



## From Seeing to Knowing the Dharma

*A commentary on the Bahiya sutta, a parable with an elephant, and a commentary on my favorite writing of Daniel Ingram, which includes eight elephants in total!*

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*Dedicated to a dearly beloved, old fart of a Zen monk, whom I've never met.*

## **Contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Preface</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>From Seeing to Knowing the Dharma</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The parable of the elephant</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The Eight Elephants</b>	<b>20</b>

All of the views expressed here are subject to change at the drop of a hat.

— Nick Haley's Very Useful Disclaimer

## 1 Preface

This text is intended for meditation practitioners who have attained to at least stream entry, preferably second path, and are feeling a bit stuck. By which I mean:

- They have gone through at least a few insight cycles, they know the territory at least a little.
- They know what a fruition/cessation is and ideally are at the point when they can make one happen at least some of the time.
- And they want to progress further, but are finding that the same things that they did before no longer work.

I was in this situation for about fourteen years. During this period I had a semi-regular practice and did at least one 10-day retreat every year. Some might say that I simply needed to meditate more, and I myself wandered if I was being a good Buddhist, but judging from how the progression to (what I think is) anagami finally happened, I don't think that was the issue at all. I realize, in retrospect, that I was already pretty good at doing vipassana, at least in the sense that my *investigative ability* was very well developed. At any moment that I decided to, I could easily notice that experience was made of sensations bearing the three characteristics: they were impermanent, check, happening without my participation, check, and consistently not fulfilling me at all, check. I could do this from the tiniest vibrations at the edge of consciousness where fleeting thoughts and intentions arise, up to very global perceptions such as the entire visual field appearing and disappearing again and again and again. So, one could say, my ability to **see** was well developed. And yet I was stuck in 2nd path for 14 years (2010-2024).

I genuinely thought that my vipassana was simply not good enough, I just had to do it more intensely, more often and better. I felt guilty that my mindfulness and persistence were so weak (if you feel this, you shouldn't, that's possibly not what's happening at all). Here it didn't help that my favorite Dharma teacher happens to be a very high energy person who can do retreats where he meditates for 20 hours out of 24 hours of every day. I could never even approximate this brutal intensity on retreat, my best days capped off at 14

hours or so, and the sustainable amount that doesn't soon lead to excruciating exhaustion is more like 7-9 hours. I deeply feared that I was destined never to get this thing.

But, it turns out, what was missing was not more **seeing**. What was missing was something which I am here calling **knowing**.

I personally do not know of any document where these two mental activities, which I'm calling seeing and knowing, are clearly defined and distinguished as two different kinds of mental activity. Quite on the contrary, I know of many instances where the two mental movements are referred to in a hazy, blurred out way, as if they are somehow equivalent. Perhaps it really does take 14 years of being stuck with just one of the two, to be able to make this particular fine distinction in such a clear-cut way. This is what motivated me to write this text, as I feel that maybe 10 years ago or so my ability to **see** was already probably good enough that I could attain the **knowledge** I eventually did attain. So I've decided to write the exact text that I needed to read 10 years ago, to save me 10 years of misdirected meditation practice.

But of course, maybe the distinction is found somewhere in the literature. I'm really sorry, I'm the furthest thing from a Buddhist scholar. I read some suttas, sure, but I mostly stuck to a few modern authors that I liked very much, chief among them Daniel Ingram and Leigh Brasington. I also learned some things from Shinzen Young's talks, Yogani of AYP<sup>1</sup>, Nick Haley of the Hamilton project blog<sup>2</sup>, took Jhana classes with Vince Horn and Brian Newman at the jhana community website<sup>3</sup>, and I asked many questions on the DhO<sup>4</sup> and got good answers for them... But I never seriously studied my copy of the Visuddhimagga, and I was always turned off by the Vajrayana, Mahayana and Zen aesthetics. And I thought all the direct pointing teaching was a bunch of bollocks. My mind would go something like: *sure, I conceptually understand that there is no self, no time other than the present, etc, but how do I make the shift into seeing it all the time?!*

This leads me to explaining the dedication of this text. Very early in my meditation career, I heard the following anecdote told by Shinzen Young (which I'm paraphrasing as I can't find the original):

During an interview for a Japanese radio station, three Zen monks are

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<sup>1</sup><https://aypsite.org>

<sup>2</sup><http://thehamiltonproject.blogspot.com/>

<sup>3</sup><https://the.jhana.community/>

<sup>4</sup><https://dharamaoverground.org>

asked the question: 'So, venerable sirs, what is enlightenment?'

They hesitate a little about who will answer, before the two younger monks defer to the most senior monk. The old man pauses, looking around, gathering his thoughts for a while, and then replies:

'Enlightenment is knowing that you are already enlightened.'

Argh! I cannot tell you enough how much I specifically disliked this particular anecdote. In my mind, the old fart was being "stupidly Zen", he was being unclear and unhelpful, arrogantly adorning the practice with an air of Zen mystery. Oooooooooo, we are already enlightened, what a Hocus Pocus Abracadabra Flim Flam Hogwash, you must think you are so smart because you talk in obscure terms. Well I'm certainly not enlightened, so thanks for nothing douchebag, Uck!

