

Buddhist Inquiry into Knowledge Management: A Comprehensive Literature Review

Wewala Dhammaloka¹

Abstract

This literature review explores the integration of Buddhist principles into Knowledge Management (KM), presenting an interdisciplinary examination that challenges traditional Western paradigms. By analyzing the origins and evolution of knowledge management literature, the review highlights the contributions of key theorists such as Karl Wigg, Lawrence Prusak, and Nonaka and Takeuchi. The study emphasizes the importance of balancing human-centric and technology-centric perspectives, incorporating cultural and philosophical dimensions that enrich KM practices. The influence of Buddhist teachings,

including the Mahayana approach, Zen Buddhism, and the Noble Eightfold Path, offers valuable insights into creating ethical, self-aware, and continuously evolving KM practices. The review contrasts the symbolic representation of knowledge in Eastern philosophy, where it is seen as a revelation of Truth, with its commodification in Western thought. This comparison reveals profound differences in conceptualization and utilization, inviting a rethinking of traditional KM paradigms. The interdisciplinary study underscores the potential of Buddhist principles to foster continuous learning, ethical decision-making, and holistic well-being, ultimately promoting a more enlightened and interconnected generation with KM practices.

Keywords: Buddhist knowledge Management, Human-centric Perspectives, Interdisciplinary study, Symbolic representation of knowledge

1. Senior Lecturer, Social Sciences and Comparative Studies, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka.

E-mail: dhammalok2019@busl.ac.lk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2024-3443>



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Introduction

The convergence of Buddhist principles and Knowledge Management (KM) presents a fascinating interdisciplinary study that challenges conventional paradigms and introduces new perspectives on understanding and managing knowledge. This article delves into the integration of Buddhist concepts within the realm of KM, exploring the rich interplay between humanistic and holistic approaches to knowledge, as well as the ethical implications of such integration. By examining the origins and evolution of KM literature, along with the contributions of key theorists like Karl Wigg, Lawrence Prusak, and Nonaka and Takeuchi, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the field's development. The conceptual structures of KM reveal the necessity of balancing human-centric and technology-centric perspectives, incorporating cultural and philosophical dimensions that enrich the practice.

Buddhism's influence on KM is explored through various frameworks, including the Mahayana approach, Zen Buddhism, and the Noble Eightfold Path. These teachings offer valuable insights into creating ethical self-awareness, and continuously evolving KM practices. Buddhist principles of Anitya, Pratityasamuppada, Karma, Pragna, Maitriya, and Karuna emphasize the interconnectedness of knowledge, human existence, and the broader universe. Furthermore, the symbolic representation of knowledge in Eastern philosophy, contrasted with its commodification in Western thought, highlights profound differences in conceptualization and

utilization. This exploration invites a rethinking of traditional KM paradigms, proposing an ethically grounded and holistic approach.

Through this interdisciplinary study, the integration of Buddhist philosophy into KM emerges as a pathway to fostering continuous learning, ethical decision-making, and holistic well-being. By embracing these principles, we can envision a more enlightened and interconnected human generation of KM practices.

Objectives and methodology of the study

The study aims to achieve three key objectives: examining the evolution and contributions of prominent theorists in KM, exploring how Buddhist principles can enhance KM practices, and comparing the symbolic representation of knowledge in Eastern and Western philosophies. Methodologies utilized include a comprehensive literature review to trace the historical and conceptual evolution of KM, qualitative analysis of Buddhist frameworks to identify their relevance, and comparative analysis to contrast philosophical perspectives. These approaches collectively provide a robust framework for integrating ethical self-aware, and holistic concepts into KM practices.

To analyze the evolution and contributions to KM literature, a comprehensive literature review was conducted. This involved systematically searching academic databases, journals, and seminal works to identify key theorists and map the field's development

over time. By tracing the historical progression of ideas, the study establishes a foundational understanding of KM's conceptual evolution and its broader implications.

Exploring the integration of Buddhist principles into KM employed qualitative analysis, focusing on frameworks such as the Mahayana approach, Zen Buddhism, and the Noble Eightfold Path. Through textual analysis of Buddhist scriptures and teachings, relevant principles were identified and assessed for their application in ethical and holistic knowledge practices. Finally, to contrast Eastern and Western philosophies, a comparative analysis was conducted, examining philosophical texts and cultural studies to understand how symbolic representation varies across traditions and its impact on KM approaches.

