abaya (Abhayarajakumara-sutta) and mode of penetration (Nibbedikapariyaya). These discourses deal with pragmatic conception of truth [knowledge] in Buddhist philosophy (Kalupahana, 2007). This view regards knowledge as not dependent upon immutable facts but rather knowledge is derived through inquiry of empirical nature. Misconceptions and misunderstandings regarding knowledge are also discussed in Buddhist discourses. Accordingly, perversions (Vipallasa) discourse talks about distortions that occur due to erroneous perceptions created through erroneous grasping of sensory experiences. Further, the discourse on the establishment of mindfulness (Satipatthana-sutta) states that in a context where there is no absolute certainty and error-free knowledge mindfulness is important for human beings, which would enhance the focusing ability of the individuals.

Considering the nature of the Buddhist epistemology, the next section elaborates how Buddhist epistemology would be useful in looking at contemporary KM.

4. Relevance of the Buddhist epistemology to managing knowledge

The above explanations reveal that the Buddhist epistemology has contrary views to Cartesian dualism and the rationalist views, which believes in objective existence of knowledge and upon which the foundation of the mainstream perspective (direct perspective) of KM is built. As discussed, Cartesian dualism adopts a dualistic view of phenomena, and the mind-body unity of humans is not accepted. However, the mind-body distinction proposed in Cartesian dualism is subject to much debate regarding its acceptability (Abrams, 2016; Hopkinson, 2015; Lin, 2013). Therefore, the same acceptability issue exists regarding the direct perspective of KM which is influenced by the Cartesian dualism.

Contrary to the Cartesian dualism, Buddhist epistemology rejects the dichotomic treatment of phenomena and mind-body unity of the humans is accepted in Buddhist epistemology. The stance of Buddhism is that mind and body are mutually dependent and inseparable, therefore, the human beings operate as a whole (Lin, 2013). This is further elaborated by Lax (1996: 201) as “What we consider to be the self (atta), character, or personality is actually the sum total of body parts, thoughts, sensations, desires, memories, and so on”. It is important to note that this notion of ‘human beings operate as a whole’ is what is lacking in the management of knowledge within the direct perspective. Ignoring the ‘wholeness’ which is sometimes referred to as ‘oneness’ (Bratianu, 2016; M. Li and Gao, 2003) has led to the main belief in the direct perspective of KM that knowledge can be managed as an asset separate from the knower. Though the indirect perspective is sceptic on this separability, the theoretical foundation of the Buddhist perspective on the oneness is not present in either direct or indirect KM perspectives. Hence, the Buddhist theoretical foundation regarding oneness provides ground to draft an alternative holistic standpoint on management of tacit and explicit knowledge within organisations. Further, this also enables to bring in a new interpretation to the oxymoron nature of KM which is identified by Alvesson and Kärreman (2001) as a key issue that lies within the management of tacit knowledge especially under the direct perspective.

Further, as mentioned in the Discourse to Kaccayana, the right view (sammaditthi) is recognised as important in understanding the reality of things. Hence, right view is important in two aspects – to make right and informed decisions and to understand that nothing exists permanent. For instance within KM processes within organisations, right and informed decision making is critical for assessment of knowledge gaps and the understanding of the impermanent nature of things, which would result in better management of knowledge processes within organisations. Hence, the Buddhist notion of right view will assist in redrafting the management of some stages of KM process in a more realistic manner which incorporates the true nature of the existence of things.

In additions to the views is revealed through the above-mentioned discourses, several other principles related to Buddhist epistemology could be used to provide new insights to KM practices in organisations. For instance, the main thesis of Buddhist epistemology is finding the path towards liberation. In doing so, the individual is the one who should create their own knowledge and wisdom, which is related to the ‘free inquiry’ elaborated earlier (Lax, 1996). To accomplish this, individuals rely on their own knowledge and engage in self-learning and self-transformation in a world which is in a continuous flux. This fluid nature of things [becoming] is addressed in Buddhist epistemology through the principle of ‘impermanence’ (Garfield, 2014). The self-learning and self-

transformation in a world of continuous flux is important for individuals to keep their knowledge up to date and to be adaptive to changing circumstances. Thus, a fluid state of mind is required by the workers in a dynamic working context. Such a mindset better facilitates knowledge creation within individuals. Further, this encourages learning at the organisational level as well due to the fluid nature of the external environment faced by contemporary organisations.

Moreover, free inquiry places primacy on the individuals in gaining knowledge (Chang, 2002). In organisations, which are composed of individuals, it is the functioning of the individuals that matters in knowledge processes. Especially in knowledge intensive firms where majority of the work force is comprised of knowledge workers, facilitating free inquiry is vital. Unlike the ordinary workers, knowledge workers are a special category where a considerable autonomy is offered in their work milieu. Hence, they have the freedom of deciding how and when they work. This freedom is well captured in the free inquiry notion. Therefore, this Buddhist principle will provide insights to redraft how the knowledge workers should be better managed within the organisations.

Additionally, the Buddhist principle of kindness and compassion endorse the value of spirituality that is required for smooth functioning of social processes. This principle enables the development of sense of belongingness, shared values, respect and harmony (Chang, 2002). Spirituality is already addressed in relation to management processes like leadership, decision making etc. (Bouckaert and Zsolnai, 2012; Foo, 2012) though its link with KM is not evident in literature. This principle will enable to rethink how the social relationships can be facilitated to encourage knowledge sharing activities among organisational members. This is specifically useful in tacit knowledge sharing which is difficult to be captured through the mechanistic approaches of the direct perspective.

Discussed above are some potential ways in which the Buddhist epistemology can contribute to KM. The potential explained here is based on the assumptions derived through the review of the Buddhist epistemology. Exploring these potentials would enable the drafting of new and holistic initiatives for managing knowledge within organisations. For example, the ultimate aim of Buddhism is social wellbeing. An organisation is also a social entity which is comprised of social relationships between individuals at various levels. Knowledge is inherently subject to conflict and power issues within organisations (Foucault, 1980). In a context vulnerable to conflicts and power issues, application of Buddhist views into knowledge management practices is expected to develop amicable relationships within organisational members and ensure the well-being of all. This is specifically important in furthering the social process approach to KM.

5. In conclusion

In the organisational context knowledge became the most strategically important asset and a myriad of views regarding the nature of knowledge were held. Due to the strategic importance of knowledge, approaches to manage knowledge were sought after. These approaches varied depending on what view they held regarding knowledge. As a result of this, many KM perspectives are found in literature and the literature review identifies two broader perspectives as the mainstream/direct and the indirect which coincide with the functional and social constructivist views on knowledge respectively.

The literature review reveals that the mainstream/direct perspectives dominate the KM practice. The direct perspectives are rooted in the Western epistemologies where most influence is from the Cartesian dualism and the rationalist approaches. In this context, presence of the Eastern epistemologies in KM literature is negligible. Amongst the Eastern epistemologies, the Buddhist epistemology has a comprehensive theory of knowledge. Yet, though the Buddhist views have entered the general management, economic and ethics discussion arenas, its potential to contribute to contemporary KM still remains under investigated. The potential contributions stem from the Buddhist epistemology to contribute to the alternative KM perspective proposed in the paper.

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