How humbling it was for me, then, that the first time when **seeing** turned into **knowing**, this very same statement came rushing into my mind, and helped catalyze the flip into 3rd path. Not only was the old geezer not being mysterious at all, he was saying it like it is in the most clear and succinct way he could. The same guy I totally disdained was right there, kindly holding my hand, helping me along, and all this time, the arrogant fool had been me. So I am really sorry, my nameless Dharma friend whom I have never met, I bow my head down in the deepest acknowledgement, and I dedicate this undeserving text to you.

So there is this mental activity, or mental movement, which I am calling **knowing**. I'm calling it this because I am now convinced that it is the essential mental shift that needs to happen for someone to attain liberation. I should say that I am not 4th path, so take it with a grain of salt.

But even the Buddha didn't claim that the cause of suffering is blindness, but rather, the cause of suffering is ignorance. In the description of his awakening, the choice of words goes something like *ignorance was destroyed, knowledge arose*. Also, the root cause of suffering, as per dependent origination, is ignorance, so, lack of knowledge. Not blindness, as in, lack of seeing. Of course, seeing is *required* for knowing - it's just not *sufficient*, and hence one can be pretty good at seeing, and yet be stuck for 14 years.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Thanissaro Bhikhu, now Ajahn, defends that what needs to be known is the 4 noble truths. Perhaps he's right? But people from later turnings (Mahayana, Vajrayana), will explain it very differently, as did the zen monk mentioned above. The knowing I'm referring to is different. All I can say that this "knowing" thing that I'm trying to point out has

Ok then, my first goal in this text is to give reasonable definitions of what I mean by seeing and knowing. As all meditators know, this kind of thing is hard to communicate. I want to say some words, which refer to things that happen in my perception, in a way that people understand to what these words are pointing to in their own perception.

In an attempt to get you in the right headspace for understanding what I mean, I will give you two little stories. In both of them, seeing and knowing happen in very distinct, well delineated moments.

I start in Section 2 with a commentary on the Bahiya sutta. I will try to make it entertaining, as the Bahiya sutta is my utmost favorite sutta, and I want to share why I like it so much. The section ends with an attempt at giving a definition of these two distinct mental activities. Hopefully that will lead to some conceptual clarity about this distinction, and the next question that my past self would have asked me is: *Ok I conceptually understand that there are these two things, so how do I make the jump from seeing to knowing in my own practice?*

So then, in Section 3, I will share a little story, *the parable of the elephant*, which I invented for the purpose of reinforcing the distinction between the two activities, and for illustrating how the mind goes from one to the other, from seeing to knowing.

Ok then, the one remaining issue is: seeing and knowing what? And how does one, practically speaking, go from seeing to knowing that which needs to be known? The Bahiya sutta answers the first question, of what is to be known, but is murky on the distinction between seeing and knowing, and how to go from seeing to knowing. The parable of the elephant should explain how to do that. But I want to be more explicit, more extensive, because I think it might help. I want to give my imaginary past self practical exercises, a workout regiment, if you will, that causes the transition from seeing to knowing to happen. These are the same exercises that I do, as I hopefully move along to 4th path.

So, with that in mind, in Section 4 I will write a commentary on my absolute favorite piece of writing by Daniel Ingram. It is a post from 2021 on the DhO, entitled *This moment*<sup>6</sup>. The commentary itself is entitled *The eight elephants*. It contains Daniel's post, an interpretation of its central statement in the light of the parable of the elephant, and suggestions for a practice, which we can call *from seeing to knowing*, that uses a mix of vipassana and asking specific

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catalyzed the most significant shift in my perception, towards the direction of mental peace and silence, that has happened in my practice thus far.

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message\\_boards/view\\_message/22843393](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/view_message/22843393)

questions to oneself, with the intention to make knowing arise from seeing.



## 2 From Seeing to Knowing the Dharma

The Bāhiya sutta tells the story of Bāhiya, the recluse. I learned about this sutta by Leigh Brasington. In his webpage<sup>7</sup>, Leigh has a translation by John D. Ireland, where he has added some very useful comments by himself and by John Peacock. You should totally download it because the comments are great<sup>8</sup>. However, my favorite among the translations I know of, which I think most correctly reflects the teaching, is that of Suddhāso Bhikkhu<sup>9</sup>. That is the one I copy pasted below. I made a few changes that made sense to me, taken from other translations, so it's really Suddhāso Bhikkhu's translation with a few changes, and these changes appear in italic font.

*Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvatti, at Jeta's Grove, in Anāthapiṇḍika's park. On this occasion Bāhiya Dārucīriya was living at Suppāraka, on the shore of the ocean. He was honored, respected, revered, worshiped, and esteemed, and he received robes, almsfood, dwellings, medicine, and medical supplies.*

Okay, so Bāhiya was a beggar, a recluse. This was and is common in India, some people feel the calling and take off, go live in the wilderness, and depend on others to come and give them food. Apparently, Bāhiya was beloved by the nearby community, who provided well for him. I think it is reasonable to infer from this, that he had been a recluse for several years.

