

## Direct Experience



On May 27<sup>th</sup>, we had Maria Straatman give a dharma talk on direct experience. Maria is a former scientist and businesswoman, and has been a student of Gil Fronsdal since 1997. She is a graduate of the Sati Center Buddhist Chaplaincy Training; has been trained as an End of Life Counselor by Alaya Institute; and serves as a hospice volunteer for Zen Hospice Project. In addition, Maria is a staff person with Commonweal Cancer Help Program and coordinates Commonweal's Support Groups for People with Heart Disease.

When you meditate, ask yourself

“What am I aware of?” As the mind drifts – and it will, when you come back to awareness, rejoice that you are awake in this moment. What is it that you are aware of? Is it your breath or the idea of your breath? Do you feel the movement of your breath, the temperature, the movement of your body as it rises and falls? How do you register this awareness?

Maria explained that we have three ways of knowing; by inference, by authority, and by direct experience.

With knowing by inference, we categorize things in “this is like that” fashion. Although this may help us with quick judgments, we lose the distinctions of what is different, and ways in which “this is not like that.” In other words, this is an approximate knowledge, filtered by assumptions of similarity.

We also tend to accept what is told us by an authoritative source. However, in the Kalama Sutta (<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/kalama1.htm>) the Buddha cautions us about the unreliability of authority when it goes against what we know is right:

Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher." Kalamas, when you yourselves know: "These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill," abandon them.'

The best way to know something is by direct experience. This is what the Buddha is alluding to in the Kalama Sutta – when your direct experience in conflict with authority, trust your direct experience. But how do we know our direct experience is right? Is it always true and unbiased? These questions formed the basis for our talk:

“One of the basic ideas about Buddhism is that instead of focusing on beliefs and doctrine, we are directed toward our direct experience as a guide to what is true. It is one of the attractive aspects for many people. I was talking with a dharma friend of mine who was describing a kalyana mitta group (friends who meet to meditate together and perhaps share experiences of the dharma.) Although some members of the group had only been meditating a few months, he was not concerned about guidance because they are all dealing only with direct experience.

This mention of direct experience sent my mind off in consideration of what this might mean. Because my experience tells me that what I think I know is colored by a number of things over which I don't have complete control. My 'direct experience' is a result of a combination of ways that I experience the world – and what is true?”

As an example of the limits of direct experience, there is the story of the blind men and the elephant in the Udana (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.6.04.irel.html>). The monks were puzzled over the lack of agreement among teachers and holy men of what is true, and were concerned about the quarreling and fighting over who was right.

At that time there were a number of recluses and brahmins, wanderers of various sects, living around Savatthi. And they were of various views, of various beliefs, of various opinions, and they relied for their support on their various views. There were some recluses and brahmins who asserted and held this view: “The world is eternal; only this is true, any other (view) is false.” There were some recluses and brahmins who asserted: “The world is not eternal; only this is true, any other (view) is false.” There were some who asserted: “The world is finite... The world is infinite... The life-principle and the body are the same... The life-principle and the body are different... The Tathagata exists beyond death... The Tathagata does not exist beyond death... The Tathagata both exists and does not exist beyond death; The Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist beyond death; only this is true, any other (view) is false.” And they lived quarrelsome, disputatious, and wrangling, wounding each other with verbal darts, saying: “Dhamma is like this, Dhamma is not like that! Dhamma is not like this, Dhamma is like that!”

The Buddha explained:

“Formerly, bhikkhus, there was a certain king in this very Savatthi. And that king addressed a man: ‘Come now, my good man, bring together all those persons in Savatthi who have been blind from birth.’

“‘Yes, your majesty,’ that man replied, and after detaining all the blind people in Savatthi, he approached the king and said, ‘All the blind people in Savatthi have been brought together, your majesty.’

“‘Now, my man, show the blind people an elephant.’

“‘Very well, your majesty,’ the man replied to the king, and he presented an elephant to the blind people, saying, ‘This, blind people, is an elephant.’

"To some of the blind people he presented the head of the elephant, saying, 'This is an elephant.' To some he presented an ear of the elephant, saying, 'This is an elephant.' To some he presented a tusk... the trunk... the body... the foot... the hindquarters... the tail... the tuft at the end of the tail, saying, 'This is an elephant.'

"Then, bhikkhus, the man, having shown the elephant to the blind people, went to the king and said, 'The blind people have been shown the elephant, your majesty. Do now what you think is suitable.' Then the king approached those blind people and said, 'Have you been shown the elephant?'

"Yes, your majesty, we have been shown the elephant.'

"Tell me, blind people, what is an elephant like?'

