

Buddhism and Vedanta

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James: Note: This email was from a person with firm self-knowledge who is in the *nididhyasana* phase. *Nididhyasana*, a phase that follows firm self-knowledge, popularly known as “enlightenment,” produces the fruit of self-knowledge – direct experience of the self as limitless bliss – by removing deep patterns of behavior that obscure it. The *jhanas* of Buddhism are meditative *sattvic* states of mind that are a great help for *nididhyasana*. This *satsang* eventually enters the always-controversial topic of the nature of enlightenment itself.

Kumar: Hi, James. I recently attended the *jhanas* retreat and really enjoyed myself. For the first time in my life I was able to enjoy meditation and sit still for over two hours and not feel pain and frustration.

I believe that the *jhanas* are powerful techniques to sharpen your mind so that insight might appear, take root and become integrated with your real life. It is also historically used as a tool to burn the mind of conditioning and residual *karma*. The insight is through *vipassana* practice since *jhanas* does not lead to liberation by themselves. I am working backwards since I already know who I am, but it is an excellent set of meditative techniques to deepen your understanding of how the mind works.

A few thoughts:

A. In Hindu tradition, doing *jhanas* would be like doing *tapas*, very useful for stilling the mind, burning *karma* and allowing the self to reflect in a pure mind. Enlightened or not, the mind needs to be carefully monitored all the time. In my personal experience doing *tapas* or *jhanas* is essential for maintaining equanimity and a calm, tranquil mind. I also realized the connection between the *pranayama* exercises taught in *raja yoga* and connecting to the non-experiencing witness through breath practice. It was a very powerful feeling knowing that breath can help connect the mind to the non-experiencing witness in a radically different way. Of course the assumption is that you already know that you are the non-experiencing entity.

Actually, any meditation practice or scriptural study should suffice, but one advantage of doing *jhanas* is the bliss the mind feels while meditating. It would be the Buddhist equivalent of *bhakti yoga*. Also, in these deep absorption states, the knowledge that I am limitless awareness will stick better and continue to grow.

B. There is some confusion in Buddhism about awareness/self and non-self as presented by Vedanta. When I asked the teacher if the *jhana* arises in the mind or awareness, he had no idea what I was talking about. Nobody ever asked this question before. Also, I asked who is the recognizer of the *jhana* state because to recognize that you are in *jhana* there has to be an element of recognition, otherwise you will have no idea what state you are in. Recognition necessarily has to happen in the mind because it is an instrument of the self and the mind is insentient, except insofar as it is illumined by awareness.

Anyway, I found it odd that this obvious fact was lost to them. Maybe the concept of

no-self is misinterpreted by Buddhists as a non-recognizing entity. I don't know, but I wish they just said that it was awareness or the mind illumined by awareness. I had a big discussion with my Zen teacher after the retreat, but it seems in Buddhism they dance around the fact.

C. That said, I have no doubt it is a powerful practice, and stilling the mind allows one to see the conditioning of the mind as a whole. I can bet easy money that the choiceless awareness that Krishnamurti talks about is using the practice of *jhana* to still the mind so that at some point in time the spark of awareness catches fire and ignites.

Maybe if you sit long enough and are an intelligent person, the insight that you are awareness might arise but Vedanta is easier. Historically, Buddha had to differentiate himself from the Vedic culture, so it is entirely possible that he articulated the same concepts slightly differently. I am pretty sure when Buddha said *anatman*, he meant that there was no permanent experiencing entity, which is correct.

James: Yes, it seems Buddhists in general are clueless about the self. Buddhism, like Yoga, is meant for doers so they will be knowledgeable about various states of mind, but not about the self, because the self is beyond perception. Doers rely exclusively on perception as a means of knowledge. Your observations of the *jhanas* practices are interesting, but there is one rather big piece of perhaps unintentional ignorance. It is impossible to "connect" with the non-experiencing witness. Tell me why. If you can't I will explain it.

Kumar: I don't think it is possible to "connect" with the non-experiencing witness either, because it is unobjectifiable.

The whole concept of a personal *jiva* arises from the non-experiencing witness itself, so there is no need for the *jiva* to connect with the non-experiencing witness. The *jiva* is non-separate from awareness. Awareness is the ground of being, in a manner of speaking, and if reality is non-dual there is no need to connect with anything.

I don't think that the Dzogchen people are trying to connect to the non-experiencing witness. I am pretty sure that Buddha and the Tibetan *lamas* were smart enough to know that essential fact. My understanding is that they focus more on the various righteous living practices after understanding awareness. After enlightenment, life can become very boring, so you need to make up stuff. Look at all the arguments between the Kevala Advaita Vedanta, Advaita Vedanta and Ajati schools.

It seems there is some understanding of the non-experiencing witness awareness in Buddhism if this statement by Timothy Conway is correct:

"The Buddha actually does very occasionally talk about the Absolute, such as in the *Udana Sutta*, wherein he refers to the Unborn, Uncompounded, Unmade, without which there would be no freedom from that which is born, compounded, made. He also speaks of the Anidassana Vinnana, the 'surfaceless' or 'seamless/structureless' Awareness which is NOT one of the five *khandhas* (Skt: *skandhas*), including the fifth *skandha* of *vinnana* or personal consciousness. His famous refrain in the Pali-language *suttas* is '*n'etam mama, n'eso ham asmi, nameso atta.*' 'This is not mine, this is not me, this is not my Self.' Thus he is pointing back to our Source nature, the Absolute Awareness or One Reality/Self.

This is why the Tathagata Garbha school of Buddhism came in (circa third century CE) to correct a misunderstanding of Nagarjuna's 'Emptiness' teaching (*Sunyata*), crucially affirming the *Satyatman* or 'True Self.' This is what later Hua-yen and Ch'an Buddhism refer to as the Original Mind, Unborn Self, etc."

James: This is very interesting insofar as it expands my knowledge of at least one aspect of Buddhism, the nature of the self. It is really not helpful to speak of about "Buddhism" except in a very superficial way, because there is no central doctrinal authority like the *Vedas*. Although Buddha was a Hindu, Hinduism views Buddhism as a heterodox Vedic path, at best useful for purification of the subtle body, but not useful for *moksa*, because of its dualistic orientation, although occasionally meditators realize the self if their desire to experience is converted to a desire to know. Consequently, Vedanta gives them the benefit of the doubt and calls meditation a "leading error," meaning they discover the self by accident. You are right that Vedanta is much easier because it identifies the self at the outset and views meditation as self-actualization, not as a means of self-knowledge, i.e. "enlightenment."