In their comments to the Bāhiya sutta, Leigh and John make an absolutely crucial observation, without which you will not really understand the sutta. I paraphrase: The bark cloth clothing that Bāhiya is wearing strongly suggests that he follows a particular religious scripture, the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*. This Upanishad is based on the following fundamental philosophical stance:

(from the Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad, not the Bāhiya sutta)

*The unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the unrecognized cognizer... There is no other seer but he, no other hearer, no other thinker, no other cognizer. This is thy self, the inner controller, the immortal..."*

It then uses this assumption, that there exists an unseen seer, to further make the following analogy:

<sup>7</sup>[urlhttps://www.leighb.com](https://www.leighb.com)

<sup>8</sup>[https://www.leighb.com/Udana\\_1.10\\_The\\_Bhiya\\_Sutta.pdf](https://www.leighb.com/Udana_1.10_The_Bhiya_Sutta.pdf)

<sup>9</sup><https://suttacentral.net/ud1.10/en/suddhaso?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false>

(Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, not the Bāhiya sutta)

1. As a large tree, so indeed is a man. This is true. His hair is its leaves, his skin its outer bark.
2. It is from his skin that blood flows, and from the bark sap. Therefore when a man is wounded, blood flows, as sap from a tree that is injured.
3. His flesh is its inner bark, and his sinews its innermost layer of bark; it is tough. His bones lie under, as does its wood; his marrow is comparable to its pith.
4. If a tree, after it is felled, springs again from its root in a newer form, from what root does man spring forth after he is cut off by death?
5. Do not say, 'From the seed,' for it is produced in a living man. A tree springs also from the seed; after it is dead it certainly springs again (from the seed as well).
6. If a tree is pulled out with its root, it no more sprouts, From what root does a mortal spring forth after he is cut off by death ?

So you see: when you cut down a tree but don't remove the root, a new tree springs from the root. In the same way when a person dies, the "root", meaning the unseen seer, unheard hearer *etc*, is not cut out, and so the person reincarnates. The compelling, graphic nature of this analogy is presumably why students of this Upanishad wore clothing made out of tree bark.

And from this, we can reasonably conclude two things:

1. Just from the way that the Bāhiya is dressed, someone like the Buddha, who was very well versed in the different philosophical schools of his time, would be able to tell, in a single glance, *Oh, this guy is one of those bark-wearing monks of the "immortal inner controller"*. Which of course is exactly opposite to Buddha's own teaching.
2. Bāhiya must have spent his entire career as a recluse looking for that unseen seer, unheard hearer, unthought thinker, uncognized cognizer, etc. Having spent his entire career (which we already surmised was a long one) looking for this unfindable thing, he became *extremely good at seeing that it wasn't there!* In fact that is precisely what the very philosophy he followed urged him to understand: the seer somehow exists, and yet cannot be seen.

And I would add the following: This **seeing** that there is no self here, no self there, no self in this, no self in that, this is one of the three activities which we practice when we do vipassana (at least, as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw). We learn to look and see what is there, and notice that it is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not a self. So Bāhiya must have spent his entire career doing vipassana focused exclusively on the no-self characteristic of experience! He was a total vipassana pro! He totally mastered how one can do vipassana while *not* becoming enlightened in the process! He was a master of what I'm calling **seeing**, specifically, at **seeing** that there is no self.

Then when Bāhiya was alone in retreat, this thought arose in his mind: "There are beings in this world who are Arahants or are on the way to becoming Arahants; I am one of them."

A deva who used to be one of the Bāhiya's relatives knew what Bāhiya was thinking, and out of compassion and well-wishing for Bāhiya he approached Bāhiya and said to him, "Bāhiya, you are certainly not an Arahant, and you are not on the way to becoming an Arahant. You aren't even doing the practices by means of which you could be an Arahant or be on the way to becoming an Arahant."

"Then who in this world of devas is currently an Arahant or on the way to becoming an Arahant?"

"Bāhiya, in the northern country there is a city named Sāvatti. That is where the Blessed One lives now, the Arahant, the Fully Self-Awakened One. Bāhiya, that Blessed One is an Arahant and teaches the way to become an Arahant."

So Bāhiya thought pretty highly of himself, but was visited by a relative who reincarnated as a deva, i.e. a female god, and she tells him he's totally not getting it, if he wants to get his act together he should go and see the Buddha. The thing about this part of the sutta is that, as we will see from the rest of the story, it is hard to see how the Buddha's sanga could have possibly known the origin story of Bāhiya, since he spent a total of maybe one hour with them, in total. So maybe they made up his origin story, when they decided to include it in the oral tradition. Or maybe someone in the Sangha went into deep concentration and saw what happened - or in any case saw something - in their mind's eye<sup>10</sup>.

But who cares? It's a great story. Bāhiya somehow knew where the Buddha was teaching, and I guess the Buddha was becoming famous in the recluse

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<sup>10</sup>Many suttas call this the "divine eye," and rave repeatedly about how this eye's vision surpasses that of the physical eye, so they thought of such visions as unquestionably true.

community so that's not hard to explain. And so he traveled there:

Motivated by that deva, Bāhiya left Suppāraka. On his way to Sāvattḥi, he only stayed one night in each place he passed through. When he arrived, he went to Jeta's Grove and entered Anāthapiṇḍika's park. On this occasion several monks were doing walking meditation in the open air. Bāhiya approached those monks and said to them, "Bhante, where does the Blessed One currently live – the Arahant, the Fully Self-Awakened One? We wish to see the Blessed One, the Arahant, the Fully Self-Awakened One."

"Bāhiya, he has entered the residential area for alms."

