Buddhism and Vedanta

Ram (James Swartz) - April, 2014

Kumar: Dear Ram, I have found that vipassana, the Buddhist meditation technique, is an excellent training for being a witness. It is not true that you just sit in silence staring at a blank wall. In the proper vipassana technique you actually learn to watch… starting with the breath to focus the mind, and then watch physical sensations, including pain (to the level you can tolerate), and then to the subtler thoughts and emotions arising and passing, one’s reactions to things. It really trains the attention to keep vigilant and watch everything arising and passing. I suppose this is training in samadhana but also titiksha and shama. From there it is an easy step to turning the attention around to observe the observer, to watch the watcher. This is where Vedanta comes in.

I speak from experience with vipassana. I have done numerous ten-day courses and one thirty-day. The continuous silence and no communication, including no eye contact, encourages one to keep focused all the time… during sitting meditation, then walking with the focus on the feet, during meals watching the sensations and desires, while taking care of the body, etc. The only “time off” is when we are fast asleep. So we could say we watch the arising and passing of phenomena for 18 hours per day. It’s a pity the Buddhists don’t know Vedanta. But I think more and more sincere ones are now talking about “awareness.” They still don’t like the word “self”!!!

Ramji: It is good to get some reasonable feedback on the vipassana method.

Yes, it is good training, as you say. The problem is that it also trains you to be a doer, a watcher, when you are already a watcher. Additionally, if you know what the self is then you don’t need to learn how to watch because the knowledge turns you into a watcher the minute it comes to mind. Vedanta is deliberate thinking, keeping the idea “I am the witnessing consciousness” in mind at all times. Vedanta is knowledge. If you know what the doer is, you needn’t train it to watch the breath, etc. because it is always watching something. It is reflected awareness, going on without effort 18 hours a day. The Buddhists wouldn’t talk about awareness even if they understood what it means because it would immediately negate all their efforts. Meditation is for doers and it is good for doers but it is very, very difficult indeed for DO-ers to become BE-ers. One develops an identity around one’s practice and the doer claims it is watching its thoughts, not realizing that the watching is automatic – the self reflecting on the subtle body. Vedanta has no quarrel with meditation. It can be a leading error – or not. We see quite a few Buddhists coming to Vedanta these days but I would hazard a guess that anyone who actually understands what Vedanta is and how it works would not go to Buddhism. Actually, one Vedanta guy I know did do about a year in Buddhism – he got fed up with me because I wasn’t paying enough attention to his ego, I think – and came back to Vedanta for the reasons mentioned above.

In the end enlightenment is only what you know, nothing more. This does not sound very sexy or interesting to a doer. Yes, we address the doer but only because it is a part of everyone that needs to be reconciled. But we can build a bridge out of doership if the doer is tiring of doing, which many doers do. My doer is so tired of all the doings that have been thrust on it by my recent fame. It has been thinking of disappearing into the wilderness with a boat and a fishing rod – with my darling Sundari in tow, no doubt. It is fine if there is joy in doing but ultimately there is no joy compared to the joy of being what one is. All the doings are gratuitous insofar as the joy that comes from action is just the joy of the self which is prior to action and always present. Anyway, we love the Buddhists. People think we don’t because we dare to point out the limitations of Buddhism as an efficient means of self-knowledge. You can get there with Buddhism, no doubt, but it is a long, hard slog and the danger, as I said, is the lack of clarity about the nature of the doer and the nature of the self.

They want us to understand emptiness as it is meant to be understood but we want them to understand the self as it is meant to be understood. This war between Buddhism and Vedanta is foolish but it is not going to go away anytime soon because it reflects a deeper problem, the inability to reconcile action with actionlessness, the doer with the self. The link is so strong that only a very dispassionate seeker can resolve it, assuming he or she has the aid of a valid means of self-knowledge.

Kumar: What you wrote about vipassana is absolutely correct. The doer/meditator is the problem. And a spiritual doer is dangerous. There is enough in self-knowledge, the practice of the knowledge, the application of the knowledge to every moment, to be a BE-er.

I meant that the vipassana training was good for the beginning seeker. Vedanta also accepts the doer in the beginning. All of us begin as doers. The seeker with the sense of doership is asked to prepare his mind so that the teaching of Vedanta can be accurately contemplated on as it is taught and meant to be understood. So it is here, in the preparation of the mind, that vipassana is helpful… training in shama, titiksha, samadhana, vigilance. It helps to reduce and break identification with objects, objects being anything other than myself, the witness.

As the knowledge of Vedanta is being internalised, Vedanta pulls the rug out by negating the doer. But because the mind has been prepared, the assimilation of no-doer is automatic and effortless, based on the knowledge that one is pure awareness. About the doer, there is really nothing wrong with the doer as such. It is part of the structure of the subtle body. The problem lies with me, awareness, blinded by maya, forgetting I am awareness and thinking I am that doer. I downgrade myself. Being free of the doer simply means I understand that the doer is one thing and I am something else, pure awareness. The doer is mithya and I am satyam. So for the more mature yogi, vipassana is not necessary. Someone who knows they are pure awareness does not need vipassana at all. Meditation is what he or she is, as pure awareness.

I could never go back to Buddhism, the little that I studied in the forest monasteries in Sri Lanka. It is an incomplete teaching. It is like trying to scratch the nose with the arm going around the back of the head. I think what the Buddha taught and what Buddhism today teaches are not the same. This applies to nearly all religions… Christianity, Islam, even Hinduism. In Buddhism, Nagarjuna is studied more than the words of the Buddha. The reason given is that it is hard to understand what the Buddha said. But that is not so. Nagarjuna was not a meditator, more of an intellectual, and wrote his treatises as such. Anyway, the technique of vipassana is helpful in the beginning. Apparently this technique is mentioned in the Rig Veda but I have no proof of that. If I felt like doing a ten-day retreat now, it would be just to rest and enjoy purely as the pure awareness I am, with minimal effort on attending to the needs of the body-mind. I suppose I am a sannyasi at heart!!

~ Kumar