

The Importance of Direct Experience

by Gil Fronsdal

“Bhikkhus, if wanderers of other sects ask you: ‘For what purpose, friends, is the holy life lived under the ascetic Gotama?’— being asked thus, you should answer those wanderers thus: ‘It is, friends, for the full understanding of suffering that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One.’”¹

We have no evidence the Buddha ever intended to create a new, distinct religion, certainly not a religion as we think of it in the modern world. The Buddha did, however, see himself as a participant in the loose and diverse group of renunciants and spiritual teachers who were his contemporaries. As such, he shared teachings, concepts, and practices present within parts of this broader community of spiritual practitioners. From statements within the suttas, some of the ideas and teachings we now associate with the Buddha, like the *brahmavihāras*, the seven factors of awakening,² states of meditative absorption, and an ultimate goal called *nibbāna* were also found among his contemporaries. Some of the sacred Indian texts called the *Upanishads*, which predate the Buddha, contain teachings similar to those of the Buddha on such topics as not-self, karma, dependent arising, and the importance of non-clinging. In other words, some of what we now associate with Buddhism is not what made the Buddha’s teachings unique in the ancient world.

The Buddha categorized the spiritual teachers of his time according to the source on which they relied for their teachings. Some based their teachings on oral tradition—i.e., the sacred texts passed down orally through many generations. Others based their teachings on what they had faith in, perhaps the words of a particular teacher or the gods their family believed in. Others were philosophers whose teachings relied on reasoning and logic. But, a final category consisted of teachers who relied on their own direct experiential knowledge

¹ *The Connected Discourses* 35.152

² *The Discourse on Awakening; Anguttara Nikaya* (AN iv 351).

(*abhiñña*). The Buddha put himself into this last group.³ He emphasized the “*Dhamma* that is seen” (*diṭṭhadhamma*) and that, “through insight (*paññā*), the highest truth is seen with one’s own eyes by means of one’s own body.”⁴ Therefore, it is in his teaching on direct experience we find the core and maybe unique teachings of the Buddha. In relying on direct experience, what did the Buddha know? What form of direct, experiential knowledge is essential to the path of liberation the Buddha taught?

Two teachings that begin to answer these questions appear in the first discourse of the *Long Discourses* and the first discourse of the *Middle Length Discourses*. These two texts function as “entry points” or introductions to the diverse and extensive teachings that follow in these great anthologies. The fact that the initial discourses in both collections contain similar teachings reinforces the idea that the message they have is important. Both emphasize the importance of direct, present-moment experience as an alternative to philosophical and existential views current at the time of the Buddha.

The Discourse of Brahma’s Net

In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the first discourse in the *Long Discourse*, the Buddha mentions sixty-two views about the self, the world, and *nibbāna* current in his time. These ideas center on whether the self and the world are eternal, whether the self continues after death, and what experiences constitute *nibbāna*. Most of these views are interpretations of direct experience, some of which occur in meditation. The Pali word the Buddha uses here to refer to this direct experience is *vedanā*, a noun referring to sensations that are “known,” “sensed,” or experienced.”⁵ The Buddha does not deny the direct experiences that are the basis of the sixty-two views. Instead, he understood that grasping onto the views and interpretations of these experiences can be harmful.⁶

³ *The Discourse to Sangārava; Majjhima Nikaya* (MN ii 211).

⁴ *The Discourse to Canki* (MN ii 173); *kāyena ceva paramasaccam sacchikaroti paññāya*

⁵ *Vedanā* is sometimes interpreted to mean “feeling tone” because of the instruction in the *Discourse on the Four [Ways] of Establishing Awareness* to know unpleasant sensations as unpleasant sensations and pleasant sensations as pleasant sensations, etc. However, ‘feeling tones’ are a characteristic of all sensations, not what *vedanā* is.

⁶ E.g., DN i 16.

While the Buddha does not explicitly say that the 62 views and interpretations are wrong, this may be implied.⁷ He is, in contrast, explicit that they are merely the “experience of those who do not know and see, and who are immersed in craving.”⁸ The word here translated as “experience” is *vedeti*, meaning “to sense,” “to experience,” and “to know.” In relationship to those “who do not know and see,” this passage has two meanings, both emphasizing the importance of “experience.” First, it refers to how the experience of those who do not know or see correctly is ignorantly understood. Second, it points to the specific sensory experience or data on which they build their concepts, ideas, and interpretations.

The Buddha’s alternative to the sixty-two views is understanding something about the nature of sense experience arising from contact (*phassa*) between sense objects and any of the six sense organs: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. He states

When monastics know as it has come to be the arising, disappearance, enjoyment, danger, and escape regarding the sixfold spheres of sense contact, they know what transcends all these [views].⁹

Rather than putting forth a “view,” the Buddha points to direct insight into the changing nature of sense experience. Seeing how sensations arise and pass is more useful to attaining liberation than building religious doctrines. As we shall see repeatedly in this course, insight into impermanence regarding the arising and passing of experience is central to the Buddha’s path of liberation.

