

REALIZATION vs. EXPERIENCE

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What is the difference between the two very popular terms often used by Buddhists: experience and realization. It is worth being clear about.

Experience is what we are all having every day of our lives, and this includes our metaphysical or sacred experiences. When we are talking about spiritual experiences, the bottom line is that they are not permanent. What goes up comes down, sooner or later. That is the hallmark of all experience: it does not last. We all know this.

Heaven knows, when I have some kind of epiphany (or the least spiritual insight) I hope it will last. I act as if it will last and certainly blab to others as if it is now a permanent state that I am living. The sad truth is that these experiences do not last. What is up one day (i.e. me) is almost certain to be down the next day or soon after that.

I wish I had a nickel for every time in my yearly interview with Khenpo Rinpoche (the dharma teacher I have worked with for many years) I have described some ecstatic vision or state only to have him gently tell me "That is all fine, but it is just an experience." It is not realization.

While (as I understand it) enlightenment includes realization, all realization is not enlightenment. I can see that I am going to have to be clearer here. What then is realization anyway?

For starters, my understanding is that realization has no ups and downs. When you get it, you got it. It never goes away. At the same time it is not any kind of 'high' or euphoria, but just something you 'realize'. A good analogy are those pictures that you stare at until you can see some words, phrase, or image embedded in the picture. You look and look and see nothing. Then, suddenly, you see the image embedded within the picture.

In that instant you finally get it and forever after when you look at the picture you can see the embedded image. Realization is something like that, very down to earth and simple, and not all "spiritual." Once you get it, you have it. Why is realization important?

Obviously realization is important because it does not change. It has no ups and downs. It is not an experience but a simple understanding, a realization. At the same time it also is probably not what we expected, not the mad idea of enlightenment or blissful state we had imagined it to be.

Where might we encounter realization?

Notice I didn't say "when" will we encounter realization because that could be a long, long time. But the teachings do say where we might find realization, and it seems on that all the major disciplines agree, at least Tibetan Buddhism and Zen.

The Zen Buddhists call it "Kensho" and the Tibetans call it "recognizing the true nature of the mind." And while it is a rather big deal, it is not enlightenment. In reality, it is the actual first step toward enlightenment, the end of speculation, expectation, and imagining. We stop imagining what we are looking for as we get the first real taste of how we might proceed; we can finally see what needs to be done.

And while this is realization, it is not a realization of some spiritual high, but rather one of how the mind actually works, and it is probably not at all how we imagined or expected it all these years. That is the best part.

Our illusions, expectations, imagining, and guessing are ended by a simple realization of how things actually are, like finally seeing the image embedded in the picture. There can be no doubt. And as plain and simple as this is, as down to earth, it is a radical shift, an actual realization!

The wonderful thing about recognizing the nature of the mind (as I understand it) is not what you see, but how you respond to this recognition, and that is: completely. When you finally see how the mind works you also see that not only is the mind workable, but that it is entirely up to you to work it. In fact, what is then crystal clear is that only you can work it. And this is a wonderful thing.

Kensho or recognizing the nature of the mind is not enlightenment or anything close to it, but it is a realization, and one with a profound effect. It marks not the end of our practice, but actually the beginning of real practice and the advent of permanent enthusiasm for practice. We finally know what we are doing. From then on it is up to us.