

Believing & Knowing

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There's a passage where the Buddha compares the practice to building a house. You put up the different beams and the rafters, and the top piece of wood, the ridgepole, has to depend on the lower beams and rafters. At the same time, though, they depend on it. They're not solid or secure until the ridge pole is in place.

This is an image of the different strengths we need in the practice: Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration are like the beams and the rafters going up. Discernment is the ridgepole—the discernment that leads to the right ending of stress.

As the others are going up, they're going to be a little wobbly. They're not one hundred percent sure. It's only when we start having direct insight that discernment really starts yielding results. That's when everything is solid and in place.

The Buddha has us be very clear on this fact. We don't have to pretend that we know things that we don't know. If you're pretending that you know something that you don't know, he said, it's a sign of defilement. It gets in the way of actual knowledge. But we do have to learn how to deal with uncertainties and likelihoods. We're working on a working hypothesis: the hypothesis that our actions actually do matter, and that the training of the mind is the most direct way of living skillfully in this world—and also of finding release from suffering.

As Ajahn Maha Boowa once said, if you could take a nibbana and all the noble attainments so that people could actually see them, nobody in the world would want anything else. But they can't be taken out and shown like that.

The Buddha did, however, teach in a way that would try to give rise to a sense of conviction. He had seen on the second watch of the night, on the night of his awakening, that beings fare well and poorly in line with their actions. Their actions are, in turn, determined by their views, and their views are determined by their respect or lack of respect for noble ones, their conviction or lack of conviction in noble ones.

He then explored this principle of action further into the mind, into the intentions that are arising and passing away in the present moment, and was able to see things in terms of the four noble truths—the four truths about stress and the four truths about what they call the effluents.

There seem to be two stages in that last knowledge, first in terms of the four noble truths that led to what's called the arising of the Dhamma eye, and then—once the duties that are appropriate to the four noble truths have been completed—the four noble truths about the effluent of sensuality, the effluent of views, the effluent of ignorance. You abandon those, and the mind is totally released.

For 49 days after that, the Buddha experienced the bliss of awakening, the bliss of release. When the time came to teach, first he saw how difficult it would be. He couldn't just take release out and show it to people. But he also realized that it would be important that in teaching right view to people that he would also have to inspire them with respect, inspire them with a sense of confidence.

So he taught in many different ways. Sometimes he'd use his psychic powers; sometimes he'd use sheer force of reason—not that the reason would prove his truths but simply to show that they made sense. He meant it as a way of giving rise to respect, giving rise to a sense of confidence. He'd use analogies to make things clear. He actually gave people checklists, questionnaires with which they could question themselves as they practiced, so that they could begin to gauge for themselves how well they were doing, how effectively they were putting his teachings into practice.

In other words, the Buddha was an extremely responsible teacher, all as a way of giving rise to confidence in his listeners. But even then, he was very careful to make sure that they didn't overestimate their knowledge or overestimate what they had gained by listening to him.

There was that story of the man who had listened to the Buddha one day and he went back to tell a friend. "This Buddha, he said, "he really is a Buddha. He's really awakened." So the second man said, "How do you know?" And the first man said, "Well I see people come to disprove his teachings, but before they even open their mouths he's taught them in such a way that they've abandoned their views and take him on as their teacher. That's the sign that he's awakened. It's like an elephant hunter going into the elephant wood and seeing the footprints of the elephant and he knows he's found a bull elephant." xx

So the second man wants to go see the Buddha. He goes and meets him and tells him what the first man told him, and the Buddha says, "That's not the right use of that analogy." Then he gives the right use: The elephant hunter wants a bull elephant to do some heavy work, so he goes into the wood. He sees some large elephant footprints, but he doesn't immediately jump to the conclusion that this must be a bull elephant. Those large footprints might be the footprints of dwarf females with big feet. But they look promising. So he follows them. As he goes along, he sees scratch marks high in the trees. And again he doesn't come to the

conclusion that these must be the scratch marks from the tusks of a big bull elephant, because some female elephants are tall and have tusks. But they look promising. So even at that point he doesn't know for sure that he's found his bull elephant yet. He follows the footprints and finally he sees a bull elephant standing in a clearing. That's when he knows for sure that he's found a bull elephant.

