

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 03-24-2015.

I've been doing 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, especially those things we turn to for 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. Several weeks ago we reached the completion of the fifth of seven stages of the Path of Purification, Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is the Path and What Is Not the Path. Part of realizing in one's own experience what is and isn't the path, is finding that even some of the most beautiful, powerful and seemingly transformative experiences that one has encountered in meditation can become obstacles if one gets attached to them, if one craves and clings to them.

I've stepped out of the Path of Purification model over the past few weeks, to explore how the ideas and experiences associated with spaciousness and facets of non-duality can also become obstacles to freedom when one is practicing within the Theravāda Buddhist practice tradition.

As I mentioned last week, the term non-duality is used to refer to three things<sup>1</sup>:

- what is referred to in Mahāyana Buddhism as the non-duality of relative or conventional reality and absolute or ultimate reality;
- second, the Advaita Vedantā belief that there is one "unchanging reality amidst and beyond the world"<sup>2</sup>; 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, expressed in Buddhist terms such as "luminous mind, Buddha-nature, and rigpa."<sup>3</sup>

Last week I quoted some dialogue from the movie *I Heart the Huckabees*. In the dialogue a blanket is being used to express the view that the universe is ultimately non-dual or one. I want to start by repeating a couple of parts of that:

"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.

...

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?"<sup>4</sup>

Now this movie dialogue is just that. So I'd like to share a few quotes from actual contemporary teachers of this non-dual perspective.

This is from an American teacher whose given name was Steven Gray, but who now goes by the Sanskrit name Adyashanti.

"The aim of my teaching is enlightenment—awakening from the dream state of separateness to the reality of the One."<sup>5</sup>

"... The truth is that you already are what you are seeking. You are looking for God with his eyes. The truth is so simple and shocking, so radical and taboo that it is easy to miss among your flurry of seeking."<sup>6</sup>

And this is from Tony Parsons, another contemporary non-dual teacher:

"All that manifests is always and only the appearance of Source—the apparent universe, the world, the life story, the body-mind, feelings, the sense of separation, and the search for enlightenment. It is all the one appearing as two—the no-thing appearing as everything."<sup>7</sup>

This gives you a sense of how they talk and think, and that the movie dialogue was actually pretty accurate.

So let me repeat a sentence from the dialogue: "When you get the non-dual nature of reality you can relax because everything you could ever want or be you already have and are." If you're like me, it is easy to get caught up in the part that says "you can relax

because everything you could ever want or be you already have and are." But I think the more crucial part is at the beginning "When you get the non-dual nature of reality..."

Adyashanti has said, about "getting it":

"When I first started teaching, I wanted to believe that all someone would have to do is have the awakening experience and off they would go. Now I know there is much more to it. I found that many people do have that essential, experiential awakening to who and what they are, to the absolute, and yet those who have that experience very rarely become free."<sup>8</sup>

"You are the ultimate source, and everything is perfect unity and everything out there is actually you, equally. So inherent in this revelation of unity is the realization that there is no such thing as an 'other.' There is no one else because it is all ultimately one's own self.

"I've known people who have had this perception, and then the first thing they do is return to living life as if there were an other. They live life as if there is a personal me and a personal you, even though they have experientially glimpsed that this is not true. So, in many cases, experiential understanding is not enough."<sup>9</sup>

So even in such non-dual approaches, having an experience of oneness is not enough. One has to work at living into this understanding of all being one, which means working with one's perceptions and thoughts, and working at letting go of the experiences that are part of the sense of self and other, such as greed and hatred.

In my view, a danger of the non-dual approach is that, having had a glimpse of oneness, then assuming that one has now "got it" and there is nothing else to do, no further work to do. Along with that there is even the belief that there is nothing one can do to change the way things are or the way they are going to be.

I have known and know a fair number of people who are attracted to this non-dual perspective. Some of them, I'm pretty sure, have had some glimpses of oneness. Some of them stopped practicing, believing that practicing was just an expression of the delusion that there is a seeker and something to seek. Yet when I speak with them they still tell me of experiences that seem to me to involve greed, hatred and delusion. Some of them have also come to believe that one has no control or influence over what happens, so there is nothing to do and nothing one can do to alter any of their life circumstances.

Although Adyashanti now teaches a kind of sudden realization of the non-dual, his own history suggests we follow a different path. He practiced quite intensively in the Zen tradition for about ten years. It's said he had a number of transformative experiences before he began teaching.<sup>10</sup> Yet after his Zen teacher invited him to teach, he adopted the Advaita Vedanta approach essentially expecting his followers to experience the insights he has had without doing the work that he did.

The experiences of spaciousness and oneness that I've talked about over the last three weeks can involve powerful and useful experiences. They can open us to an experiential understanding of perspectives that are deeper or broader than anything we might have known before. But if we take them to be the end of the path, it is easy to get lost and to remain caught in the factors that actually lead to our stress, struggle and suffering.

From the Theravāda Buddhist perspective, the path isn't about having or being these deep experiences, it is seeing the ways that these experiences are conditional and impermanent, and consequently not a satisfactory refuge for us. It is about asking ourselves two questions, again and again until the end:

"Am I suffering, am I experiencing unsatisfactoriness?"

and "Is what I'm doing helping to free me from that suffering?"

If we're still suffering, still caught in what is unsatisfactory, then what we are doing is not our resting place. We have more work to do.

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### Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Non-Dualism", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nondualism>, accessed 2015-03-13@8:37 a.m. CDT.
2. Wikipedia, "Brahman", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman>, accessed 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>.
5. Adyashanti. *Emptiness Dancing*, Los Gatos, CA: Open Gate Publishing, 2004, p. 1.
6. *ibid*, p. 2.
7. Parsons, Tony. *As It Is: The Open Secret of Spiritual Awakening*, Carlsbad, CA: Inner Directions Publishing, 2004, p. vii.
8. Adyashanti, *op cit.*, p. 205.
9. *ibid*, pp. 206-207.
10. Wikipedia, "Adyashanti," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adyashanti>, accessed 2015-03-20@1:59 p.m.

