

Direct Experience

Rev. Master Olaf Miller
North Cascades Buddhist Priory

Buddhism teaches us that we all have the Buddha Nature; that indeed, we are all a part of the “One,” the Unborn. It should come as no surprise, then, that we can experience directly the love, compassion, and wisdom of this Unborn.

I would like to relate one such experience that has become part of the bedrock of my faith. When I was a very young man I got into some trouble and ended up in jail one night. As I sat in that cell I was in a state of shock, almost overwhelmed by distress and fear. Then, all at once, out of nowhere, I just knew with absolute certainty, that the true “me” could not be harmed no matter what happened to this body. This was an enormous relief to me and a great comfort. I still had to deal with the stress of the situation and the consequences of my actions.

This experience has profound implications for me that continue to unfold over time. One message is clear: there is “Something” greater than this “me” and that “Something” cares for me and is looking out for me. Time and again this has been proven true for me. If it is true for me, it is true for everyone. This, too, is a great consolation as I witness the suffering in the world. When I look back at the painful and difficult times in my life, I see them with a new appreciation of the “jewels” contained within them. We really would like to avoid pain, but the pain is the signal that something needs help, and if we keep looking up, the help will come.

In the beginning there was just a need in me and a response, a sort of miracle really, an act of grace. Later, after years of religious training I learned that I could take my worries and concerns consciously and directly to the Eternal by offering everything up in childlike trust. Reverend Master Jiyu showed us how to do this in *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom*.

None of this stops us from experiencing the karma of a human being, nor does it relieve us from the responsibility of doing our own training. And yet, each time we receive help, it is a new wonder.

Direct Experience—Part 2

Rev. Master Olaf Miller

North Cascades Buddhist Priory

When I was a teenager I began dating a girl and quickly developed strong feelings for her. We had an off-and-on relationship through our teen years, and then I moved far away. I had always been aware that there was an extra dimension to this relationship—something deep and from the far past. Just the thought of this person would bring forth a deep longing in me. Even after we had gone our separate ways and married other people, this response remained.

About ten years later I returned to my hometown to visit my parents and friends. We had a barbecue at my parents home and many of my friends came, including this woman. Seeing her again brought forth an intense longing in me; I was desperate to know that she loved me. That night, lying in bed, suddenly a great flood of Love washed over me. This Love did not belong to anything, nor was it focused on a particular person—it was just Love. This experience was a great comfort to me and seemed to wash away the greater part of the grief contained within the longing.

Even so, this connection remained important to me. Over the years, my internal response to this piece of karma has gotten lighter and lighter until now it just brings forth a quiet joy in me and the wish that all of the need associated with this bit of karma will find its help.

This experience, and many others, has shown me that all of our longings are important to the Eternal. There is nothing that the Eternal cannot help us with. It seems to be the hardest thing for us to learn that we don't have to do everything by ourselves.

When I became a monk I recognized that by doing so I was closing the door on a lot of different options for my life. What I was not aware of was the many doors I was opening at the same time. I have been amazed by how my various longings, skills, and abilities have been fulfilled and made use of in the course of monastic life. When we entrust ourselves to the Eternal, the Eternal looks after us in ways that help us and others to be a success.

Direct Experience—Part 3

Rev. Master Olaf Miller

North Cascades Buddhist Priory

In the first two parts of this series I wrote about help that came to me spontaneously and without my consciously asking for it. In this part I would like to relate times when I asked more directly for help in different ways.

When I was around thirty, a great deal of change occurred in my life. For one thing, after a decade of smoking I decided to quit. I enrolled in a stop-smoking course and for a week I received instruction on how the mind works in relation to addictions and how to change that way of thinking. It worked for me and I never smoked again. I think the most important thing to come out of this was that I learned how to use my will. I learned that I could direct my life in positive directions, and not merely act on habits that were damaging to myself and others.

Another event that occurred around this time was that my marriage fell apart. This was certainly a time of great upheaval. Something that I had taken refuge in—something that had defined who I was—was gone. The comfortable rug of expectation I had been standing securely on was pulled out from under me and I was flat on my face. I needed help to stand back up find a new way forward. Then, one night I was walking home, feeling miserable, angry, and frustrated. I looked up at the sky, shook my fist at it, and said, “If You are up there, show me the way! “ Within a few days I was introduced to the Portland Buddhist Priory and the “Way.”

