

Doubting Thomas by Duncan Barford

Hearing that I'd set myself the goal of enlightenment, someone quipped: *What if you get enlightened and then realise you don't like it?*

At the time I thought this was stupid. Now, I'm not so sure.

It was March 2009 when I broke through into fourth path—or 'full' enlightenment, according to the Therevada model. Beforehand, I could see emptiness pretty much constantly, but it seemed to occupy a particular region in the field of awareness; 'it' and 'me' appeared distinct. On the commencement of fourth path, this sense of separation collapsed. Emptiness expanded within awareness to include self. In every direction I discovered emptiness. 'Inwards' was just another direction; there was no longer anything special about what appeared to be 'internal' sensations.

At first it was difficult to put a finger on quite what had happened. Enlightenment is not an act of will—it happens regardless—so with it comes no implicit realisation of what it is. Enlightenment isn't like putting a hat on your head; it's like having a hat drop on you. You feel it and wonder: 'Hey! What the [#@&!] is this?'

Most immediately, enlightenment presented itself as having nothing to do with any of the practices I'd been engaged in. The idea that meditation—or any activity whatsoever—had any bearing upon it was laughable. So this was how I spent the first few days, walking around, seeing emptiness everywhere and realising there was nothing to do and nowhere to go because 'just this' was 'it' all along.

Alan had been there a couple of weeks already. 'Now try some Ramana Maharshi self-inquiry,' he suggested. 'It's mental!'

I took his advice and recoiled from the profound shock of it. When I asked 'Who am I?' formerly the answer was always in the shape of an idea or sensation. But now the answer was crystal clear and returned in the form of an experience: *emptiness*. That 'thing' beyond awareness, which was neither an idea, sensation, feeling, thought or perception, which was infinite, eternal, changeless and unconditioned—well, that was 'me'. And I could see also how this realisation of 'I am *that*' is available right now to everyone on the planet.

But this is where the warm and fuzzy part of the story ends, because the past six months have been more of a struggle than I ever expected. That quip about 'what if you get enlightened and discover you don't like it?' has returned to haunt me.

Here are some words describing how I've felt since that big special moment back in March: doubtful, depressed, frustrated and pissed off.

'You can't be enlightened, then,' is the obvious rejoinder, in which case I point the reader back to what I've written above. None of that recognition of emptiness in all things has ever gone

away or faded since the moment it first reared up. Abiding non-dual awareness has taken up home in me and seems resolved to stay. It's unaffected by anything I do or not do. If I'm happy, I see it; but so too if I'm miserable, bored, being stupid or acting like a git. Becoming kinder or happier, therefore, does not depend on my gaining some supposed 'deeper insight' into the nature of reality. How can you go 'deeper' into something than realising it doesn't exist? Being kinder and happier depends simply on practising those behaviours.

It's *doubt* that has been my biggest tormentor. The commentator in my head continues to insist: 'This can't be real. This can't be it. You're going to lose it, aren't you? Is it still there? Go on, check! You're deluding yourself.'

But every time I check I see the same. Yet this constant checking fails to abate the need to check again and test and console myself with the proof of it, which is then immediately doubted all over again.

It's stupid. I see it clearly, but that doesn't prevent it from happening. It reminds me of the friend of a friend who was diagnosed as schizophrenic: 'I know the voices aren't real,' this person reportedly said, 'but it doesn't stop me hearing them.'

I don't have schizophrenia; just an acute case of *karma*. When I meditate now, the focus has shifted slightly from the nature of *stuff* arising to its nature as *arising* stuff. It comes, persists, insists, impermanent, without essence and unsatisfactory, but it arises nevertheless—according to some configuration that lies far beyond my personal awareness.

We generally label this unacknowledged configuration in the way our thoughts and impulses arise with the word 'habit'. I never dreamed that one of the main lessons of enlightenment is how deep and intractable the grip of habit is upon our lives.