Then Bāhiya went through Jeta's Grove, leaving it behind and entering Sāvattḥi. There he saw the Blessed One going for alms in Sāvattḥi – inspiring, inspirational, his appearance peaceful, his mind peaceful, with the utmost self-mastery and tranquility, trained, restrained, self-controlled, and majestic<sup>1</sup>. Having seen the Blessed One, he approached him and lowered himself to the ground with his head at the Blessed One's feet, saying "Teach me the Dhamma, Bhante, Blessed One! Teach me the Dhamma, Sublime One, for the sake of my long-term benefit and happiness."

Ok, so the guy travels from Suppāraka to Sāvattḥī, which is about 1200 miles, or 1800 Km. It is safe to presume that, being a beggar without any possessions, he walked. Checking on google maps, walking the same distance, without sleeping or breaks, in our modern times, i.e. asphalt roads, no wolves, that takes 16 days. So Bāhiya must have been walking for *months*, and yet he never stops for more than the time it takes him to sleep until the next day and do it again. Upon arriving at the monastery, he does not sit or relax, he goes straight to the point, finds that the Buddha is begging for food in town, goes straight there, and throws himself at the his feet, begging, from the bottom of his heart, for the teaching.

Why is he in such a rush? Man, you've traveled for months, you finally got there, sit down a little, maybe? Have a cup of tea! Chill!

But Bāhiya is compelled by something, an urgent feeling has been drumming in the back of his head, a restless energy pushing him forward... why?

When this was said, the Blessed One said to Bāhiya, "This is not the time, Bāhiya. We have entered a residential area for alms."

I mean, can you imagine the number of dudes who threw themselves theatrically at the feet of the Buddha? He must have seen all sorts of shenanigans (e.g. in

UD1.7<sup>11</sup>). But the Buddha knows full well the importance of the alms. If the monks don't get food, they go hungry, and their meditation suffers from the hunger, as his own once did during his period of extreme asceticism. So this guy can wait.

A second time Bāhiya said to the Blessed One, “Bhante, it is hard to know how long the Blessed One's life will last, or how long my life will last. Teach me the Dhamma, Bhante, Blessed One! Teach me the Dhamma, Sublime One, for the sake of my long-term benefit and happiness.”

A second time the Blessed One said to Bāhiya, “This is not the time, Bāhiya. We have entered a residential area for alms.”

The Buddha is practically rolling his eyes: *Dude, we're begging for food, it's not the right time.*

But Bāhiya is having none of it, there's a nagging sense of urgency pushing him on, and for the third time he insists:

A third time Bāhiya said to the Blessed One, “Bhante, it is hard to know how long the Blessed One's life will last, or how long my life will last. Teach me the Dhamma, Bhante, Blessed One! Teach me the Dhamma, Sublime One, for the sake of my long-term benefit and happiness.”

And here the Buddha must have paused, and really paid attention to the guy for the first time. He looks Bāhiya up and down, sees the bark clothing, and understands exactly he needs to say:

*“In that case, Bāhiya, this is how you are to train yourself:*

*In the seen, there will be just the seen.*

*In the heard, there will be just the heard.*

*In the sensed, there will be just the sensed.*

*In the cognized, there will be just the cognized.*

*This, Bāhiya, is how you are to train yourself.*

*Bāhiya, when it is like this for you –*

<sup>11</sup><https://suttacentral.net/ud1.7/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin>

In the seen, there is just the seen,  
In the heard, there is just the heard,  
In the sensed, there is just the sensed,  
In the cognized, there is just the cognized –  
Then, Bāhiya, there will be no 'you' in terms of this.  
When there is no 'you' in terms of this,  
Then there is no 'you' there;  
When there is no 'you' there,  
There is no 'you' here, or beyond, or in between.  
Just this is the end of suffering.”

And **BAM**:

Then while the Blessed One was teaching this brief Dhamma teaching to Bāhiya, Bāhiya's mind was liberated from the corruptions by means of non-attachment.

Tragically, Bāhiya didn't have much time to enjoy his liberation, and we finally understand why he was in such a resolute hurry:

After the Blessed One had instructed Bāhiya with this brief instruction, he left. And not long after the Blessed One left, *Bāhiya was killed by a cow with a young calf.*

What a story, huh? The sutta continues: the monks paid their respects, the Buddha declared that Bāhiya was completely liberated, and uttered a heartfelt poem... which I won't include because I now want to make the main point of this commentary.

It is this: Bāhiya was a grandmaster of no-self vipassana, he was excellent at **seeing**, but he had not dispelled ignorance, he had not gained knowledge, he was untrained in **knowing**.

Now I want to attempt to give a brief definition of what knowing is: it is an act of generalization. It is a moment when the mind again **sees** something it has seen many times before, and takes it up as a general pattern. The next time

that the mind sees the same thing again, it will no longer just “see it again,” it will *recognize it* as something which is *already known*. The sensation of this recognition goes something like “hmm hmm, yup, yes, I know this, huh huh, yup”. Any new future instance of seeing is now directly recognized as a particular instance of the same knowledge. Future instances of this pattern are automatically categorized, in some deep, direct, automatic way, as something which is already known.