"Those blind people who had been shown the head of the elephant replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a water jar.' Those blind people who had been shown the ear of the elephant replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a winnowing basket.' Those blind people who had been shown the tusk of the elephant replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a plowshare.' Those blind people who had been shown the trunk replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a plow pole.' Those blind people who had been shown the body replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a storeroom.' Those blind people who had been shown the foot replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a post.' Those blind people who had been shown the hindquarters replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a mortar.' Those blind people who had been shown the tail replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a pestle.' Those blind people who had been shown the tuft at the end of the tail replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a broom.'

"Saying 'An elephant is like this, an elephant is not like that! An elephant is not like this, an elephant is like that!' they fought each other with their fists. And the king was delighted (with the spectacle).

"Even so, bhikkhus, are those wanderers of various sects blind, unseeing... saying, 'Dhamma is like this!... Dhamma is like that!'"

At one time, people believed that the world was flat. This belief did not affect the shape of the planet. At one time, people believed that the earth was the center of the universe. The universe was not affected by this belief.

"So, this is one way we have of experiencing the world: through our beliefs. Our meditation practice is another way in which we examine what is true and we do this by developing the capacity to notice what is happening in the present moment. Still, it is a

great challenge to separate this noticing from what our minds and our habits of mind bring to the process.”

Take the example of a singing bowl ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rin\\_gong\\_at\\_Kiyomizudera,\\_Kyoto.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rin_gong_at_Kiyomizudera,_Kyoto.JPG)). What is true of this bell?

We look at the physical form. It is rounded, a little bigger than a half-sphere; it may be brass – hard, cold, and metallic. There is a second part of the bell, a sounding rod, long and cylindrical. We may consider our feelings about this bell. Perhaps we like the sound when the bell is struck, or we like the look of it. With feelings, we are responding to the experience we have of the bell.

We may have thoughts about the bell; this is like the bell I have at home; this is nothing like the deep-sounding bell at Spirit Rock – we compare, we go to the past and to the future – someday I will have a bell like this...

The physical form itself is not a bell; only the idea about the pieces gathered from past experiences allows us to call it a bell. Our direct experience of the two separate pieces is neutral – we have an idea of what is a bell and how these two pieces conform to that idea or concept.

All of this is subject to our awareness, our consciousness of something in our experience. Without consciousness, we may be wandering in our thoughts and be ‘tuning out’ the sound of the bell entirely. We may not be seeing the bell or the two pieces because we have our eyes shut. We may be selectively using our senses, our understanding, or our consciousness.

These five characteristics, the physical form, our thoughts, concepts, feelings and consciousness are referred to as the Five Aggregates or khandha in Pali. The Aggregates are what we attach to. Lily de Silva calls them the Self-made Private Prison (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/desilva/bl120.html>)

*According to the teachings of the Buddha the human personality comprises five "aggregates of grasping," called in Pali pañc'upadanakkhandha. They are enumerated as:*

- the aggregate of body;
- the aggregate of feelings;
- the aggregate of perception;
- the aggregate of volitional activities;
- the aggregate of consciousness.

*We may wonder why the Buddha mentions only five aggregates, no more and no less. We can attempt to answer this question by analyzing any unit of experience in our day-to-day life. Suppose, for instance, we hear a big noise on the road, and we rush to the spot and recognize that a motorcycle accident has taken place; we feel sorry for the victim and want to rush him to the hospital. If we look at this experience and analyze the physical and mental phenomena*

*involved, we will notice that they can be accommodated within the five aggregates of grasping.*

*Of course, we all know the body or the material aspect of our personality. It is this body which approached the site of the accident. We heard the noise and saw the scene of the accident, that means we have had auditory and visual consciousness. We recognized that it is a motorcycle accident, that is the aggregate of perception and ideation. We felt sorry for the victim, and our sorrow is the feeling aspect of our personality. We wanted to take the victim to hospital, and that is the volitional aspect. Thus we have found all five aggregates of grasping in this unit of experience. The physical and mental phenomena involved in all our varied experiences can be included within these five aggregates. It is very likely that the Buddha too discovered these five aggregates of grasping by analyzing experience through objective awareness (sati) and intuitive wisdom (pañña ).*