The Emergence and evolution of KM

KM as a concept emerged in the mid-twentieth century within Western business society and has developed across various technological and cultural backgrounds to the present day. Its pioneer authors and their concepts primarily originated from developed regions such as Europe, the United States, and Japan (Thomas, n.d.). An article (1996) by Carl M. Wigg and colleagues provides a historical overview of the KM literature (Towe, Pizziconi, Wigg, 1997). Several management theorists from around the world have contributed to the evolution of KM concepts, methodologies, and literature, including Peter F. Drucker (Drucker, 1999), Paul Strassmann (Strassmann,

n.d.), and Peter M. Senge (Senge, n.d.). Among these, the contributions of American theorists such as Karl M. Wiig are particularly prominent (Skyrme, 2011).

Prominent authors have significantly contributed to the development of KM literature, especially since the 1990s. Notable contributors include Lawrence Prusak (1997; 2001), Thomas H. Davenport (1998), Ikujiro Nonaka (1991; 2001), and Hirotaka Takeuchi (2006). Influential works such as Bob Garratt's 1990 book on "Creating Learning Organizations" and Peter Senge's "The Fifth Discipline" have enriched the field. In 1991, Thomas A. T. S. Stewart introduced the idea of intellectual capital in his article "Brainpower," and Nonaka's article "Knowledge Creating Companies" was published in the Harvard Business Review. The first book specifically dedicated to KM, "Knowledge Management Foundation," was authored by Carl Wigg in 1993 (Milton, 2018). The subsequent establishment of the International Knowledge Management Network and the European Knowledge Management Association facilitated further advancements and discussions in the field (Wigg, 1997).

The evolution of KM literature has been influenced by various cultural and philosophical dimensions. Authors such as Drucker and Strassmann emphasized the importance of information and knowledge as organizational resources, while Senge highlighted the cultural aspect by focusing on the concept of "Organizational Learning." American businessman Chris Argyris and

Australian experts Christopher A. Bartlett and Dorothy Leonard introduced modern ideas and concepts that shaped the knowledge management discourse. Japanese experts Nonaka and Takeuchi made significant contributions by integrating Eastern cultural perspectives, particularly Zen Buddhism, into knowledge management models, thus broadening the scope and applicability of the field (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011).

Karl Wigg is a prominent figure in Western KM. In his pivotal article (1997), "Knowledge Management: Where Does It Come From? Where Is It Going?", he traces the progression of knowledge used from the agricultural era to the modern knowledge age. Wigg also offers an in-depth overview of KM activities and publications in the Western world from 1918 to 1996, detailing its evolution through distinct levels, summarized in a structured table:

Knowledge Management Authors

Period: from -to	Stage	Level of KM
BC10000-18 th Century	Agricultural Economy	Concerned with Agriculture: development of settled agriculture and the establishment of early agrarian societies
Medieval era - Late 18 th Century	Natural Resource Economy	Exploiting Natural Resources Without Considering Consumer Interest: use of natural resources for economic activities, including mining and forestry.
18 th Century - Mid-19 th Century (1760s to 1840s)	Industrial Revolution	Recognition of Knowledge as a Specialist: shift from manual labor and agrarian economies to industrialized and mechanized manufacturing processes.
Mid-19 th Century- Mid-20 th Century (1850s to 1950s)	Manufacturing Revolution	Growing Importance of Expertise: significant advancements in mass production, assembly line techniques, and industrial growth.

Mid-20 th century and continuing to the present day	Information/Knowledge Revolution	Focused on KM; Emphasis on Employees and Customer Interest: proliferation of information technologies, the rise of the knowledge-based economy, and the significant influence of digital innovations on society and business practice.
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(Source: Wigg, K. M. (1997). Knowledge Management: Where Did It Come From and Where Will It Go? *Expert Systems with Applications*, 13(1):1-14. doi.org/10.1016/S0957-4174(97)00018-3)

Wigg argues that KM gained prominence in competitive, advanced organizations in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He also describes various publications, conferences, organizations, and business institutions on KM in the Western production management field from 1975 to 1999. The socio-economic structure played a crucial role in the development and utilization of KM. Prusak (2001) highlights the significance of the 1993 Boston Conference on Knowledge Management, describing it as a pivotal event in the field. His article, "Where Did Knowledge Management Come From?" published in 1999, traces the modern history and future of KM, emphasizing its historical and fundamental need. Danport and Prusak (1997) in their pioneering work, "Working Knowledge," introduced the vocabulary, concepts, and services of KM to the world. They highlighted the human qualities of knowledge, such as experience and intuition, which are challenging to manage yet crucial. They explored the socio-technical aspects of KM, emphasizing its human and cultural dimensions. Peter Drucker (1909-2005)