Bāhiya had **seen**, a million gazillion times: there is no self in this sensation, there is no self in that sensation, *etcetera*, but when the Buddha gave him the above instructions, he realized: there are only the sensations, there is no self at all anywhere! And suddenly his mind understood directly — i.e. at the level of sense data, not at the conceptual level of knowing how to string together sentences which are consistent with the fact — It understood directly that this is a completely general pattern that **APPLIES TO EVERYTHING IN EXPERIENCE, ALL THE TIME**. His mind took up that conclusion as knowledge, and that was the moment he became enlightened. In other words, his mind finally took the complete repeated absence of proof (for years he looked and never found a self) as a complete, utter proof of absence (there *just isn't* a self and never was and he's now completely and utterly certain of this!). This flip from something that one can see when one looks, to something one already knows to be true, that is **knowing**. The flip, from a seen recurrent absence of a self, to a known certainty of absence — there is no self — this is what **knowing the dharma of no-self** is like. Knowing changes the way in which the mind perceives the no-self characteristic, from something which is seen, perhaps repeatedly many thousands of times when doing vipassana over many years, to something which is recognizable, obvious, unsurprising, a truism, a certainty, an inevitability, already obviously there all the time. This mental activity, which I'm calling knowing, is the dispelling of ignorance at the root of suffering.

When I excitedly shared with my girlfriend the story of Bāhiya, I cried at the tragic fact that he worked his entire life towards something which he only got to enjoy for a few moments. ‘Not such a bad way to go,’ she shrugged. Indeed, let me try to imagine what it must have felt like for Bāhiya... His mind soaked up the knowledge: *wow, there is no self anywhere to be found in the entirety of my experience! Actually, there never has been a self at all!* He finally **knew** this and the cognitive dissonance — there is a self, but he never found it — it just disappeared, and suddenly everything was totally and completely quiet and clear. *What peace! What tranquility! Everything is just as it is! The mind! This place! What a vast, utterly tranquil beauty! The sky! The sunlight! The animals! The cute, adorable baby cow!...*

### 3 The parable of the elephant

Here I'm going to try and make a parable where you are the enlightened Buddha, more or less. Or rather, a parable where you understand perfectly well what it means to be enlightened.

So let us imagine. You are a kind, patient, sensible person whom, at some point in your life, took up a contract as the butler of a wealthy Greek aristocrat, Agnostos ("*ignorant*").

Agnostos lived in a sprawling palace by the sea. In this parable, Agnostos' palace is a metaphor for the mind.

Hence, the palace gardens were enormous, perfect for hours of wandering among sunlit trees (sight), the sound of waves crashing on the distant shore (sound). Inside, there was a movie theater with a giant screen (inner eye), a music room with a high definition sound system (inner seeing), a special room for reciting poetry (speech, etc you get the idea), a haunted house with a rickety roller coaster, a luxurious massage parlor, an underground factory of perfumes and intoxicants... The place was huge, it took you years just to learn your way around.

At first, you didn't think much of it when Agnostos started talking about his elephant. Sometimes, while in the middle of some activity, he would remember something, look around, and, apparently not finding what he sought, he would get up and leave the room. You eventually asked where he was going. 'I'm going to see the elephant,' he said, 'He's in a room somewhere in this house'. At first, given the size of the palace, you thought maybe there really was an elephant somewhere. But as his obsession grew, you started to wonder.

It wasn't just that he had an elephant; he had to constantly attend to it. "I have to feed the elephant," he'd say, interrupting his peaceful morning. Or, "The elephant is bored, I need to entertain him." At first you offered to help, but he'd always make an excuse, change the subject, or simply dismiss the idea. You never saw any sign of an elephant, not a single photograph, pile of dung, paw mark, or anything, and so you soon concluded that there simply isn't an elephant, and Agnostos must be using this as an excuse for something else.

But one day, as Agnostos was leaving and said 'I'm tired, I need some elephant time', you confessed your annoyance 'Sir, could you please drop the silly elephant story, I don't really care to know what you are actually doing.' But then Agnostos stares at you, his face a mixture of shock and disbelief. "What?! The elephant is real!" he exclaimed. Then, a sly grin spread across his face. "My friend, it's literally the elephant in the room!" he chuckled with absolute confidence, spreading out his arms, as if all you had to do was look around.



Feeling disoriented, you look around. 'Erm, where...?' you ask. Then Agnostos himself looks around. 'Oh... He's actually not here right now...' But he's out there somewhere,' he says with certainty.

You again wonder if you got it wrong. Over the course of a year, you methodically search every room of the palace: no elephant. Several times, you secretly follow Agnostos when he declares he is going to see the elephant. He never actually does: there appears to be no elephant. One day, you insist you must see this elephant, and you are completely adamant about it, you won't take no for an answer. He finally agrees, and takes you to a room of the house: no elephant. He promptly declares that the elephant was just here, but the situation just repeats again and again. No matter how many rooms the two of you visit, in search of this elephant, it simply isn't there.

You eventually realized that Agnostos was not just convinced there was an elephant somewhere, it was as if, by default, he was convinced that the elephant was always in the same room he happened to be in, looking at what he was doing. And yet, Agnostos is not hallucinating: whenever he actually bothers to look, he easily sees that there is no elephant to be found. Nonetheless, for some mysterious reason, Agnostos' position never changes.

In summary, the situation is this:

1. You know that there is no elephant anywhere in Agnostos' home.
2. Agnostos is deeply and genuinely possessed by a **delusion**, that there exists an elephant somewhere in his home.
3. Simultaneously, and very bizarrely, it's not as if he's actually hallucinating an elephant, not at all, whenever he bothers to look to any particular place, he can **see** that there is no elephant there, when he looks into any particular room, he acknowledges that it's just a room, empty of elephant.