*Why are they called aggregates, khandha? Khandha means "heap" or "accumulation." It is easy to understand that the body is a heap of material elements. We maintain its process of growth by heaping it up with gross material food. In the mental sphere, too, through our experiences we accumulate feelings, perceptions and ideas, volitions, and consciousness. Therefore all five aspects of the personality are called heaps, accumulations, or aggregates. Since they are intimately interconnected and act on one another, the processes are extremely complex and complicated. According to one commentarial simile they are like the waters at a confluence where five rivers meet. One cannot take a handful of water and say that it came from such and such a river. The aggregates are ever-changing and are constantly in a state of flux. They are so volatile and dynamic that they give rise to the notion of "I" and "mine." Just as a fast revolving firebrand gives the illusion of a circle of fire, these dynamic processes of physical and mental energy give rise to the illusion of I, self, ego, soul.*

*They are called aggregates of grasping because we cling to them passionately as "I" and "mine." Just as an animal tied with a strap to a firm post runs round and round the post, stands, sits, and lies down beside the post, so the person who regards the five aggregates as his self cannot escape from the aggregates and the suffering, disappointment, and anxiety which invariably accompany them ([SN XXII.99](#); S iii.150).*

*The five aggregates constitute a real private prison for us. We suffer a great deal due to our attachment to this prison and our expectations of what the prison should be. As our perception of the external world and our relations with our fellow human beings are conditioned by the nature of this prison, interpersonal relations and communication become extremely complex, tricky, and problematic. Problems become more and more complicated to the extent that we identify ourselves with this private prison.*

The Five Aggregates are clinging aggregates

(<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.044.than.html>) and thus give rise to suffering.

In clinging to physical form, we may want material things to last forever. We may want to be forever young, banishing old age, sickness, and death.

Feelings may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We want to hold on to those feelings that are pleasant, and run away from those that are unpleasant. Obsession with ignorance causes us to cling to neutral feelings.

Our perceptions mask what is true. In Book of Hours, Rilke writes

No one lives his life.  
Disguised since childhood,  
Haphazardly assembled  
From voices and fears and little pleasures,  
We come of age as masks.  
Our true face never speaks  
Somewhere there must be storehouses  
where all these lives are laid away  
like suits of armor or old carriages  
or clothes hanging limply on the walls.  
Maybe all paths lead there  
To the repository of un-lived things.

What is behind the mask?

Our mental formations, our volitional activities, may express things we focus on, which we then become. If we think we are a certain mind state, then we tend to become that mind state. If we think we are no good, we may lose our good qualities. If we feel discouraged, we may become permanently discouraged. We make choices based on what we think is true. We believe and become the scripts we run in our minds.

However, believing the mind state is optional. As the bumper sticker says "don't believe everything you think." Identifying and believing are done by choice. A thought may trigger an emotion, but mindfulness allows us to see the causes and conditions for the arisen mood.

In the Gaddula Sutta (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.099.than.html>) the Buddha tells us:

"Just as a dog, tied by a leash to a post or stake, keeps running around and circling around that very post or stake; in the same way, an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person ... assumes form to be the self...

"He assumes feeling to be the self...

"He assumes perception to be the self...

"He assumes (mental) fabrications to be the self...

"He assumes consciousness to be the self...

"He keeps running around and circling around that very form... that very feeling... that very perception... those very fabrications... that very consciousness. He is not set loose from form, not set loose from feeling... from perception... from fabrications... not set loose from consciousness. He is not set loose from birth, aging, & death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. He is not set loose, I tell you, from suffering & stress."

Maria noted that we are meaning-making machines. We attach a meaning to things that justifies what we like.

This is how we live our lives: we take in sensory input; we apply those sense items to what we already know and form ideas or concepts about them. Mostly, we attach meaning to them. Oh, I want ice cream – I must be hungry. Well, we may be hungry, but possibly what we are hungry for is attention, or energy, or freedom from boredom, etc.

Sometimes we are aware of what our bodies are doing and thinking and sometimes we are only vaguely aware. We live in a very complex world. As we drive down the freeway, how automatic is it? Where is our mind? Are we reliving the incident that happened earlier today that we now have the perfect rejoinder for? Do you remember the way here this evening and each turn you made in your arrival? Of course not. There is an infinite array of things to be mindful of. So what is the direct experience?

A couple of days ago we were driving over our twisty, winding roads in West Marin – on an errand. We wanted to make short work of the errand and return to the larger task at home. It being Memorial Day, many other people were enjoying their day off work and spending in a variety of activities that involved being on the roads in west Marin: cycling being the one that most got my attention then. Imagine traveling 20 miles at 15 miles per hour when you are intent on a specific errand and what might arise. I found some very unkind thoughts arising – and my chest tightened; in my agitation clenching my fists and I was astounded by how tired I was. And that all of it was caused by me and identifying with a quick trip to town. My meaning for the trip was being compromised by my direct experience and I didn't like it – I wanted it to be otherwise.