and Paul Strassmann underscored the growing importance of information, viewing knowledge as a key asset in modern companies and organizations. Drucker stated that knowledge is essential to society and the work environment (Drucker & Maciariello, 1973). Senge (1990) discussed the concept of the "learning organization" and explored the cultural dimension of knowledge management (Luhn, 2016). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1994; Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007) have made significant contributions to knowledge management from Eastern thought and culture, particularly with a Buddhist slant. Their approach reflects an Eastern religious and cultural perspective, focusing on "organizational learning" and moving away from the technical dimension to emphasize humanistic aspects.

Literature Classification of KM

KM literature can be broadly classified into two categories: 1. Human-Centric Literature: This category emphasizes human and social functioning, exploring the creation and sharing of knowledge

based on the relationship between knowledge and society, man, and cultural significance. Key works include Jannex (2003; 2008), Samaras & et al. (2008), Schein (2017), Argyris & Schön (1997), Pandey (2016), Polanyi (1967), and Syed & et al. (2018). The book “Communication, Organizational Learning” (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011) highlights the social organizational function of KM. The textbook “Knowledge Management Theory and Practice” (Dalkir, 2005) covers the entire field of KM studies. Religious and cultural studies have become increasingly significant in contemporary KM research (Örtenblad, 2014).

2. **Technology-Centric Literature:** This category focuses on the use of information and communication technologies in KM. Key works include Maier (2007), Wei Choo (2001), and Nisha (2018). These studies often reveal the limitations of relying primarily on technology, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that includes human and cultural dimensions.

The integration of Buddhist principles into KM practices highlights the importance of managing knowledge for the benefit of humans and the world. The following sections will review the authors who have examined KM from a Buddhist perspective and their concepts and ideas.

Buddhism and KM Literature

Several academic investigations have explored the intersection of Buddhism and KM, highlighting how Buddhist concepts, principles, teachings, practices,

and perspectives are utilized to analyze various aspects of KM. Religion and spirituality in the workplace have gained increasing attention in organizational studies. Research on these themes within the Asian context, alongside Western management approaches to spiritual concepts, has been synthesized (Tse, Naidu, & Ramsay, 2023). The concept of "absolute happiness," as explained in Nichiren Buddhism, has been examined in the context of spiritual intelligence to promote conscious leadership (Kathuria, Awasthy, & Sharma, 2023). Authors have explored how sustainable marketing strategies can align with the core principles and values of Hinduism and Buddhism, two major religions that profoundly influence Indian culture (Vashisth & Malvia, 2024). They highlight that Buddhist teachings on compassion, mindful consumption, and enlightenment contribute to sustainable marketing practices. The authors argue that Buddhism plays a crucial role in shaping cultural values and offers wisdom for the holistic betterment of humanity.

Mahayana Approach to KM: Turning Tacit Knowledge into Explicit Knowledge

Nonaka’s SECI model demonstrates the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and is deeply influenced by Nishida Kitaro's Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, incorporating ideas like absolute emptiness, pure experience, and inherent goodness (Nishida, 1970b; Maraldo, 2019). The model's dynamic knowledge creation process—socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization—

reflects Nishida's emphasis on direct experiences and interconnectedness, promoting collaboration and mutual understanding (Maraldo, 2019). This integration of Mahayana philosophy and KM offers a humanistic approach to knowledge creation, challenging Western economic-focused frameworks (Andresen & Boom, 2007).

Further influences on KM include Zen Buddhism, which links knowledge creation to self-realization and understanding the true nature of things, emphasizing its role in fostering empathy and teamwork in organizations (Katuscakova, 2014; Thomas, 2009; Basker, 2015). Nonaka's model aligns with Japanese management philosophies shaped by Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism, reflecting their emphasis on ethical practices and employee motivation, which contributed to the rapid economic growth in East Asian countries (Rarick, 1994; Andresen & Boom, 2007). The synthesis of Eastern thought and KM highlights knowledge as an evolving, interactive process that transcends mere information management (Thomas, 2009).

Humanism, Innovation, and Knowledge-Based Culture

Otto Chang has significantly contributed to the field of KM by highlighting the limitations of existing paradigms and integrating humanistic Buddhism into KM theories (Chang, 2002; 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006). He emphasizes that a knowledge-based economy focuses on human happiness and solving economic problems using human intelligence,

differing from a knowledge-based economic model (Chang, 2006). Chang's analysis outlines how humanistic Buddhism can foster an organizational culture of self-learning, innovation, and continuous renewal, drawing parallels between Buddhist practices and the values of innovative organizations (Chang, 2005b; Chang & Slaubaugh, 2016).

