

The Certainty of Uncertainty

Ultimately, most spiritual teachings end up as belief systems – religions. The word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin word *religare*, meaning ‘to bind’. True liberation is freedom from anything that binds us. The Direct Path is a process of liberating ourselves from all beliefs, especially the hidden beliefs that may seem so obvious that we don’t consider them to be beliefs, such as the belief that we are tiny, separate, limited entities living in a vast universe. But it also includes beliefs based on what the sages and contemporary non-dual teachers tell us about the nature of ourselves and the universe. What they say is intended to form a starting-point for our own exploration and experimentation – not as a belief-system to be used as a replacement for our old beliefs. Here is a further explanation from Francis:

It is important not to take up any position, because an alternative position is simply another object, another attachment. We use this inquiry to undermine all belief systems, all attachment to concepts of any kind, and this leaves us in the absence of any position, in ‘not knowing’. In this ‘not knowing’ everything changes and everything becomes possible. We take a new direction that cannot be formulated but which expresses itself as a living experience of freedom and happiness.

The place of ‘not knowing’ is the experience of the now. However, it requires understanding, not effort, to drop belief systems to which we are attached.

[Francis Lucille, *The Perfume of Silence*: Just Say ‘Yes’ Inside]

There are two ways in which this dropping of belief systems can arise. First, we can discover that the beliefs we hold about the nature of ourselves or the universe are nothing more than possible models. We have no proof that they are true. Then, just discovering an alternative model which does an equally good job of explaining our experience should be enough to convince us that since we cannot choose between the two models, we have to say ‘I don’t know’. We arrive at ‘not knowing’.

But is that ‘not knowing’, in itself, enlightenment? Is it enough for liberation? Surely there needs to be some new understanding that brings certainty? In a recent retreat, Francis was asked about the difference between a glimpse and understanding. In his reply, he describes how liberation arises from an interplay of certainty and uncertainty – being certain that you can never be certain:

FL: Any form of understanding is the operation of awareness. In other words, it’s obviously the same reality that perceives and that understands. That’s obvious to us. There’s not a perceiver and an understander in us. The differences are about the nature of the understanding, the object. What is it that we understand? ...

One [*type of understanding*] is phenomenal understanding – it’s understanding that relates to phenomena, and this is mostly what is understood as ‘understanding’, like understanding mathematics or engineering or literature or practical issues in life.

And then noumenal understanding is any kind of understanding that refers to something that is not a phenomenon. In other words, something that is not an appearance. Things such as ‘reality’ or ‘I’ or ‘self’ or ‘awareness’ or ‘consciousness’. Now that could be called noumenal in contradistinction to phenomenal understanding.

For instance, if I ask you ‘is there awareness in this moment?’, you say ‘yes’. So this comes from an understanding, and this form of understanding relates to awareness, therefore it’s non-phenomenal. So it’s a form of noumenal understanding. And most human beings, if you ask them the question ‘is there consciousness in this moment?’ or ‘are you aware’, they would say

‘yes’. Are they liberated? No. In other words, it’s a glimpse about awareness, but it’s not a liberating glimpse. So there are many glimpses about awareness. They are important. They are steps towards liberation. But they are not yet liberation.

So any liberating glimpse is a glimpse for instance that relates to the limited or unlimited nature of awareness. So if you are asked a question ‘based upon your experience is awareness limited?’ and if you say ‘I don’t know’, if you truly say ‘I don’t know’ based upon your experience, then you can be asked ‘do you believe that other people know better than you, are better equipped than you to answer this question?’. You may say ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I don’t think so’. In other words, you are the only one who can answer a question about your awareness. And you have the experience of awareness. So if you say ‘I really have no evidence that awareness is limited’, and if that comes from an understanding, that would be a liberating glimpse, although it may not seem to be like that in the beginning.

Another type of liberating glimpse is if I say, for instance, ‘nothing which appears in awareness can give you any information about awareness’. It may sound like something abstract and many people would say ‘well, that’s very nerdy, and I don’t care very much about that’. But for some of us, upon hearing that or upon reflecting upon it, they will say ‘yes, I’m absolutely certain that is the case: that nothing that is perceived by or in awareness can give me any information about awareness, other than that there is awareness, perhaps, but nothing more. And in particular, as a result cannot give me any information as to the limited or unlimited nature of awareness’. So it’s even a more consequential and more general glimpse than the one that I mentioned before.