Habit is empty, of course. It's not a thing in itself but, like everything, phenomena created from a circumstantial pattern of other phenomena, passing itself off as something distinct. But habit doesn't need to be absolute (impossible, naturally) in order to exercise an iron grip; it's the position where it sits that gives it its power. In the realm of the senses, whatever presents to awareness comes via the sense organs. Analogously, in the realm of the mind, arising thoughts and ideas seem first to have been filtered through a layer of habit.

Looking back across my life and considering the habits of thought I've acquired from education and experience, it's clear that doubt and negativity have always been my trusty friends.

I test ideas by attacking them and doing my best to rip them down until there's nothing standing. If anything remains, then I take this as a sign it might be true. It's my rule not to take on trust anything I haven't first tried to tear apart.

This hasn't been an intellectual choice. (I doubt that such a thing is possible.) Early upbringing and character have determined how I approach ideas. I've never adopted a philosophy that I haven't seen through and grew sick of in time. This has led to dark episodes of disillusionment and confusion—but I don't altogether regret them. I couldn't have arrived at the insights I've

accumulated without this attitude, for the good reason that I've never spared myself or my own experience from this same urge to tear things apart.

Skepticism gets things done. Negation is probably our most powerful intellectual tool. Think, for instance, of how vipassana depends upon rejecting every single notion or idea and proceeding on the basis of immediate experience alone. Or think of how the conceptualisation of God, the Absolute, only gets anywhere when approached in the apophatic mode—i.e. in purely *negative* terms.

The *Vimuttimaggā* categorises people into three basic types: the walker in passion, the walker in hate, and the walker in infatuation. My type, the one that 'is given to fault-finding' and 'does not cleave (to what is good)' (p. 56) is the walker in hate.

Each type works toward self-realisation at a particular speed and finds the going more or less difficult. The walker in passion gets there quickly, because he or she is accepting, intent on good and faithful to their ideals. Well, good for him! Yet, surprisingly, the walker in hate gets there quickly too, because 'hate and intelligence are alike owing to three traits: non-clinging, searching for faults, repulsion' (p. 56).

Being of a destructive cast of mind is helpful on the path to enlightenment. But—as I've realised—those same habits may not prove so helpful afterwards, because you cannot tear down emptiness. When emptiness is apparent in everything, the capacity to negate is pointless, self-contradictory. And equally, you cannot doubt the absolute; doubt is relative when set against the absolute, and is rendered futile.

Yet my habits of a life-time are not going to vanish overnight. Especially not when they've proved so helpful and successful in the past.

I take consolation in the story of St. Thomas, the one who doubted the resurrection until he'd personally seen the risen Christ and stuck his fingers in Christ's wounds. 'Do you believe because you see me?' says Christ to Thomas. 'How happy are those who believe *without* seeing me!' (John 20: 29).



The Incredulity of Thomas (Caravaggio)

Exoteric Christianity is big on the notion of belief, so it's easy to read this as Jesus admonishing Thomas for his lack of faith. But I think Christ is simply pointing out that Thomas might be less miserable if he didn't keep constantly testing the fuck out of everything.

The risen body of Christ is not an animated corpse, but a metaphor for the body post-enlightenment. (The *dharmakaya*, it's called in Buddhism.) To stick your fingers in the wounds of Christ is the pointless attempt to probe or grasp at absolute emptiness with the relative mind.

Is it still there? Is it truly real? Is He truly resurrected? These are futile attempts to establish a proof beyond that which is proof already.

Indeed, happy are those not stupid enough for this!

Reference

Upatissa (1995). *Vimuttimagga* ('The Path of Freedom'), trans. Rev. N.R.M. Ehara, Soma Thera, Kheminda Thera. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.

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Duncan Barford dabbled in magick as a teenager and underwent certain experiences that nagged him throughout his later life, until he finally investigated reality properly and found himself following the path to enlightenment alongside Alan Chapman.

Since his awakening in March 2009, Duncan has become interested in sharing his insights with others through writing and teaching. He figures that if he can get enlightened then probably a whole lot of other people can too. Currently, he is particularly interested in exposing how contemporary culture can obstruct our realisation of the Good.

Visit <http://openenlightenment.org/> for more information.