In the same way, the good results that we get from the practice developing the precepts, developing mindfulness and alertness, overcoming the hindrances, getting the mind in states of concentration, are like the footprints. They don't prove that the Buddha was awakened, but they give us encouragement. We see the good results that come when we train the mind, and that strengthens our conviction.

We keep up our persistence and try to become more mindful, further our powers of concentration, and even when we gain psychic powers, it's still just the scratch marks high up in the trees. It's still not proof.

I've told you of that story of the woman who was a student of Ajaan Fuang who started developing a sense of where there are hungry ghosts around. Sometimes they were under stairs, sometimes hiding behind the doors and gates, really miserable little places. She didn't like seeing them. It unnerved her. At the same time, she wasn't one hundred percent sure that she was actually seeing these things or she was getting a little crazy. Ajaan Fuang told her, "Well, whether they're true or not, ask them questions. Ask them why they're there. What did they do to become hungry ghosts? And see if you can help them."

So she did. She found out the various things that they had done. Sometimes she could help them with her meditation, sometimes she couldn't, but then after a while it all stopped. In the meantime, she had learned something about the principle of kamma. She still wasn't one hundred percent sure that she was actually seeing real hungry ghosts, but the lesson she learned about kamma stuck with her.

I found out later that prior to that she had been interested in magic spells. The whole point about magic spells is gaining power over other people. This knowledge made her stop and realize that even though you may gain power over people with magic spells, it's got its kammic consequences.

But even that kind of knowledge is not one hundred percent sure. It's just the scratch marks up in the trees. It's only when you have your first experience of the Dhamma eye, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, and you touch the deathless—you see the deathless and you know it for yourself: That's when you've found your bull elephant—and that's when the knowledge is sure: The Buddha really is awakened. He really does know what he's talking about.

So, it's important to remember this as we practice. Sometimes we read about the ajaans and the ajaans' students and the psychic powers they had, and we feel envious that they had a lot more evidence than we do, a lot more encouragement in the practice. Well, it's not necessarily so. You can have these experiences and still not really trust them. And sometimes, if you misuse that kind of knowledge, it can backfire on you. In particular, if you start putting the one hundred percent Good Housekeeping seal of approval that "Whatever I see in my meditation must be true," that really sets you up for a fall, because that kind of knowledge is uncertain. Just as our normal every day perceptions can be clouded by our defilements, psychic knowledge can be clouded by defilement, too. The only sure way is to get rid of those defilements—your greed, aversion, and delusion—so that someday you'll find your bull elephant. You'll see for yourself that what the Buddha taught was true. The Buddha really did know what he was talking about.

To get back to the house analogy: You've finally got the ridgepole in place. Everything else is solid. Your conviction has now been confirmed. Your persistence, your mindfulness, and concentration have shown results. Your discernment has shown results. It's in that freedom: That's where the knowledge lies. You know that you've understood the principle of cause and effect. You know you can understand your own actions, because you've used that knowledge to find freedom, where the happiness is totally unconditioned.

Now, even though we'd like to have one hundred percent certainty before we set forth on this path, it can't be provided. But you look around. You see what other paths are available, and you see that this one makes sense, that it does seem to give good results. And so, as with the footprints, you follow it.

You keep on working on the rafters and the beams of the house, knowing that the beams are not quite solid—and not pretending that they are. If you pretend that they are, you just stop. Your courage to keep acting on your convictions: That's what eventually puts everything in place.

You see for yourself, and that's when you know your knowledge is sure, because you've tested it again and again and again and again. You've refined your powers of perception, refined the subtleness of your discernment. That's when you have your guarantee.