

# THE ANCIENT APPROACH TO LEARNING IN MYANMAR IN TODAY'S CONTEXT

By  
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## ***Abstract***

*The ancient approach to learning in Myanmar can be traced back to the verses composed five centuries ago although its origin may be before Christ. The eight functions of learning consist of listening, thinking, questioning, talking, examining, note-taking, memorizing and reciting. Due to the scarcity of writing materials in the then agrarian society, it is no wonder that reading and writing were not included. The ancient approach to learning should not be misunderstood as rote learning because included therein are dynamic learning functions like thinking, questioning and examining. All these learning functions are useful and effective when these are adapted and extended in the light of modern learning aids.*

Learning is briefly defined as the process of acquiring skills, knowledge, and/or competence (John Burke, 1995). Similarly, Thompson and Zeuli (1999) defined learning as conceptual advance being the development of new and usable understanding (Hammond & Sykes, ed., 1999). These two definitions directly fit in the two out of the four pillars as foundations of education recognized by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) namely: learning to know and learning to do. A broader view of learning is given by Melton (1950) as obviously basic to the education process as well as a fundamental process or characteristic of mind.

The oriental way of learning is often criticized as rote learning by westerners as well as western educated scholars in the East.

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It is generally assumed that, by rote learning, a learner (also called as student and pupil in institutions) tries to memorize the whole text regardless of understanding or scrutiny. When a learner recites a text or verse again, it looks like chanting or ritual to the wondering of strange listeners. This kind of learning can be traced to monastic education especially in Thailand and Myanmar, because in ancient days children's literary education started in Buddhist monasteries where the monks provided education as well as cultural heritage and Buddhist studies.

In fact, the ancient approach to learning in Myanmar is more than rote learning and memorizing. This kind of learning approach consists of eight functions as stated in the verses by a famous monk-poet by the name of Shin Maha Rattathara about five centuries ago. Although equivalent English terms cannot be found, these functions are translated to the nearest meaning as follows:

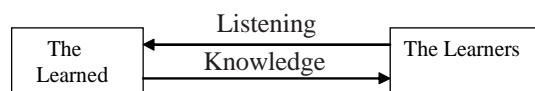
1. Listening
2. Thinking
3. Questioning
4. Talking
5. Examining
6. Note taking
7. Memorizing
8. Reciting

This approach to learning might have originated from Buddhist or Hindi or Sanskrit literature in India, or may be further traced to the days of Taxila many centuries before the Buddha. As some of the above translated terms may not reflect the exact meaning of those functions, the writer would like to make an attempt to explain and interpret those meanings both in the original context and the

present day context followed by discussion and application.

## 1. Listening

Listening or hearing means receiving the knowledge or wisdom by attentive ears. Since an idea or knowledge is perceived mainly with hearing sense, one basic necessity of listening is concentration. In the olden days, there were no amenities or teaching /learning aids, and the transfer of knowledge was done verbally through personal contact; a learner needed to go to the learned to learn by listening first. The learning by listening in those days is illustrated in figure 1.



**Figure: 1**

Just listening does not necessarily mean accepting or obeying, but may lead to remembering or memorizing. In the olden days, the most common place for listening is a monastic school but not exclusively. To learn by listening, the learners could go to learned people or wise men individually wherever they were. Even listening to the elders during day-to-day work is also included in this function. In fact, listening type of learning starts when babies are in their mother's bosom. Thus listening can be done formally in schools and informally outside the school. In the olden days, both learners and the learned must be present at the time of talking/listening. In contrast, with the advent of audio/video aids, listening could follow any time and place convenient to the learner so that both parties