



(Opposite)
Buddha in Cage, Wutai Mountain, Shanxi Province, 1998
From the series *The Chinese*
by Liu Zheng

Just When You Think You're Enlightened

Temporary experiences such as flashes of bliss or clarity can be encouraging moments in your practice, says **Andrew Holecek**, but only if you know how to handle them. If you don't, beware. They can be traps.

Sooner or later it's going to happen—it might be the very first time you meditate or only after years of dedicated practice, but someday you're going to have a spiritual experience. These experiences come in many forms, ranging from simple tranquility to radiant ecstasy. In their fullest expression, they are spiritual earthquakes that can transform your life. The Tibetan sage Marpa shared one such experience:

I was overwhelmed with joy. The hairs on my body stood on end, and I was moved to tears... My body was intoxicated with undefiled bliss... There dawned an experience beyond words.

—from *The Rain of Wisdom*,
translated by the Nalanda Translation
Committee

At more modest levels, they can manifest as the total cessation of thought, an out-of-body experience, or sensations of bliss and clarity. You might have an experience of profound meditation, or of union with the entire cosmos, and say to yourself, "This is it! This is what I've been waiting for." Like the endorphins released in a runner's high, these experiences are the meditator's high. And they are addictive.

These events are a time for celebration—and a time for concern. They're cause for celebration because they can be genuine markers of progress. You're getting a glimpse into the nature of mind and reality; you're starting to see things the way they truly are. You're waking up. But such experiences are also cause for concern precisely because they feel so good. Surprising as it may sound, the spiritual path is not about making you feel good. It's about making you feel real.

Spiritual experiences can be the sweetest honey covering the sharpest hooks. Because they can be so transformative and blissful, it's almost impossible not to grasp after them. You want more. That's the hook. And anytime grasping is involved, even if it's for a spiritual experience, you're back in samsara, hooked into the conditioned world of endless dissatisfaction.

Spiritual experiences are by-products of meditation. The problem is that we think they're the *final* product of meditation. Traleg Rinpoche said, "The main cause of misperceptions regarding meditation experience is that after the loss of the initial fervor, we may forget to focus on the essence of meditation and its purpose and instead place more and more emphasis on the underlying meditative experience itself."

Spiritual experiences are called *nyam* in

Tibetan, which means “temporary experience,” and every meditator needs to be aware of them. Nyam is set in contrast to *tokpa*, which means “realization.” Nyam is like pleasant vapor. No matter how good it feels, it always evaporates. Tokpa is like a mountain. It stays. A nyam always has a beginning and an end. One day you soar into the most heavenly meditation, but eventually you drop back to Earth. There are no drop-outs with authentic realization.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche refers to nyams as “meditation moods” and says, “Nyam has thickness; tokpa is light and fine. The problem is we like thickness more; it’s more substantive and satisfying.” We like the substance of our moods.

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Nyam and tokpa are themselves the last two phases of a three-phase process of complete assimilation or incorporation of dharma: understanding, experience, and realization. This shows us that experience is indeed a good thing, a necessary but *intermediate* phase in absorbing the dharma. We start with understanding, which is traditionally referred to as a patch because eventually it falls off. With study and practice, understanding develops into experience, which is like the weather—it always changes. With sustained practice, experience matures into realization, which like the sky never wavers. This is the three-stage process of full embodiment; it is how we ingest, digest, and metabolize the dharma until it almost literally becomes us.

If you relate to a nyam properly, it blossoms into realization. If you don’t, it rots and becomes the most subtle and serious of all spiritual traps. Tai Situ Rinpoche said that you can get stuck in a nyam for an entire lifetime. More commonly, people waste precious years thinking that because they had a spiritual experience they’re enlightened, when in fact they’re merely shackled to a nyam. If you’re attached to your grand experience and start to identify with it, you have simply replaced a chain made of lead with one made of gold. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said:

Meditators who run after experiences, like a child running after a beautiful rainbow, will be misled. When you practice intensely, you may have flashes of clairvoyance and various signs of accomplishment, but all they do is foster expectations and pride—they are just devilish tricks and the source of obstacles.

—from *Journey to Enlightenment*,
by Matthieu Ricard

Attachment to anything, no matter how spectacular, is still attachment.

I have a special interest in nyams because I, too, have been hooked. The first nyam to get me was the experience of nonthought. This caught me when I was introduced to Transcendental Meditation nearly forty years ago. As my TM instructor guided me into meditation, I slipped into profound meditative absorption. For the first time in my life, I felt fully awake without a single thought running through my mind. I had never thought such a blissful state was even possible.

What made the experience so striking was the contrast of having arrived for my instruction feeling speedy and anxious, and then within thirty minutes dropping into a state completely free of thought. It was like diving below choppy waves into tranquil deep water. Because the contrast was so dramatic, I thought I had attained some level of enlightenment. It took me years to realize that this is a common experience and that I was far from enlightened.

