

Overcoming Doubt Through Direct Experience

by Shaila Catherine

In the Middle Length Discourses, there is a parable of a person born blind who could not see dark or light forms, colored forms, or the stars, sun, or moon, and so he says: “I do not know these. I do not see these. Therefore, these do not exist.”

This blind person denies what is outside his particular experience. This tendency—to doubt what has not yet been experienced—is relatively common in the Western Dhamma scene. For instance, I have heard people discount the potential for the stability of jhāna—maintaining that it is impossible to master such stable states of concentration in today's world. I have also heard people express doubt in the possibility of liberation from greed, hatred, and ignorance. Some people, though interested in the Dhamma, have come to think full awakening itself is nearly impossible in today's world.

But just because we have reviewed our circle of friends and found it devoid of enlightened beings doesn't mean we should give up hope that awakening can happen to people like us.

Discovering for Ourselves

The Buddha frequently emphasized the importance of direct knowledge. For instance, he observed that when the seven factors of enlightenment have been “developed and cultivated, they lead to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.”

The Buddha also criticized members of other sects for holding views based merely on logic, oral tradition, faith in the teacher or tradition, or reflective acceptance of a view.

But how should we relate to the idea of direct, personal knowledge if we are at a stage on our path where we don't possess that knowledge and haven't had the experience? How can we remain open to the highest possibility of awakening, while maintaining a balanced, critical, and intelligent perspective about the goals that we seek, and the timeline we set for accomplishments?

Direct Experience and Buddhist Teachings

Over time, many of us will have profound personal transformations and deep insights through practice. Some of them may map neatly onto traditional descriptions that we read about in the suttas or hear in Dhamma talks. We might name them as insight knowledges, awakening experiences, or experiences of emptiness.

The maps we find in the suttas can help us determine if we are on course, checking that our experiences are serving our purpose. Some people fall in love with these maps, and that is understandable as maps in general can be rewarding to use—even entertaining. When you are driving a new route, do you ever feel the pleasure of finding where you are on the map?

If we become overly attached to maps, however, we limit our ability to connect with the tangible world around us. As Polish-American scholar Alfred Korzybski said: “The map is not the territory.”

If we are unwary, spiritual maps can have drawbacks and even feed the construction of self. We must be careful when we use maps like the four jhānas, the four stages of awakening, or the 16 insight knowledges.

The point of these teachings is to not to help the ego attain something. And at a certain point, it is necessary to stop evaluating where you are in the practice and free the mind from the duality of success and failure. Your self worth does not depend upon where you place yourself on an abstract spiritual map. In fact, anytime your self-worth is in question, watch out! Self-grasping is near-by.

We must work with conceit whether we succeed or fail at establishing concentration. We must unravel this tendency to be proud of our attainments or discouraged by our accomplishment or constructs, and prevent release.

In a way we must not care where we are on the map while at the same time totally caring about where we are ultimately heading. We shouldn't settle for anything less than full awakening. As the Buddha exhorts regarding any given level of our attainment: Do not stop short with that!

Direct Experience and the Path of Practice

While the direction from teachers and from spiritual maps can be helpful, we need the courage to walk the path for ourselves. We might make mistakes. We might struggle with difficult mental states. And we might misperceive or misinterpret our experience.

But we learn a lot by walking the path diligently and by letting go of our concepts of what we think is possible. We must be wise, and gradually develop our virtues, clarity, strength, wisdom, and equanimity. Full commitment does not require force or expectation.

Right effort means being as willing to back off as to dive in. I encourage students who are on the brink of radically new perspectives in their samādhi or insight to let it evolve slowly. For instance, I sometimes suggest that they enter into the unfamiliar depth of samādhi for just a brief moment, and then emerge to check out the quality of the mind. Investigate this unfamiliar state several times before letting the mind launch into jhanic absorption. When students take a little time to develop gradually and intelligently, they quickly confirm for themselves that the states of concentration and insight are entirely wholesome.

Practicing wisely, we develop the skill to move the mind intentionally. We must have the skills to enter and exit any state or perception without fear of being consumed by it, sucked into the energy, or stuck there. Eventually we develop mastery of the mind in concentration, and liberating insight into the emptiness of all things.

When progress is won on the path, it can sometimes feed the ego. Overzealous arrogance or sheer impatience might cause some people to think that their level of skill is higher, and the nature of their experiences are more sublime, than in fact they are.

The Buddha strictly prohibited monastics from declaring their attainments. It was a serious offense that would end one's monastic life. The Buddhist tradition teaches meditators to go through a process of reviewing the attainment, stabilizing the realization, learning to abide in voidness at will, and then continually reviewing the mind for defilements.

While we should not brashly and prematurely declare our attainments, we should dream big about what is possible on the path. I am inspired by teachings where the Buddha encouraged his disciples to not stop short of the goal of full awakening. He urged his followers to abandon each successive attainment and surmount every wholesome state achieved. I take this call for diligent practice to heart. ☸

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