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EDITORIAL

It is with great pleasure that I announce the publication of the third volume of Indic Heritage and Culture in 2024. Our online journal fosters academic discourse on Indian heritage and culture, catering to future researchers and scholars.

This volume features 17 insightful articles showcasing India's rich cultural diversity. I thank our advisor, Prof. Jeffery D. Long, for his guidance and our editorial team for their tireless efforts. I also appreciate Siddhanth International Publication's exceptional support.

As we continue to explore the depths of India's cultural heritage, we remain committed to fostering meaningful academic discourse and inspiring a deeper understanding of our shared history.

Indrani Choudhury

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Reflections on the Buddha : Historical and Philosophical

(Part Three)

Jeffery D. Long

In the first two parts of this series of reflections on the Buddha, I explored questions about the historicity of the Buddha and the events of his life as described in Buddhist literature, the relationship of his teachings to other schools of thought of his time (the early systems of Jainism, Vedānta, and Yoga), the meaning of the No Self doctrine, and the question of whether Buddhism and Vedānta–traditions at once radically similar and yet diametrically opposed–might point beyond themselves to the same essentiallytrans-linguistic realization of non-duality.

In this third and final instalment, I shall turn to the experience of Buddhism in Japan–and in particular, to my own experience as a Vedāntin traveling in Japan, absorbing the serene atmosphere of Buddhist temples and connecting my sensibility as a Vedāntic practitioner and a scholar of Indic traditions with the realities of Japanese Buddhism. As a Vedāntin who is also a westerner, my thoughts often turn to the question of how Indic traditions are being adapted to life in the west. How much of the transformation that this process has involved is distortion, in which essentials are being lost in translation? How much of it is creative innovation, and no less a part of these ancient lineages than innovations that have already occurred in India long ago? In attempting to respond thoughtfully to these (often politically fraught) questions, perhaps it may be useful to look to another society that has been absorbing and assimilating an Indic tradition–Buddhism–for many centuries, to the extent that many Japanese persons now see Buddhism as an intrinsic part of their national cultural identity.

My Relationship with Japan :

Like many westerners, I have long had a fascination with Japan. In my case, this has been second only to my fascination with India. And also like many westerners, my fascination has been primarily with traditional Japanese culture: the Japan of samurai warriors and Zen monks, of meditation and calligraphy, as well as sword-fighting and the martial arts. Funnily, though, my first exposure to Japanese culture was to the ultra-modern world of Japanese movies and TV series about giant monsters and giant robots: Godzilla, Ultraman, and the less-known (but beloved by me in my childhood) *Johnny Sokko and His Flying Robot*.

As good fortune would have it, I ended up marrying someone who both shared and, in many ways, embodied my interests in both India and Japan: an Indian teacher and scholar of Japanese language and culture. As even greater good fortune would have it, we were both able to secure teaching

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jobs at the same college, where we are now not only life partners, but colleagues. Mahua (my wife), established our college's Japanese program and the two of us together, in collaboration with other faculty members, established our Asian Studies program.

Two of the many facets of my wife's Japanese program that have been a great boon to me personally are the annual events which I describe as the 'book ends' of our summers. Every May, my wife takes a group of students from our college on a three-week tour of Japan, and every August, a group of students from Nihon University, in Japan, come to our college in Pennsylvania–Elizabethtown College–to learn English and experience the culture of America firsthand, a program which my wife directs and in which I serve as her assistant.

These two programs have opened up Japan to me in ways that have been transformative and profound. Each May since 2007 (with the exception of 2011, when our trip had to be cancelled due to the horrific tsunami of that March), I have accompanied Mahua and her students for at least part of their three-week journey, giving a guest lecture on Buddhism and, as my knowledge of Japanese Buddhism has deepened, serving as an informal tour guide in some of the temples and shrines that we visit. We have also stayed back a few times in order to do some more in-depth exploring than is possible with a dozen college students in tow. And each August since 2001, I have met approximately twenty students from Japan, becoming good friends with many, some of whom have returned and stayed with us in our home numerous times, and some who have later hosted us or our American students in Japan.