The good news was that I had tasted an aspect of the awakened mind and wanted more. The experience inspired me to pursue meditation with gusto. I began a daily practice that hasn’t waned in four decades. The bad news was that I tied myself in knots trying to reproduce that experience. I had set a bar that was ridiculously high and caused me all sorts of unnecessary anguish when I couldn’t measure up.

Relating to Spiritual Experience

Because these exalted states are so delicious, it’s hard not to cling to a nyam. On one level, they’re just spiritual candy; having some of these sweets is okay now and again, but feasting on them will make your meditation sick.

How do we properly relate to a nyam? Let's say that you have an experience of bliss in your meditation. It's okay to celebrate it. Give yourself a pat on your back. But then let it go. *Reinstate the conditions that brought about the experience in the first place.* In other words, most of these experiences arise when the mind is open, spacious, and relaxed. William Blake, in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, wrote:

*He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.*

If you grasp after the event and try to repeat it, that contraction around the experience ironically prevents it. In order to let realization come, we first have to let experience go.

Another aspect of improper relationship is talking about the experience. It's very tempting to share, proclaim, or even advertise your awakening, but it's important to check your motivation. Ask yourself, why do you want to do this? Do you want others to know how realized you are? If so, let your actions speak louder than your words. Live your awakening. Don't voice it.

Spiritual experiences often arise in the sanctuary of silence, and they should be kept in that sanctuary. There is a reason for secrecy in the traditions. If you remain silent, the experience tends to stabilize and mature. The nyam evolves into tokpa. If you talk about it, the experience trickles away. The nyam degenerates into a distant memory. Don't be a leaky container and dribble onto others. Keep your experience hermetically sealed so it doesn't spoil.

It may be okay to share your experience with intimate spiritual friends; after all, it could inspire them. But even here, always check your motivation first. When people talk about their experiences, they usually just want them to be confirmed. The one person you should talk to is your teacher or meditation instructor. An authentic teacher will keep you on track by telling you the experience is neither good nor bad, or by ignoring you, or encouraging you to let it go.

During one long retreat, I had another nyam. When I came out of retreat, I raced to share my

"realization" with my teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche. As I shared my enlightenment experience, he yawned and looked out the window. My so-called "awakening" was putting him to sleep! When I was done, he spoke about a topic that had nothing to do with my experience. I came in all puffed up with my nyam and left punctured and deflated. It wasn't what I wanted, but it was exactly what I needed.

When you talk about your experience inappropriately, you transform opportunity into obstacle. The blessed event flips into a cursed one. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche said that talking about spiritual experiences is like being in a dark cave with a candle and then giving your candle away—you're left in the dark. This is one way to tell the difference between a truly realized master and one stuck in a nyam. True masters never talk about their realization; those infected with a nyam are happy to talk. As Taoism puts it, "He who speaks does not know. He who knows does not speak."

The essence of a proper relationship to spiritual experience is silence and release. Keep your mouth closed and your heart open. Use the experience to inspire you to keep going, but go forward without the nyam holding you back. Relate to whatever arises—the good, the bad, and the ugly—with equanimity. That's how experience matures into realization.

Since spiritual experiences can be so ecstatic, and the grasping correspondingly extreme, sometimes our fingers need to be pried away from the nyam. Khenpo Rinpoche said that you nurture meditative experience by destroying it. Patrul Rinpoche echoed this advice:

The yogin's meditation improves through destruction... When experiences of stillness, bliss, and clarity occur and feelings such as joy, delight, or pleasant sensations arise, you should blast this husk of attachment to experience into smithereens.

—from *Lion's Gaze: A Commentary on Tsig Sum Nedek*, by Khenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche

What's blasted is not the experience itself but our grasping onto it. Tsoknyi Rinpoche also



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points out, “Ordinary people don’t get enlightened because they don’t meditate. Yogis don’t get enlightened because they don’t stop meditating.” They can’t get enough of their high.

There is no tyranny as great as the tyranny of success—material or spiritual. Success leads to pride and attachment. Nyams *are* markers of success, but the tyranny of that triumph can boomerang. When nyams are solidified, they must be defeated. Honest meditators invite that defeat; charlatans shun it.

Guru vs. Guruism

There’s another reason why it’s dangerous to talk about spiritual experiences. When you talk

about your spiritual experience, you reify it and begin to identify with it and believe it. The more you talk, the more you convince yourself that something special really did happen. Worse still, others might start to believe it and feed the reification. Word of your awakening can spread like a virus, and before you know it, everybody may become infected with strains of your nyam.

When this happens, a subtle codependent relationship develops between “master” and disciple. The disciple unwittingly enables the “master” by revering their nyam (and projecting their psychological issues onto the “master”); the “master” then enables the disciple by showering them with attention (and similarly gets tangled in a swarm of their own projections and shadow elements). They think they’re lifting each other up, but they’re actually pulling each other down. Everybody buys into the experience of the “master,” and soon a cult is born. A “guru” has been forcefully delivered into the world.