Knowing the enjoyment and danger of experiences is a holistic understanding of what is satisfying and what is problematic about our experiences. Even the most enjoyable experiences can be dangerous if we become attached to them. What “transcends all views” probably refers to the experience of liberation free of clinging to experiences of any kind.

⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi gives the impression that the Buddha claims that the interpretations are misinterpretations when he translates *parāmaṭṭhā* as “misapprehended” in the sentence, “These standpoints, thus assumed and thus misapprehended, lead to such a future destination, to such a state in the world beyond.” *Parāmaṭṭhā* is derived from the word *masati*, to touch or to grasp. To translate it as “misapprehended” is only accurate if it is taken to mean “not to hold” rather than “misunderstood.”

⁸ DN 1.3.32.

⁹ *Brahmajāla Sutta*; DN 1 (I 45)

In summary, in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* the Buddha doesn't offer a doctrine comparable to the sixty-two views he describes. Instead, he points out that all sixty-two views are "dependent on sense contact."¹⁰ That is, the initial building blocks for doctrines are the data that comes in through the senses. Most of the sixty-two views are interpretations of experiences people have in meditation. Rather than conceptually interpreting these experiences, the Buddha emphasizes having insight into the nature of the sensations that make up the experiences. Liberation is attained through seeing the impermanent nature of sense contact. By realizing their arising and passing, one can let go of clinging to them and thus become liberated.

Discourse on the Root of All Things

In the *Discourse on the Root of All Things*, the first discourse in the *Middle Length Discourses*, the Buddha mentions 120 views that he says are "not accurate understanding."¹¹ These views are derived from relating to each of the 24 objects of awareness in five different ways. These are the 24 objects:

1-4: The four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind

5: Beings

6-12: Seven different types of gods

13-16: The four formless bases: infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception

17-20: What is seen, heard, sensed, and cognized

21: Experiences of unity/oneness

22: Experiences of diversity/differences

23: The All

24: *Nibbāna*

¹⁰ *Phassa paccayā*.

¹¹ *apariññāta*

After having perceived (*sañjānāti*) one of these 24 items, there are five ways that someone who is not liberated relates to each of these items:

- 1) Imagining (*maññati*) oneself as being the item
- 2) Imagining oneself as being in the item
- 3) Imagining oneself as distinct from the item
- 4) Imagining oneself as possessing the item
- 5) Delighting in the item

None of these five ways of relating constitutes “accurate understanding.” The first four involve *maññati*, a verb that can be translated as “imagining” and “conceiving.” We can understand “conceiving” as “giving birth” to concepts projected onto what one is experiencing. In the first four items above, what is projected or interpreted are ideas of self related to the perceived object.

An arhat, in contrast, does not conceive or delight in these 24 objects of perception. Instead, the arhats “directly know” (*abhijānāti*) each item without conceiving themselves in a relationship in any of the four ways an unenlightened person might, nor do they delight in the item. An arhat doesn't add anything to what is directly known. No interpretations about the self are projected onto what is known. These teachings imply that arhats can experience states which are sometimes interpreted to have some ultimate spiritual value, such as unity, totality (“the all”), and *nibbāna*. However, the arhat does not apply any notions of ‘self’ to these states.

A similar idea of not adding anything to our basic perceptions also appears in the *Discourse to Bahiya*, another sutta where the Buddha concisely summarizes his teaching. Asked by Bahiya to explain the Dharma in brief, the Buddha replied,

When for you there is only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then there is no you in relationship with that that. When you are not in relation to that, you are not there. When you are not there, you are not here, not beyond, and not in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering.¹²

¹² *Udāna* 1.10

Here, the emphasis is on seeing, hearing, sensing, and cognizing without any additional interpretation or ideas of self. The direct experience is known simply for what it is.

The Discourse on the Wonderful and Marvelous

Whereas the *Brahmajāla Sutta* and the *Discourse on the Root of All Things* present direct experience as the alternative to philosophical views, the *Discourse on the Wonderful and Marvelous* does so by contrasting the value of direct experience with tales of supernatural or miraculous events connected to the Buddha's birth. The discourse begins with Ānanda narrating a long list of miracles that occurred just before, during, and after the Buddha's birth. He punctuates the end of each miracle tale with the refrain, "This too I remember as a marvelous and wonderful quality of the Buddha." When Ānanda is done, the Buddha then adds a final miracle associated with "the Tathāgatha" (which is how he refers to himself) that is "marvelous and wonderful." Ānanda's list of miracles provides a powerful rhetorical set-up for the Buddha to explain, in contrast, what he believes is marvelous and wonderful. The Buddha says,

Here, Ānanda, for the Tathāgatha feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear; recognitions are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear; thoughts are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Remember this too, Ānanda, as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathāgatha.