Thus, through my wife–though India is of course my primary area of expertise as well as the geographic point of origin of my spiritual practice–I have come to be acquainted quite well with Japanese culture, a culture with which I have become no less comfortable than that of India. It has also become a highly useful 'third lens' through which to view both the American culture of my upbringing and the Indian culture of my adoption. I find that very often, people who live between two cultural worlds become consumed by the back-and-forth between those worlds. A third vantage point brings a refreshing objectivity to one's life, and the realization that even a perspective that has been expanded by a deep engagement with two cultures remains, nevertheless, just one limited perspective among many. My wife and I live in three cultural worlds (a point on which every visitor to our home has commented) and we are grateful for the multi-dimensionality that this has given to our life experiences.

A Vedântin in Japan :

From the perspective of the average westerner, one can probably think of no two cultures more different from one another than those of India and Japan. Both cultures have been stereotyped in ways that distort their realities; and critics will astutely and correctly point out that these distortions have served in various ways to advance western interests, and that they continue to do so today. In the worldview in which these stereotypes operate, it is typically India that comes out the loser in a cultural

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comparison with Japan: rich vs. poor, orderly vs. chaotic, 'hyper-developed' vs. 'under-developed,' and so on.

What I have discovered, though, as a Vedāntic practitioner and scholar of Indic religions traveling in Japan, is just how deeply Indian much of Japanese culture truly is: how much it is informed by Dharmic categories and sensibilities. This of course is no 'discovery' of mine. It is well known among the general public that Buddhism originates in India, and well known among scholars that, as Buddhism is transmitted across Asia, it carries with it a wide array of elements of the broader Indic culture in which it originated, including a great many elements that would be more readily recognized as Hindu than Buddhist–like the Indonesian shadow plays depicting episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, or the temples to Lord Visnu and Lord Śiva at Angkor Wat. I am referring here to a more personal sense of 'discovery,' in which one has long known something on an intellectual level, but is nevertheless startled upon encountering it directly. For me, this sense of discovery has been accentuated by the fact that, again, in popular discourse, India and Japan are depicted as one another's 'other,' rather than as civilizations with many deep and enduring cultural connections. The erasure of these connections from the popular imagination, not only of westerners, but of the Japanese people themselves (as well as, no doubt, many Indians) is another example of the colonization of the mind thatstereotypes facilitate. As someone both trained in and, in many ways, acculturated to Indian ways of living and thinking, it was thus jarring to me to, for example, overhear a Japanese tour guide explaining in English to a group of western visitors that the Devanāgarī writing on a temple monument–writing which any reader of Hindi or Sanskrit could easily decipher–was 'Buddhist magical writing.' (To be fair to the tour guide, the writings in question were Tāntric *bīja* mantras. So technically they were 'Buddhist magical writing,' intended to ward off evil. What was striking was the evident absence of awareness of an Indian connection that was blindingly obvious to one versed in Indian culture.)

A more profound impact, though, that the recognition of the 'Indianness' of Japan has had on me during my various travels there has been to create an even greater sense of a personal connection to the sacred as I have encountered it in Japanese Buddhist temples and monastic centers. Now, one may certainly encounter the sacred anywhere, in any cultural context, including those which truly are radically other to whatever one identifies as one's own. I have encountered the sacred in Rome, at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (as well as the nearby Dome of the Rock), in nature, and for that matter, at rock concerts. The encounter with the indwelling divinity in all of existence, which the *Gītā* enjoins us to see everywhere, is a function both of the object or person in which we encounter it and of our own openness to it. But I found, as someone who has taken up a Hindu practice, that there was a clear kinship between what was happening in Japanese Buddhist temples and the *pūjas* I have experienced in Hindu temples, as well as in my own home. For me, this kinship facilitated my sense of the sacrality of these spaces, as well as my sense, as discussed in my last essay in this series, that both traditions–Vedānta and Buddhism–are pointing their practitioners beyond themselves to the experience of non-duality.