This is not the beautiful birth of a realized guru but the deformed birth of guruism. Guruism is based on the spiritual experience of the “master,” and the cult is all about spreading that experience like a disease. Everybody catches the fever and wants to have the experience. These “gurus,” in an effort to protect the nyam and their exclusive role as its transmitter, often quarantine their disciples from outside influences. They claim they’re protecting their disciples, but in reality they’re just defending their own egos and empire. The Branch Davidians, Jonestown, and countless other cults have followed this classic formula. It’s another expression of grasping after elite experiences, a natural consequence of a nyam run wild.

The danger in confusing authentic gurus with guruism is that both involve surrender. Surrender has a powerful place in spirituality, if you surrender to the proper authority. When you intelligently surrender to a guru, their pure realization can pour into your open heart. The result is awakening. If you ignorantly surrender to guruism, that tainted experience can also penetrate your heart, and the result is often catastrophic.

In my years on the spiritual path, I have seen many teachers cemented to their nyam. There’s no doubt that many had genuine spiritual experiences, but there’s also no doubt that they were

superglued to that experience. These “masters” tend to pop up in the West, where spirituality is ruled by convenience and instant gratification, and where the need for disciplined practice is too often supplanted by the desire for rapid results.

Because nyams are desirable, they are marketable and they sell. Who wouldn’t pay for an experience of bliss, clarity, or nonthought, the three most famous nyams? Teachers stuck in a nyam also sell, because they often exude an aura of the nyam itself. They usually extol the extraordinary and ecstatic aspects of meditation and easily snag others just as they’ve been snagged. Their experiences sound so delectable, so “spiritual,” that it’s tempting to follow their bliss. I saw one such “master” who glided toward her throne, draped in white silk and surrounded by her flock of adoring students. She spoke in a seductive voice about the euphoric nature of her awakening. To me, she was clearly stuck in the nyam of bliss.

Teachers stuck in a nyam tend to work alone, and while they may have studied with authentic masters, they either pay lip service to their lineage or jettison it altogether. I know Western “masters” who rejected their own teachers because they didn’t confirm their nyam or otherwise endorse their awakening. The one person who could have put them back on track by destroying their attachment to the experience is dismissed as not understanding their experience.

Once such a “master” gains traction and establishes a following, it’s almost impossible to extract them from their nyam. The enabling is too deep and the success too addictive. It would take tremendous honesty and courage to turn to their adoring students and admit that they’ve all—teacher and students—been seduced into a nyam. It’s much easier to remain stuck in spiritual codependence.

Waking Up from Nyam

In the world of dreams, there’s an event called *false awakening*. This is when someone wakes up from a dream and discovers later that they were still asleep. In other words, they wake up from one level of dreaming into what they think is waking reality, only to then realize that what they’ve woken up to is yet another dream. It’s like in the movie *Inception*, where there are dreams within dreams, deceptions within deceptions.

As a student of dream yoga, I’ve experienced a number of these false awakenings. It can be shocking when the alarm clock rings and I’m jarred into waking consciousness when I thought I was already awake! It’s equally jolting when someone asleep in a nyam is finally roused from their false awakening. Most prefer to sleep. *False awakening* is a term that describes what happens when people mistake their nyam for genuine *tokpa*.

Those stuck in a nyam rarely submit to the discomfort of being jerked away from their heavenly trap. One way to detect if you’re stuck in a nyam, therefore, is to see how you react when your special experience is interrupted or challenged. If you get irritated, defensive, or angry, you’re probably infected with a nyam.

If you want to look for progress on your path, don’t look for spiritual experiences. Look at your ordinary life. Sogyal Rinpoche says:

The wonder of [enlightenment] is that it is something not exotic, not fantastic, not for an elite, but for *all of humanity*; and when we realize it, the masters tell us, it is unexpectedly ordinary. Spiritual truth is not something elaborate and esoteric, it is in fact profound common sense.... being a buddha is not being some omnipotent spiritual superman, but becoming at last a *true* human being.

—from *Glimpse After Glimpse: Daily Reflections on Living and Dying*, by Sogyal Rinpoche

Are you becoming more kind, patient, and generous? Is your heart opening? Are you more understanding and compassionate? Are you learning how to love? That’s where you’ll find the signs of realization.

There is a place for spiritual highs, but it’s the same place reserved for spiritual lows. Relate to both with equanimity and you will be liberated from them. Left alone, spiritual experiences are wonderful events. They can inspire you to practice more and really lift you up. But if you don’t relate to them properly, they can drag you down.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, “Enlightenment is ego’s ultimate disappointment.” From ego’s perspective, enlightenment is a downer. It will let you down—from the heights of inflated spiritual experience to the plateau of ordinary life, which is where true realization awaits. 