Our Guardian Ceremony offertory says, “Whenever we pray we receive, without fail, a sympathetic response.” As I hope these articles have shown, heartfelt prayers can take different forms, but they are heard by the Eternal. The “sympathetic responses” may not always be what we think we want, but they will address the need.

Direct Experience—Part 4

Rev. Master Olaf Miller

[North Cascades Buddhist Priory](#)

On my first visit to the Portland Buddhist Priory I was simply taught to meditate and nothing more. This appealed to me greatly. Here was a means of gaining insight that did not rely on the intellect or worldly knowledge. I went home and began meditating regularly. Although I did not realize it at the time, I was, in fact, taking refuge in the Buddha. After a couple of months, I returned to the Priory where I encountered the Dharma and the Sangha

For me, this was one of those situations where all conditions ripen. I was truly ready for this and embraced Buddhism wholeheartedly. Everything I read about the Buddha's teaching rang the bell of Truth in me. I felt that I had come home. I had found the path I had been searching for my whole life. At the same time I was discovering Buddhism, I was also developing a romantic relationship with someone. This loving relationship was part of a general healing period for me.

After I had been meditating for about six months there was another pivotal turning point in my spiritual life. I was with my friend when the realization welled up in me: "I need to forgive my parents," which was quickly followed by "I need to forgive myself." Although this is the way it came up for me, I was not aware of any particular problem between my parents and myself. Rather, I feel that what was happening was a general letting go of the grief, blame, and self-judgement of the past. For a short while after this, there was a shimmering glow to the world.

Soon after this I realized that I could no longer continue with the romantic aspect of my new relationship. Something had changed in me that I did not yet fully understand. Fortunately, my friend was understanding and we remained good friends for many years.

Some months later I made my first trip to Shasta Abbey to attend an Introductory Retreat. From that first visit to the Abbey I knew that I wanted to be a monk and that nothing else would do. However, I had a six-year-old son and so would need to wait. I realized that there was nothing stopping me from training in accordance with the deepest wish of my heart. Twelve years later, when my son joined the Air Force upon graduating from high school, I entered the monastery.

Direct Experience—Part 5

Rev. Master Olaf Miller
North Cascades Buddhist Priory

Nothing can prepare one for the experience of becoming a monk. I had been intending to become a monk for twelve years, living at the Portland Priory for most of that time, and training as diligently as I could as a lay person. How different could being a monk really be? On the external level of things, not so different, really. But on another level, it is “a whole new ball game,” as the saying goes.

When we say *yes!* to some major step in training, it is as though we are giving our permission to the Eternal to get out a new set of tools and go to work on us. During my novice years, I often had the mental image that I was a square peg being driven through a round hole. In order to get through a hole, a peg naturally must have some material shaved off its sharp edges. In training as a novice monk, the process whittles away at the egocentric self. This is at the least disconcerting, often confusing, and sometimes quite painful. It feels at times as though you are being taken apart piece by piece, and one can even question one’s own sanity. Faith and trust are what carries us through these difficulties, along with help from our spiritual teachers and friends.

When I think of my life prior to finding Buddhism, the greatest source of distress to me was the feeling of wandering aimlessly, of not knowing my purpose in life. Having some idea of one’s purpose in life changes everything. As Rev. Master Jiyu said in the *Wild White Goose*, “I must take everything that happens as for my good.” With this attitude, there are no meaningless experiences, nothing is wasted, everything can teach us something. This is especially important to remember when confusion and pain arise. Something inside of us recognizes the deep, true value of treading the Path and of not counting the cost.

One evening, as I was getting ready for bed, I was tired and feeling a bit low. I had the thought, "Am I ever going to get anywhere?" After a pause to consider this, I said to myself, "Well, I'm just going to keep going." Later that night, lying in bed in that state between sleep and waking, I had a vision. I saw a Buddha sitting in meditation. Suddenly, the hara of the Buddha opened and out streamed a golden light followed by a kaleidoscope of color radiating in all directions. At the same time, the words came to me, "To bow is the wish of all beings."

