

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 03-17-2015.

This is another in a series of talks on what I'm calling the Twining Vines of Awakening. The Vines refer to two interdependent processes. One vine involves opening to our own individual lives—the joys and sorrows, the acceptable things and those we wish were not part of our lives—and finding a way to meet it all with some equanimity and kindness. The other vine is the deepening processes of letting go of our usual sources of comfort—sense pleasures and the various ways that we buttress the sense of self—while seeing more and more clearly and deeply the impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty or conditional nature of what we encounter in life, including our usual sources of comfort. I've been exploring the second vine through the model found in the 5th century CE commentary, the *Visuddhimagga* or The Path of Purification.

As part of our practice, we have to distinguish between what will lead us to being entangled with the things that lead to unsatisfactoriness and suffering, in other words with greed, hatred and delusion, and what will lead us to an ability to live with equanimity, kindness and happiness. This is the development of Right View, the first component of the Eightfold Path that the Buddha taught.

We can understand the fifth stage of the Path of Purification, Purification by Knowledge of What Is the Path and What Is Not the Path, as being, at its heart, a matter of coming to develop Right View. In this case coming to understand that directly seeing and knowing the arising and ceasing of all conditioned phenomena is the way ahead. We can also understand the question of our relationship with space or spaciousness, which I discussed last week, as a matter of Right View—how we understand these experiences affects how we relate to them.

As 21st century meditators here in the West, part of this process of developing Right View, sometimes called Right Understanding, is sorting through the attitudes, beliefs and enticements of our culture. Most Western meditators are also exposed to the differing beliefs found in the major schools of Buddhism—Theravāda from South and Southeast Asia, Mahāyana from China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, and Vajrayana from Tibet. These ideas are often mixed together as though Buddhism is one way of understanding and living in the world, rather than a number of different views and methods built on the framework of the Four Noble Truths which was the central teaching of the historical Buddha. To further complicate things, there may also be ideas and beliefs from Hinduism and other

spiritual traditions as well as ideas and practices from Western psychology and growth movements like the Diamond Approach all mixed into the teachings we receive from our meditation teachers.

An influence that I want to begin exploring this evening is what is called non-duality or the non-dual, which has permeated a lot of Western Buddhist thought and practice.

Wikipedia, that great trove of human information and misinformation, states that the term non-duality is used to refer to three things¹:

- first, what is referred to in Mahāyana Buddhism as the non-duality of relative reality and absolute or ultimate reality;
- second, the belief in Advaita Vedantā, a form of Hinduism, that there is one "unchanging reality amidst and beyond the world"²; and
- third, which may be a flip side of the second one, the belief in a non-dual consciousness, or the non-duality of subject and object, which is expressed in Buddhist terms such as "luminous mind, Buddha-nature, and rigpa."³

A simple expression of these non-dual views is a joke I heard years ago: The Dalai Lama is visiting New York. He goes up to a sidewalk hot dog vendor and says: "I want one with everything."

Many of the people who get involved in meditation seem to find the idea that we are all one appealing. There is an attraction or comfort in believing that at some ultimate or absolute level there is no distinction between us or between any living beings. And in the views of many Western practitioners and teachers—I've been known to express things this way in the past too—realizing that one is one-with-everything, without any sense of separateness, is the culmination of Awakening.

Recently the Zen teacher Brad Warner posted on his blog about this belief in and desire for the experience of oneness. I want to quote the example he used. He wrote:

"In the film I HEART HUCKABEES there is a conversation between Dustin Hoffman as Bernard Jaffe (BJ) and Jason Schwartzman as Albert Markovski (AM) that goes like this (I've edited it a bit...):

BJ: 'Say this blanket represents all the matter and energy in the universe, okay? You, me, everything. Nothing has been left out. Alright? All the particles, everything. OK, let's just say this is me, and I'm what, 60 odd years old and I'm wearing a grey suit. Blah, blah, blah. And let's say that over here this is you and, I don't know, you're 21,

you've got dark hair, Etc. And over here this is Vivian, my wife and colleague. And over here, this is the Eiffel Tower, right? It's Paris! And this is a war. And this is a museum. And this is a disease. And this is an orgasm. And this is a hamburger.

AM: Everything is the same even if it's different.

BJ: Exactly! But our everyday mind forgets this. We think everything is separate, limited. I'm over here. You're over there. Which is true, but it's not the whole truth because we're all connected. Because we are connected. We need to learn how to see the blanket truth all the time right in the everyday stuff. And that's what this is for.

AM: Why do I need to see the blanket thing all of the time in the everyday stuff?

BJ: Well, you wouldn't want to miss out on the big picture, would you?

AM: Nah uh.

BJ: When you get the blanket thing you can relax because everything you could ever want or be you already have and are. Does that sound pretty good?

AM: That sounds very good!"⁴

First I want to comment on the statement: "Because we are connected. We need to learn how to see the blanket truth all the time right in the everyday stuff." This is a pretty common view among spiritual people. And many people take the idea of seeing what is sometimes called Absolute or Ultimate Reality as the true goal of Buddhist practice. But when we look at the Pāli suttas we don't find this. What we find is the Buddha presenting a whole framework of pragmatic practices—the Gradual Path—focused on freeing ourselves from greed, hatred and delusion.⁵ I'll explore this further in another talk.

It certainly is possible to have experiences of oneness. Sometimes they seem to arise spontaneously. And they can also arise as part of deep states of concentration.

One of Brad Warner's comments about this is that people come to think that not only should they have an experience of this union or oneness they should be able to stay within that experience. The attitude he talks about is probably based in the belief that to experience oneness is to be Awakened, which is mistaken. Having an experience of oneness can be a powerful, transforming experience. But for most people it is not enough to free them from getting entangled in greed, hatred and delusion.

Perhaps a greater danger of the experience of oneness and the belief that it is the goal of practice, is that it prevents one from carefully investigating the experience and seeing that

this experience of oneness is also an impermanent and conditioned state of mind. It prevents one from seeing for oneself that it is not the path.

The thing that seems most helpful is to continue to notice for oneself when greed, hatred and delusion arises in one's own life, and to see whether trying to obtain oneness is a satisfactory solution to the dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness and suffering in one's life.

© Philip L. Jones, 2015

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Non-Dualism", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nondualism>, downloaded 2015-03-13@8:37 a.m. CDT.
2. Wikipedia, "Brahman", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman>, downloaded 2015-03-13@8:39 a.m. CDT.
3. Wikipedia, "Non-Dualism"
4. Warner, Brad. "The Blanket Thing," Hardcore Zen blog, published Feb. 19, 2015, <http://hardcorezen.info/the-blanket-thing/3323>, downloaded 2015-03-13@9:48 a.m. CDT.
5. Bhikkhu Bodhi. "Dhamma and Nonduality," Access to Insight, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_27.html, downloaded 2015-03-17 @ 9:02 a.m. CDT