So these are examples of noumenal glimpses because they relate to awareness, but which have liberating power. So usually when I talk about a liberating glimpse it is a glimpse of this kind.

[Francis Lucille, 21/11/2021 Thanksgiving Retreat Week 1 Day 1]

In our contemporary Western culture, uncertainty is regarded as having little if any value. We want to be certain about everything because then we have a clear basis for making choices and decisions. Uncertainty is scary. In the following dialogue, Francis explains why it is important to value the understanding that there are some things which cannot be proved either way. In other words, to value the certainty of uncertainty:

FL: Let me be very precise. What you can understand with absolute certainty is that you have no evidence that consciousness is separate. And then give value to this understanding. This understanding has high value, but we tend to not really consider it as valuable. I repeat: you can reach a total certainty through the investigation that you have absolutely no valid reason to believe that consciousness is limited and separate.

Q: Yes, but that is not enough for it to show up – I mean the sensation.

FL: You are the one who claims that it is not enough. I am saying it’s enough. But you did exactly what I was suggesting not to do – to just move on and not give it the consideration and the value this understanding deserves. And why? Because we want something else. Because we want an experience which is going to be positive, like a big piece of chocolate, like a big samadhi. But the problem with such an experience is that it will have a beginning and it will have an end, and then it will leave us with a nostalgia when it ends.

So we have to understand that no experience that can come up in the future can put an end to our suffering. The only thing that could put an end to our suffering must be already pre-existing. And in fact it is the realisation that consciousness is universal that can put an end to our

suffering. But the path to that realisation is to be truly open to it as a possibility. And that requires investigation. That requires to reach through the investigation, the certainty that there is no evidence that consciousness is separate.

You see, we tend to want more, and we tend to want more which in fact has little value, and not to really value that which has true value. The consciousness which is hearing these words is the reality of all things.

So we have to ask ourselves: 'Have I reached through my investigation this certainty that I have no reasons to believe any longer that consciousness is personal. Have I reached this certainty or am I still biased in favour of the personal consciousness hypothesis?' Only you can answer this question. But I guarantee you there is a path to reach this certainty that's not complicated. Because all we have to do is to revisit all the evidence we believe to have that consciousness is limited, to see that in fact it is bogus evidence. And then we need to revisit it again and again and again because sometimes in hindsight we feel 'Oh perhaps I've missed something, perhaps I've not been thorough enough, perhaps there is some fallacy in my reasoning'. So we need to go back and check it out again and again and again and then at some point we say 'now I have crossed all the t's and dotted all the i's'.

[June 2016, [Satsang 13 of 24: Do you want a big piece of chocolate or the end of suffering?](#)]

How can this certainty that we cannot be certain that consciousness is limited, put an end to the suffering that arises from ignorance? In a recent satsang, an online attendee posted the following question to Francis on the chat:

Q: My question is about certainty. I think I've heard you say that it is sufficient for liberation that we be open to the possibility that we are not limited, that consciousness is not limited. If I understood correctly, you've also said that the goal of this kind of enquiry we do here is to resolve the fear of our own disappearance, because the end of worries comes from the end of the 'big worry' about death. What I don't understand is why being open to the possibility of being unlimited, is enough. Why don't we need certainty about being unlimited? ...

FL: Because the fear is based upon a belief. Every time we are afraid of dying or of absolute disappearance, it's because we believe that we can absolutely disappear. It's not that we don't know. We are not completely in not-knowing in this case. We are projecting a limitation onto our experience in the now. So if we go back to the now and we cease to conceptualise what we are as a separate and limited object, we see that there is no problem. As long as we are afraid of absolute disappearance, it's because we are not in not-knowing. We pretend to be in not-knowing, but we aren't.

So that's why you have to revisit your question more deeply. Because then if we truly don't know whether we are limited or not, if we truly don't know, then in this not-knowing we are in the now. And the now is an experience which contains peace, which knows itself. These are just words. It's then just about getting used to living in this peace. Because in the beginning it seems unbearable because we want to be back to our usual worries, to our usual sense of limitation which we enjoy so much. And we freak out pretty soon in this not-knowing. We want to know.

What does it mean 'I want to know'? Because even in your question, you want to know. You want to know that you are not mortal. But this 'wanting to know' is itself a non-acceptance of not-knowing. Can you see that? If I want to know, it means I have not fully accepted not-knowing. Then you have to ask yourself, in this desire to know, is there implicitly the belief of a limited knower? In other words, if I truly don't know what I am, do I desire to know what I am?