There followed a period in which it felt as though meditation was doing me, rather than the other way around. It was my job to not willfully allow anything to disturb this state. I was filled with gratitude towards everyone and everything.

Direct Experience—Part 6

Rev. Master Olaf Miller
North Cascades Buddhist Priory

In Part 5 of this series I mentioned the spiritual tool kit that is given by the Eternal to a disciple when he or she becomes a monk. For me, the master-disciple relationship is the most important of these tools. For the disciple, the master represents the Eternal. This relationship offers us the greatest opportunity to learn to bow, even in the most difficult of circumstances. The following is an example of this in my own training.

I have often marveled at how it seems that a perfect set of circumstances arises to bring about the opportunity for someone to learn something about their koan—their particular spiritual “problem” or karmic “knot.” In hindsight, it can seem as though you were conveniently “set up” for what happens later. I believe it is simply an example of how the Eternal knows our deepest wish and uses everything to help us.

When I first arrived to become a permanent resident of the temple, while still in the parking lot, someone told me that “within a year, you will be in your own temple somewhere.” I took this with a grain of salt, thinking, “this seems unlikely, wait and see.”

Fast forward a couple of years. There are a couple of monks in the community who are in transition, looking for where their future lay. Reverend Master Koshin has been doing a series of Dharma talks clearly aimed at encouraging them to move forward. Of course, I am present at these talks and taking it all in. It comes up for me that perhaps it is time for me to step out on my own. I had the feeling that there was a window open at this time and that if I did not go now, then I would never go.

One day I bring this idea up with Reverend Master. He tells me that I am not ready for that step. This simple statement pierces me like an arrow, and instantly I am in the most intense spiritual pain I have ever known.

Buddhism teaches us that “feeling” is the reaper of karma. I have learned from experience that the more intense my reaction to something is, the more likely it is that I am dealing with a lump of karma and must go carefully with it. In this case, there was no doubt about it.

From the beginning of this episode I resolved to keep my focus on the Eternal; to look for relief from that Source only. Sitting still in the midst of the pain, letting it come and letting it go, asking for help, offering it up, and being willing to follow wherever It led. Of course, just like meditation, we drift out of it and must bring ourselves back to it over and over again. Having been through this process before, I knew that it would not last forever. Even so I was amazed by the intensity and duration of the feeling.

The natural response to pain is to try to relieve it in some way. When karma is involved, it comes with its own brand of delusion. The mind will jump through all kinds of hoops trying to wiggle out of facing the Truth. This often involves trying to shift responsibility to some external source. In some form or another this means having an argument in your head about right or wrong. Spiritually speaking, this a complete dead end and yet the influence of the karma pulls us in this direction. I developed a sort of mantra to help me deal with this tendency. Whenever I would catch myself beginning an argument in my head, I would repeat to myself, “I would rather *bow* than be ‘right’.” This would help me re-orient on the important matter.

At first, it was all I could do to get through the hours of the day and carry on normal life. Gradually, over time, the pain began to ease and change. The pain became interspersed with moments of consolation. There is a progression of feelings one goes through as conversion happens. A softening takes place, with a growing awareness of the Eternal's compassion in the process, and a growing appreciation that it is a privilege to be a part of that process. What began as something so hard to bear became a warm embrace beyond my ability to imagine.

What a pity it is that we sometimes feel overwhelmed by pain and turn away, thereby missing an opportunity to experience this embrace.

One day I had a sense that this episode was coming to an end. It was as if this karma, that had arrived with so much fury, had burned until only a point of light remained, and then it simply winked out.

Throughout this process of conversion it is important that we look honestly at ourselves to see where this karma has influenced us, to ask in meditation “What do I need to see and learn from this?” While I cannot say that I understand very much about this episode, I was left with a distinct impression of what I needed to see. I felt a deep resolve to take no step without the Eternal.

As Reverend Master Jiyu wrote in her [Commentary on the Precepts](#), “Do not do anything unless it is ‘good;’ do not do anything unless you have first asked the Lord of the House if it is good for you to do it.” The complete section on the Precept, “Do only good,” is a wonderful and full expression of the lesson for me.