(MN 123.22)

With this explanation, the Buddha moves the conversation from myth (or the supernatural) to the immediacy of recognizing the coming and going of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. It is as if the Buddha is saying that seeing the arising and passing of these three mental events is more important than miracles.

The World

It is just within this fathom-long body, with its perception & intellect that I declare the world, the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way to the cessation of the world.

— The Buddha (*Numerical Discourses* 4.45)

The Pali word *loka* is commonly translated into English as “world.” In similar ways, the English word “world” has different meanings; the Buddha used *loka* to refer to both the external world in which we live and, more often, to one’s personal subjective experience, i.e., to the world within this “fathom-long body.”

The Buddha’s emphasis on the world of subjective experience is seen in the ways he discussed the world and suffering (*dukkha*) as virtual synonyms. Two suttas sitting side by side in the *Connected Discourses* repeat many of the same passages, although where one has “suffering,” the other has “world”:

I will teach you the arising and the passing away of suffering (SN 12.43)

I will teach you the arising and the passing away of the world (SN 12.44)

In both discourses, the Buddha describes the arising of the world and suffering in the same way:

What is the arising of suffering/the world? In dependence on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a condition, there are feelings; with feelings as a condition, there is craving; with craving as a condition, there is clinging; with clinging as a condition, there is becoming; with becoming as a condition, there is birth; with birth as a condition, there is aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. This is the arising of suffering/the world.

Both suffering and world arise dependent on direct experience of sense contact that leads to craving and eventually to

In the *Discourse on Going to the End of the World* the Buddha gives a koan-like statement about the world:¹³

Bhikkhus, I say that the end of the world cannot be known, seen, or reached by travelling. Yet, Bhikkhus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering.

This is koan-like because the Buddha does not explain this enigmatic statement. This is left for Ānanda to do after the Buddha retired to his dwelling. Ānanda explained,

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world is called the world in the Noble One's Discipline.

And what, friends, is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world? The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world. The ear . . . The nose . . . The tongue . . . The body . . . The mind. . . .

These six sense bases are the means through which we make contact with the external world and the requisite condition for viewing the world through the mental activities of perception and conceiving. Rather than searching for the end of the world by traveling across the physical world, we come to the end of the world by turning our attention inward to the basic sense-contact that is the basis for all concepts, interpretations, and reactions to the world. When we can see the arising and passing of the sense-contacts, we see the arising and ending of the world.

Thus, we see that the Buddha did not focus his teachings on explaining the nature of the external world. However, in emphasizing the world of subjective experience, he did not ignore the external world, either. One goal of his teachings is to become free of the world:

Just as a blue, red, or white lotus is born in the water and grows up in the water, but having risen up above the water, it stands unsullied by the water, so too the Tathāgata was born in the world and grew up in the world, but having overcome the world, he dwells unsullied in the world.

¹³ SN 35.116.

Conclusion

Repeatedly, the Buddha emphasized the importance of direct perception of our life and world. In some teachings, he discusses this direct perception in terms of the sense-contact and feelings; other times, he discusses it in terms of seeing thoughts and recognitions. By recognizing our basic elements of experience as they occur, we can also recognize the concepts, ideas, stories, and opinions we overlay on our direct experience. When we recognize concepts as concepts, we can be wiser about how we relate to them, perhaps avoiding the erroneous ones and not clinging to any.

Regardless of what aspect of direct experience the Buddha discusses, the central insight he points to is seeing impermanence, most often described as seeing phenomena arising and passing. As we shall see in the next set of readings for the Entering the Stream program, impermanence is a core theme in the teachings of the Buddha, it is the insight that leads to the end of suffering.

“Ignorance is abandoned and true knowledge arises when one knows and sees the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind as impermanent, when they know and see appearances, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and mind-objects as impermanent, when they know and see sense contact at the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind as impermanent, when they know and see whatever feeling arises with sense contact at the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind as condition as impermanent.”¹⁴

Kālakārāma Sutta

¹⁴ *The Connected Discourses* 35.79 (iv 50)

Having seen what can be seen, the Tathāgatha does not imagine the seen, does not imagine the unseen, does not imagine what can be seen, does not imagine on who sees.

Having heard what can be heard, the Tathāgata does not imagine the heard, . . .

Having sensed what can be sensed, the Tathāgata does not imagine the sensed, . . .

Having cognized what can be cognized, he does not imagine the cognized, . . .

Thus, bhikkhus, being such-like in regard to all phenomena seen, heard, sensed, and cognized, the Tathāgatha is Such. Moreover, I declare there is no other greater or more excellent than he who is Such.

Whatever is seen or heard or sensed

and clung to as true by others,

One who is Such — among those self-limited —

wouldn't assume to be true or even false.

Having already seen well that arrow

to which people cling and attach [claiming]

'I know, I see, that's just how it is!'

— the Tathāgata has nothing [to do with clinging]."

(AN 4.24)