I'll repeat that in a slightly different form: if I desire to know what I am, doesn't that imply somehow that I already believe to know something about what I am? And therefore, that I am not in not-knowing about what I am?

[Francis Lucille, 13/11/2021 *Living In Absolute Humility*]

This line of reasoning was explored in more detail in the subsequent dialogue with a member of the audience:

Q: To be unknowing is most uncomfortable. It cannot be peace.

FL: Because you know you are not in not-knowing. You know already that you are something that doesn't know and can know in the future, therefore that can change.

Q: Is it possible to be in unknowing and be in peace?

FL: That's what happens when you understand. And then we move away from that. But the understanding that comes from a glimpse of our true nature stops the train in its tracks. But then the train starts moving again. But in this process it has lost some of its energy. At some point it runs out of fuel and remains stranded somewhere.

Q: But wouldn't being open to the possibility you are unlimited take you away from being unknowing?

FL: Yes, if you adopt it as a belief. But if you use it as a tool to detach you from the belief to be limited, it's different. It's just a tool. You envision another possibility so that both possibilities kind of annihilate each other, mutually annihilate each other. It's like matter/anti-matter, electron/positron – pouff.

Q: So how can you be open to the possibility to be unlimited without involving a belief?

FL: You get open to the possibility that you are not limited by investigating all the evidence you have that you, as awareness, as the reality which is hearing these words, is limited. And you discover as a result of this investigation, that you have no evidence, so you don't know. And that's the moment – when you don't know that. But then, instead of living in this not-knowing, you want to know for sure that you are unlimited, and then it means that the mind has come up at that moment.

What we have to understand is that the knowledge that we have in the mind has some usefulness. And it is knowledge which is acquired through repetition. You can never be absolutely certain. So if I see the sun rising in the east every morning, and if I've been the witness of that for 76 years, I can reasonably infer that tomorrow it's going to rise again in the east. So it's the same thing here. So that's why I suggest to conduct experiments, because then if we conduct experiments to verify or falsify the other possibility as to whether consciousness is limited or not, if we dare to live our life from this new perspective, then we get a response from the universe. And each response will accumulate evidence in the same way that every morning when the sun rises, there is an accumulation of evidence. So there is a change in the mind as a result of that.

But what is important is to see that the mind can never be absolutely certain. It can be reasonably certain, but never absolutely certain. So there is a shift that takes place. Because first we understand that the evidence we had that awareness is limited, was not reasonable. It wasn't. So we debunk that. After we have completely debunked it, it has become obvious to us that it was absolutely irrational. So we start with a clean state, by which I mean we start at the

level of the mind, at the level of this cumulative acquisition of knowledge through repetition of experiments. We start from a clean state in which we truly don't know because the evidence we have so far is bogus. So we don't know. We are: 'it could be 50% this way and 50% it could be that way'. Then we are open. We conduct one of the experiments that I suggest, then it tips the balance into the new perspective. So now we are 49%/51%. Then we conduct more experiments, but we never reach 0%/100%. We can reach 0.1%/99.9%. For all practical purposes, it's sufficient. ... So we have to understand that we can shift from a situation in ignorance when we are 99.99% certain that awareness is limited, to a situation which – on the level of the mind – we are 99.99% certain that it is unlimited. That completely changes our life.

It is only the pretention of the mind, the lack of humility of the mind that wants to be 100% certain. It will never happen. So we'd better understand that it's not possible for that to happen. Why? Because the mind doesn't have a direct access to awareness. So in order to know something about awareness, we need to have direct access to awareness. When I say 'the mind doesn't have direct access to awareness', I mean that the mind experientially is made of phenomena, and phenomena are not the glimpse of our true nature. So through phenomena, we can get this 99.99% certainty and the 0.01% certainty, we can finish it off with a glimpse, which is always available, if needed. To be very practical in your life, once you have reached this preponderance of evidence that awareness is not limited, that would be Plan A. So you live your life from this assumption. But if needed, you always have Plan B which goes directly to the experience. Conduct one more experiment.

[Francis Lucille, 13/11/2021 *Living In Absolute Humility*]

Contemplation

It's OK to know something about truth provided that that which you know about truth is that it is unknowable.

[Francis Lucille, 22/11/2021 Thanksgiving Retreat]