Now, I claim that this is a very reasonable analogy, where you are yourself enlightened, and Agnostos is not. Now, that Agnostos is not enlightened would not necessarily be a problem. There is nothing inherently unbearable about Agnostos' life. But suppose, as we spend our entire time in our minds, Agnostos spends his entire time at home. Then, the constant struggle to maintain his impossible belief – the elephant exists, yet he somehow never finds it – becomes exhausting. It is a battle against reality, a constant drain on his vitality. So it is with the unenlightened mind. You, on the other hand, have no issue. As you move around the house, you already **know** that there is no elephant in any room, and are completely unsurprised by not finding an elephant all the time. For you there is no battle, the house is empty and quiet.

Also remarkable about Agnostos' situation is the persistence with which he seeks for the perpetually-unseen elephant. It's as if his house was such an unbearable awful place, that surely there had to be more. And so Agnostos seeks the elephant. He gets up early to seek it, and goes to bed late to seek it. Maybe it's in that very bright room (in bliss?). Maybe it's in the very dark attic (in the dark background?). It cannot be just the house, with its empty rooms, no, surely not that, anything but that. Poor Agnostos!

What is Agnostos missing? If he can so clearly see that there is no elephant, what is missing?

This is what is missing: Agnostos is not yet convinced. He is resisting the knowledge that there is no elephant. There is nothing other than just the house, with its empty rooms, exactly as he sees them.

There is nothing other than the sensations that are already happening in your experience right now. There is nothing behind them. They are hinting at nothing. They are hiding nothing, there is nothing hidden behind anything. These sensations are exactly as they appear. Exactly as they appear. Yup, that's right, there is no deep transformation that needs to happen. Enlightenment is nothing other than acknowledging: it's just this. There is nothing else to be found. Nothing that could be found. And nothing that could find it.

Let us have fun imagining what would happen in the parable if Agnostos for some reason got into Buddhism. Someone told him that there's no elephant and that this is the source of all his suffering. So he trains himself to really look at a room and see no elephant. He learns the 4 vipassana jhanas. He looks with intense effort at a fixed point in the wall to see that there is no elephant there (1st vipassana jhana). With practice he can now look at any given point in the room and automatically see that there is no elephant there (2nd vipassana jhana). As he can't find the elephant at the point of his focus, he starts looking for the elephant somewhere in his peripheral vision, perhaps it's hiding just out of sight?, so then focuses on his peripheral vision to try and see that there's no elephant there, either (3rd vipassana jhana). If he resists this shift to the periphery and insist on finding an elephant in the center again, this is painful (dark night). Eventually it all comes together, and he can take in the entire room and see, all at once, no elephant anywhere (4th vipassana jhana). At last, he has a genuine breakthrough: he finally sees, for a split second, that nothing he's looking at is an elephant. That would be stream entry, when everything blinks out, even the sensations of centerpoint, and for the first time you have seen that everything is impermanent.

So Agnostos has finally seen, at least once, that there is no elephant anywhere, and he sets up a complicated daily and yearly schedule to see it all the time.

But nothing really changes: he still looks at things and sees no elephant, just like before. He eventually becomes really good at seeing no elephant anywhere, but still says things like "I can't wait for the day when there will finally be no elephant." You, of course, know that there already isn't one: it's just the house.

So one day, finally, Agnostos will look at yet another empty room and dare to think: *Wow, maybe there **already is** no elephant, and that's **precisely the reason why** I'm looking everywhere and not finding it.* And then, his mind takes up the knowledge, and he realizes that this was precisely what he needed to know: *Oh, wow! That's exactly right, isn't it?! There isn't an elephant anywhere in this house, and there never was!*

In any case, that's pretty much what happened to me, on my 15th-or-so meditation retreat.

It is perhaps telling that I was very disappointed. *Wait, you're telling me it's just this?! Nooo.... Nooooo, c'mon....* It really was all very anticlimatic. But then, this same simple, down-to-earth conclusion produced massive waves of bliss like I never experienced before. As the dust settled, everything was so much more silent. And it stayed that way.

Alas, it did not clear completely, not yet. The mind is much more silent, so it's hard to pinpoint, but I can sense some dissonance still, subtle and fleeting. But somehow I think that perhaps, for the first time, I finally understand what this Buddhism thing is all about.

## 4 The Eight Elephants

Very well, here is my all-time favorite post by Daniel Ingram. It is entitled “This moment”, and appeared on DhO in June 2021<sup>12</sup>).

I now include a slightly modified version of his post. The only thing I have changed was the order of the 8 items in the list. I simply moved number 3 in the original post position 7, and shifted all the others down. This has to do with my own initial difficulty in interpreting this particular point. So they appear below in the particular order by which they became clear to me.

I talk to lots of people about meditation, sometimes up to 15 per week, sometimes as few as 1-2.

They talk about memories and plans mostly, hopes and fears, and occasionally sensations going on that moment, but rarely.

Almost none of them get that THIS IS IT.

Even the ones that are so impressed with their attainments, the powerful insight cycles, the magical experiences, the deep formless stuff, the very strange experiences that can arise in the far fusions of insight and concentration, nearly all of them fail to appreciate the simple point of these sensations, right now, right here, being it.