Chang also explores the ethical and sustainable aspects of KM through Buddhist education, the knowledge-based economy, and sustainable entrepreneurship (Chang, 2006; Chang & Slaubaugh, 2016). Daniels (2014) supports this by noting Buddhism's scientifically grounded potential for a sustainable economic system and harmonious management. Humanistic Buddhism addresses societal problems by promoting ethical resource use, understanding human needs, and achieving good human life through intellectual independence, contrasting with reliance on divine intervention. It also critiques overconsumption and emphasizes maximizing limited resources to mitigate environmental imbalances.

Sharing Knowledge for good purposes

Knowledge sharing in Buddhism prioritizes the common good, with knowledge generously shared without monetary value or commercial recognition (Chang, 2014). Buddhist KM principles include Anicca (impermanence), which highlights the constant evolution of knowledge, Pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), emphasizing the interconnected and transient nature

of reality, and Karma (action), which links actions to ethical wisdom and deeper understanding. Other principles such as Buddhahood (enlightenment) promote universal consciousness, while Maitriya and Karuna (compassion) stress the intertwined nature of empathy and knowledge for ethical and harmonious decision-making.

Chang's works advocate for a Buddhist path to knowledge creation and management, emphasizing its spiritual and societal importance. His analyses link humanistic Buddhism to organizational culture and sustainable development, reflecting its adaptability to modern contexts and its roots in Japanese culture. By introducing Buddhist humanism to a KM universe shaped by Western thought, Chang presents a framework for ethical, sustainable, and interconnected knowledge practices

Epistemology and KM

Epistemological and philosophical approaches in KM explore the essential questions of what knowledge is and how it is shared. Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the need to integrate Eastern and Western knowledge traditions, highlighting the limitations of Western epistemology rooted in Cartesian dualism, which separates knowledge from its object and hinders a holistic KM view. In contrast, Buddhist epistemology resolves this duality by offering a comprehensive, interconnected approach, as derived from Buddhist sutras (Alahakoon & Mohannak, 2019).

Differences between Western and Eastern traditions further shape the KM

paradigm. The Eastern approach often focuses on intelligence, wisdom, and spirituality (Pragna/Buddhi/Pratibha), while Western thought centers on defining and analyzing information-based knowledge (Surbi, 2016). Eastern traditions emphasize holistic decision-making and the interconnectedness of intelligence, while Western perspectives like Aristotelian naturalism prioritize static definitions and independent analyses of knowledge.

Paradigm shifts in KM reflect evolving epistemological investigations, transitioning from individual production-focused knowledge to collaborative sharing and public management (Woldesenbet, 2018; Aarons, 2006). Buddhist epistemology aligns with these shifts by promoting shared, socialized knowledge, challenging the outdated Cartesian dualism, and integrating a philosophy of science with social epistemology (Jayatilleke, 1963). This approach underscores the dynamic and collective nature of KM in fostering broader understanding and ethical practice.

Practical Wisdom in Buddhism

Buddhism emphasizes practical wisdom in business decision-making by applying general principles and methods to specific contexts. Rooted in self-examination and verification, its Middle Way, marked by peaceful and sincere actions, guides management practices (Vallabh & Singhal, 2014). However, understanding these concepts may be challenging for those unfamiliar with Eastern traditions.

Buddhist Knowledge Management (KM)

links practical wisdom to organizational culture and learning, highlighting people as central to management. Teachings such as simplicity, self-control, impermanence, and mindfulness, along with frameworks like the Noble Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts, offer valuable insights for KM and modern organizational practices (Weerasinghe et al., 2015). These principles foster ethical decision-making and a harmonious working environment.

Knowledge Symbolization

Knowledge is shaped by cultural perspectives, with Western approaches often emphasizing "intellectual capital" within a materialistic and economic framework. In this view, knowledge is seen as an objective, controllable asset that can be measured, accumulated, and used for economic gain, treated as part of an organization's input-output system (Marti, 2007; Drucker, 1969; Nonaka, 1994). In contrast, Eastern traditions, particularly influenced by Buddhism, conceptualize knowledge in a holistic and ethical context, integrating it with personal growth and community well-being (Andriessen & Boom, 2007).