Despite my belief that I am a caring person, I was entertaining very nasty retorts and wanted them off the road! I usually restrain myself when I have these impulses, but have them, I do. I do not allow this viciousness into my awareness. It doesn't fit with who I believe myself to be – who I want to be. But it is a denial of my direct experience. Acceptance of the experience is not to indulge it or adopt it; but to see it as a transient state of mind. It did occur. I don't have to own it, however. And I don't have to deny that it occurred either.

Why is all this distinction important?

If I reinforce the feeling of being pissed off by retelling my side of the story – “How can they be so indifferent, so rude – to not let us by? They’ re despicable!,” etc. I am increasing the attention on the negative and reinforcing the ill-will of the moment – I am identifying with being angry – I am an angry person. But if I am aware of the first arising of resentment, perhaps I can see how it is coloring my feelings and decide if I want to do that.

This morning I woke up with a dream still in my consciousness – a dream in which I had been very angry. There were many events in the dream, as is often true, but the piece that stuck with me as I woke up was this anger – and the memory of swinging at someone in the dream. Awake, the anger was still present and I marveled at its strength. I recalled what was going on in the dream and associated it with things that had happened over many years with the person depicted in the dream and immediately began to form meaning around the dream and felt it reinforcing in me. And then I remembered that it was just a dream. Several things were now possible:

I could form meaning around the dream and recall all those past offences and believe that this was an indication of a deep-seated resentment that needed to be expunged – or tallied.

I could note that some anger carried in my subconscious had arisen and was now over.

I could carry this vague sense of anger with me, even as a mood that lingered through the morning – or the day.

I could view the dream as a result of the self-consciousness that was arising because I was feeling vulnerable over some of the thoughts that came up as I was preparing this talk.

All of these are additions to the direct experience of awakening with the remnants of a dream. It all becomes real as I impute more and more importance to it.

Instead, I went to a book of poems and read [Mary Oliver’s The Snow Geese]. Dispelling the mood of the dream, I could view it more dispassionately.

### Snow Geese

Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last!  
What a task  
to ask

of anything, or anyone,

yet it is ours,  
and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

One fall day I heard  
above me, and above the sting of the wind, a sound  
I did not know, and my look shot upward; it was

a flock of snow geese, winging it  
faster than the ones we usually see,  
and, being the color of snow, catching the sun

so they were, in part at least, golden. I

held my breath  
as we do  
sometimes  
to stop time  
when something wonderful  
has touched us

as with a match,  
which is lit, and bright,  
but does not hurt  
in the common way,

but delightfully,  
as if delight  
were the most serious thing  
you ever felt.

The geese  
flew on,  
I have never seen them again.

Maybe I will, someday, somewhere.  
Maybe I won't.  
It doesn't matter.  
What matters  
is that, when I saw them,  
I saw them  
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

Because this is the point: our experience is colored by what we pay attention to (or don't pay attention to...). This is the arising of karma: what we emphasize, that is what arises. Now, to actually be aware of these distinctions requires a focused mind and lots of practice.

As David Budbill notes in his poem *My House*, "I built the house I live in...repair this, fix that... sooner or later, it's going to come down."

Our ideas about ourselves color all the experiences of our lives. Our ideas about who we think we think we are coerce us into behaving a certain way. These may even be positive, skillful, and successful ideas about who are. But the need to be a certain person, the need to identify with that person, may lead to a life with no choices, coercing us into suffering.

This identification left no choices; it coerced me to behave in a certain way. It arranged my karma. Not "good actions lead to good outcomes", though this may be true, but focus in this way led to what arose. A good action may or may not lead to a good outcome – but this insistence on being a certain way limited the possibilities. It led to many misinterpretations of my actions and voice and motivations...

It is no wonder we are confused about what is true. Habit sets up conditions. Focus on what is actually there. This confusion colors many things we 'see' in life – how do we see more clearly?

In *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Stephen Batchelor tells us that the Buddha's analysis "leads me to see I am not a fixed essence, but an interactive cluster of processes."

I find myself confronted with the stubbornness of matter, the fickleness of mood, the ambiguity of perception, the willfulness of thought and habit. As a way of controlling these I split reality into two parts: the bit that is mine and the bit that is not. My body stands in opposition not only to your body but to all other matter. My feelings are the only ones that really count. My version of events is always right. The imperative of my craving is set against the imperative of yours.

We are created by our intentions. What do we do about this?

When we believe we know something to be true, we need to remind ourselves "not sure, not sure." The more we think something is true, the more closely we should examine it.

If we experience something positive, we don't become positive along with it.  
If we experience something negative, we don't become negative along with it.  
Be open to the possibility of how the truth might unfold

Note:

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