By “it”, I mean:

1. The only thing going on in experience.
2. Utterly transient.
3. Utterly ungraspable and unstoppable.
4. Utterly without anything that could even attempt to grasp or stop them.
5. Utterly immediate.
6. Utterly just as they are.
7. Utterly natural.
8. Utterly the immediate and perfect solution to their insight quest.

Then, every now and then, someone comes along that get it.

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<sup>12</sup>[https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message\\_boards/view\\_message/22843393](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/view_message/22843393)

They say things like:

“The experience of the memories of meditation experiences are themselves the answer to the question of vipassana.”

“The experience of the koan is the answer to the koan.”

“Everything has the same nature all the way through. How utterly obvious this is in all things now. How could this possibly have been missed?”

“Thought and the things that thought appears to be operating on all satisfy, in that they cannot be grasped, cannot be stopped, cannot occur other than they do: what freedom!”

Those sound like things from a stylized book, but, on rare occasions, people actually do declare that their experience is like that.

When that quality of natural, inevitable, non-negotiable knowing is known to apply to all experiences immediately, automatically, naturally, without any other option, and even when not obviously paid attention to, and that holds up over all states, all stages, all shifts, all highs, all lows, all qualities of experience, that's really it.

If you find yourself reflecting on your past or future, and you don't notice that something in those reflections are equally of the same nature as everything else, or you are sure that some specific experience was it or closer to it and some other experiences are farther from it or less it, rather than appreciating those moments themselves as they occur then as simply, straightforwardly, easily, naturally it, however they are, consider tuning to that aspect, and see if it helps.

Best wishes,

Daniel

To relate the above text with the parable of the elephant, I would like to propose some definitions:

- A *dharma* is a truth about human subjective experience, which applies allways, to its entirety.

One remarkable weird thing about these truths, at least the ones I've understood (at least partially), is that they can always seem to be framed in such a way that they state that something does not exist. Another remarkable thing is that although they can be stated in different ways, I get a sense that to completely know one dharma is to know them all. That all the dharmas, or at

least the eight dharmas I will discuss here, are different angles onto the same basic fact and/or misunderstanding in human beings' subjective experience. Hence we could refer to knowing *the* dharma, instead of knowing *a* dharma.

With this in mind, let us add the following definitions:

- An *elephant* is a thing which a dharma states does not exist.
- *Ignorance* is the condition of a mind which *does not know* that a particular elephant does not exist, which is to say, the state of a mind which does not know the dharma.
- *Seeing* is the activity of noticing that a certain dharma is true, about some particular sensation happening in experience, as it happens.
- *Knowing* as the activity of taking up the dharma as knowledge, which will mean that the dharma is now *known* to apply to all experience, and automatically *recognized* as experience happens.

With these definitions, Daniel's post is pointing out the following 8 dharmas:

1. These sensations are the only thing happening in your experience.
2. These sensations are impermanent, they are always in flux.
3. These sensations are impossible to hold onto, or to stop.
4. There is nothing in experience that could even be used to hold onto or stop any of the sensations that arise.
5. These sensations happen now, always now.
6. These sensations are exactly as they seem.
7. This is all natural, unexceptional, it's the way your experience has always been.
8. These sensations, just as they already are, are the answer to your insight quest.

Now, the thing is, the above list is explaining the dharma by positive. But it seems very natural to me, to explain these dharmas by describing their elephants. I.e. by describing the delusional, non-existing entities or qualities, which the dharmas state do not exist. So following are the eight elephants. I have given them fancy names for dramatic purposes.

## The first elephant: Mr. Something Else

I know this one so well. There has got to be something else, right? I mean, these sensations don't satisfy me, so enlightenment has got to be something else, and I will find it. Maybe it's a sufficiently powerful bliss, or a sufficiently subtle background which I didn't see yet. The answer can't be just these sensations, can it?

It turns out that the dharma is more beautiful than that. But I'll leave that for the eight elephant.

Let's do an **exercise**, which includes a mix of noting, which I'm assuming you've done many thousands of times, and some reflection.

So noting:

- Pause, pay attention, notice something about your experience, literally ANYTHING. Name it with a broad category, just to be sure you saw it.
- I'll bet that it was a sensation.
- Ok, try again, ANYTHING, it can be WILD, SUBTLE, ESOTERIC, ANYTHING AT ALL.
- I'll bet that it was another sensation.

Now consider the following radical idea: *What if there is literally nothing else? Really try it on for size. What if enlightenment is just this, just these sensations?*

Are you doubting?! Ok, let me ask you this: suppose, as a working hypothesis, that there is nothing else, nothing other than these sensations. What would happen, in this hypothetical scenario, if you were to look around, pay attention to a random thing. What would you find, literally 100% of the time?

Yup! That's it! These sensations are it. There's nothing else, never has been, and never will be, until the day you die.

## The second elephant: A fixed pivot, an immortal soul.

Suppose you take your clothes off, and go bathe in a river. Your feet reach the ground, they keep you in place as the water flows downstream. You feel the water in your skin. In some places faster, with more pressure, in some places slower, with less pressure.

Now imagine that there is nothing else in your experience, other than this

feeling of water flowing, in contact with your skin. There is no body, no bones, no feet on the ground, nothing else, other than the flow of water, in contact with the skin.

Your experience is a flow of water, in contact with your sense doors. Sometimes, in some places, with more pressure, sometimes, in some places, with less pressure.