Eastern knowledge traditions interpret knowledge as a revelation of truth and unity between the universe and humanity. Unlike the Western focus on external factors and objectivity, Eastern perspectives view knowledge as arising from the mind and deeply connected to the soul and intellect. In Japan, informed by Mahayana and Zen Buddhism, knowledge is symbolized as a process of continuous self-transformation rooted in "emptiness," reflecting moral and intellectual evolution.

The cultural study of knowledge underscores the importance of Asian and Eastern philosophies, particularly Buddhist thought, which emphasizes interconnectedness and rejects Western dualism. These traditions regard truth as arising from individual intelligent thinking and interconnected existence, forming the basis of knowledge. Through this lens, Eastern philosophies provide a profound understanding of the symbolic and ethical dimensions of knowledge creation and its cultural meaning.

Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path is a central Buddhist teaching that has been applied to KM for creating meaningful value within organized communities (Griffiths, 2021). Each component contributes to ethical and sustainable practices, beginning with Samma Ditthi (Right View) to foster correct perspectives and Samma Sankappa (Right Intention) for forming good intentions. Samma Vacha (Right Speech) emphasizes ethical communication, while Samma Kammanta (Right Action) and Samma Ajiva (Right Livelihood) focus on environmentally sustainable methods and outcomes. Other elements highlight dedication and awareness, such as Samma Vayama (Right Effort), which encourages acting responsibly with commitment, and Samma Sati (Right Mindfulness), which ensures social and cultural sensitivity. Finally, Samma Samadhi (Right Concentration) underlines the need for focus and a unified mind for multidimensional problem-solving. Together, these principles form a dynamic framework for effective and holistic KM practices.

The Western paradigm of KM emphasizes rationality, measurement, and economic utility, treating intellectual capital as a measurable asset to drive competitive advantage. In contrast, the Noble Eightfold Path offers a holistic, ethical framework centered on mindfulness, sustainable practices, and human-centered values. This framework highlights the potential to enrich Western KM by introducing principles like ethical intent and mindfulness, though it presents challenges in aligning these qualitative aspects with quantitative systems.

Kalpna Mishra (2018) extends this integration by demonstrating the practical application of "Samma Vacha" (Right Speech) in KM and organizational learning. His research, particularly within the Nepali context, highlights the use of good words and ethical communication in fostering societal welfare. This approach underscores the transformative potential of incorporating Buddhist values into organizational practices, bridging the gap between ethical considerations and effective knowledge-sharing processes.

The exploration of knowledge in Buddhism spans a vast field, with teachings from the Sutra Pitaka providing insights into analyzing Western concepts and deepening understanding. Foundational sutras such as Kalama, Madhupindika, and Satipatthana inform Buddhist thought, alongside essential principles like Yonisomanasikara (wise attention), Anatma (non-self), Nirvana, and the Five Precepts, offering a holistic view of knowledge as intertwined with ethical conduct and mental cultivation.

Buddhist KM emphasizes the transformative power of interconnectedness, ethical action, and the pursuit of ultimate truth. It integrates wisdom with practical practices, including meditation, self-discipline, and kindness, fostering personal and collective growth. Practical applications extend to Dhamma preaching, lifelong learning, and altruistic behavior, exemplifying the relevance of Buddhist principles in both spiritual and organizational contexts.

Through its emphasis on ethical conduct, mental discipline, and compassion, Buddhist KM highlights a unique approach to knowledge as a means of personal transformation and societal welfare, differentiating itself from purely materialistic and rational frameworks. The Sangha, or community of monks, serves as an enduring model of collaborative learning and holistic knowledge-sharing.

Conclusion

The integration of Buddhist principles into Knowledge Management (KM) introduces a holistic and humanistic approach, emphasizing the unity of knowledge and action, impermanence, and ethical intelligence. From Karl Wigg to Nonaka and Takeuchi, KM's evolution reflects a dynamic interplay between Western technology-centric views and Eastern human-centric philosophies, encouraging a balanced framework that integrates cultural and philosophical dimensions.

Buddhist influences, including the Mahayana approach, Zen Buddhism, and the Noble Eightfold Path, offer

transformative frameworks for fostering self-awareness, ethical behavior, and continuous growth. Eastern philosophy's symbolic representation of knowledge as a revelation of truth and self-transformation contrasts with the Western focus on commodifying knowledge as intellectual capital.

By blending these diverse perspectives, KM gains a more comprehensive and ethically grounded foundation. This interdisciplinary synergy promotes continuous learning, ethical decision-making, and holistic well-being, enriching the field and paving the way for innovation and sustainable development in a more interconnected world.

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