There is nothing else happening, the water cannot be held onto, or stopped (try it in the shower), it is happening now, as it is, as it always has, and it's totally fine doing what it's doing.

Do you doubt it? Check. Literally pay attention to *anything*. It is in flux. Check, confirm, 1 time, 10 times. Consider, as a working hypothesis: *What if everything really is in flux all the time? If that were true, what would happen, literally 100% of the time I checked?*

If you think that something is not in flow, your vipassana is not strong enough. If you can already see that everything you look at is in flow, now you must realize that this is already the case all the time, right here and now.

### **The third elephant: Choice. The fourth elephant: The controller.**

Every sensation which is happening in your experience, has in some sense already happened. Intentions arise on their own, dependent on conditions.

Here is a fun exercise: Stand. Think to yourself: *at some point I will take a step forward*. Then wait until it happens, paying attention to catch that first moment when the intention first arises, how it is at first weak, perhaps hesitating, then finally gathers enough energy, connects with the legs, and you step forward. From where did it arise? How is this arising any different than the arising of any other sensation? It arises and passes away, on its own, ungraspable and unstoppable, right now, as it is, as it has always been.

Now look around at your experience. All you see are sensations. Is any sensation controlling any other sensation? Is any part of the flow grabbing, or stopping, any other part? You don't need to "let go", you are already not holding on. Rather, there are patterns of sensations that you think are holding on, but really, they are not.

Consider the following possibility: *There is no choice. There is nothing that could be chosen, even: I am not being offered two alternatives. There is only one dish in the menu, and this is it.*



## The fifth elephant: The past and the future.

So many times you must have heard, in meditation circles, *everything is happening now*, so we also hear: focus on now, be in the moment, or whatever.

But that is wrong. You are already in the moment. These sensations, happening on their own, happen when?

Let's check. Pay attention to *anything*. When is it happening? I'll bet it is happening now.

Again, take up the following working hypothesis: *everything is **already** happening perfectly right now*. Check: once, twice, ten times. It's *already always* the case. Learn it. You don't have to do anything at all. You just have to take it up as knowledge.

## The sixth elephant: Something non obvious.

I claim that the characteristics of experience which make up the enlightened mind are easy to see. Maybe not completely obvious at first, but after some training, which I'm assuming you have, they are for the most part easy to see. Look at anything: a sensation. It is impermanent, doesn't hit the spot, and happens on its own.

*But some sensations are muddy and unclear.*

Consider the following working hypothesis: *a sensation which is muddy and unclear, is **not** a clear sensation which is muddled by something else, but **rather** a completely clearly perceived experience of confusion.*

Everything is happening just as it is. There is NOTHING BEHIND any of the sensations you experience. Certainly, some sensations arise in sequence, sometimes in a previously predicted sequence. That just means that there is causality, and one could colloquially say that some things are hidden behind others. However, *in your experience*, everything which arises is just as it is, in this moment right now. It is hiding nothing. A question is just the experience of the question. It might *cause* other sensations (answers, doubt, etc), but it *hides* nothing. Do the experiment, check. Ask a question in your mind. In your experience of asking the question, is the question anything other than what it is?

Test, confirm, one time, ten times.

*But I have patterns of sensations which seem to imply that there is something hidden behind them.*

And these are just sensations that appear as something which seems to imply that there is something hidden. It actually does not imply that at all. If they are shifting, they are shifting, if they are vortexing, they are vortexing, they are just as they are, they are themselves the information which they carry, they carry no other information other than the experience of themselves.

Every sensation is exactly as it appears to be.

### **The Seventh elephant. An elusive prize, or an internal demon; something special, extraordinary, unlike the rest.**

All of the following statements are wrong:

- Enlightenment is gaining something elusive, which one did not have before.
- Enlightenment is losing something terrible, which one normally carries around.
- Enlightenment is something completely special and extraordinary.

All of the following statements are correct:

- Enlightenment is realizing that something is true which has always been true.
- Enlightenment is realizing that there was nothing terrible happening in the first place.
- Enlightenment is found in the completely normal, ordinary experience.

Enlightenment takes nothing away. There is no *golden* sensation to find, it is and always will be just normal sensations.

Above all, most importantly: the enlightened mind is your home. It is the same old show you've been wearing all these years, comfy and normal.

### **The eight elephant: Suffering**

We finally come to our last elephant. If I could tell you all of the dudes whom I've called a moron because they said something like *there is nothing to do, nothing to find, nothing to attain, you are already enlightened, etc.* I now take it that these were people who had already realized the point, and were trying to convey it as best as they could.

These sensations are, already, utterly, the immediate and perfect solution to your insight quest.

They are already at peace. Already, there is no suffering to be found anywhere.

Do the test. Take up the following working hypothesis: *What if I am already enlightened? What if these sensations are already just totally fine, just as they are.*

And now the question is whether you can see it. I'll admit this is the least obvious of the dharmas to see. But it is also, in some sense, the highest, ultimate dharma.

It might start by noticing that these sensations, which are all that exist, are doing their own thing, and are totally fine doing it, they don't mind, they are not in conflict, they are just moving along.

Peace is not a scarce resource, you do not need to go to mars. Peace is utterly abundant, it is everything you experience, all the time. This is why the dharma has been called the refugeless refuge. There is ultimately, already, no suffering. There is only ignorance of this fact.

How beautiful is the dharma!