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A Non-Tradition-Bound Spirituality :

Older works on Japanese religion will sometimes include figures about the percentage of Japanese people who adhere to particular spiritual paths. I have seen, several times, the claim advanced that roughly fifty percent of the Japanese people practice Buddhism and that the other fifty percent practice Shinto, with a tiny number practicing Christianity or other non-indigenous traditions.

These figures, however, are deceptive, and obscure the reality of Japanese spirituality as I have observed it both in Japan and among our Japanese students in the August program.

What is this reality? It is a reality that can be addressed from at least two perspectives: that of traditional affiliation and that of the question of whether or not Japanese people are even religious at all.

In terms of traditional affiliation, let us look at the fifty-fifty figures for adherence to the Buddhist and Shinto traditions. The reality of Japanese religious affiliation–as well as of traditional Chinese religious affiliation and, in many places and during many periods of history, of traditional Indian religious affiliation–is that it is non-exclusive. That is, the phenomena of what many scholars now call 'multiple religious belonging' and 'multiple religious participation' have been a common element of religious observance across Asia.

One might argue that the very 'multiplicity' being described here is an illusion, an effect of seeing the primary units of religious adherence as the 'semi-fictitious entities' called the world's religions.[1] In other words, for many people–such as most Japanese people throughout history–who engage in such multiple religious participation, there is nothing 'multiple' about it. From their perspective, they have an internally coherent and organic worldview which integrates elements that one might call 'Buddhist,' some that one might call 'Shinto,' some that one might call 'Confucian,' some that one might call 'Christian,' and so on.

Coming from a western perspective, in which religious affiliation is more often, at least until recently, seen as exclusive and absolute, a natural question to ask a Japanese person, if one is aware that Buddhism and Shinto have been the dominant traditions of Japan for many centuries, is 'Do you practice Buddhism or Shinto?' Because another very strong element of Japanese culture is politeness (a specific type of politeness that one can trace to Confucianism), a Japanese person who is asked this question is most likely to pick one or the other of the two options presented. Given that there is a fifty percent probability of one or the other of these options being the case, one ends up with sociology texts on the religions of Japan that tell us that fifty percent of Japanese people practice Buddhism and fifty percent practice Shinto.

The reality is that Japanese Buddhism and Shinto have integrated and interpenetrated one another quite thoroughly during the fourteen centuries since Buddhism was introduced to Japan. Shinto is often presented as the indigenous religion of Japan, as distinct from the Buddhist tradition, which was introduced first by Korean Buddhist monks and then more extensively from China, and of course originated in India. Not a tradition of extensive theologizing or philosophizing, Shinto is focused primarily upon the *kami*, or the spiritual beings who inhabit every part of the natural world. More of a

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practice than a belief, if Shinto has a central teaching, it is that all of nature is infused with spiritual presences. The kami inhabit animals, trees, rivers, mountains, rocks, and–more abstractly–spaces in which one experiences awe and wonder at the beauty of existence. Indeed, the very word *kami* means precisely that which evokes awe and wonder. Kami could perhaps be called 'gods,' and the kami that are associated with major phenomena–such as Susanō, the god of storms, or Amaterasu, the supreme goddess, who is associated with the sun–do indeed function much like the deities of other traditions. But kami are as much forces as they are personal beings. The other central teaching of Shinto, one could say, is that maintaining harmony and balance between the human world and the realm of the kami is essential to human flourishing. Kami are honored in shrines (*omiya*, *jinja*), which are distinguished from temples (*otera*), which are Buddhist establishments. (One does not speak of 'Shinto temples' or 'Buddhist shrines.' This would be a confusion of the terminology, and of the function of these two types of establishment.) At a Shinto shrine, one first purifies one's body by washing one's hands and face with water from a sacred spring near the shrine's entrance. On entering the shrine, one claps one's hands twice, bows, gives an offering of coins to aid in the upkeep of the shrine, and then bows and claps again before leaving. It is in this way that one honors the kami, who inhabits a sacred mirror in the shrine's inner sanctum. (Sometimes the mirror is visible from the vantage point of the visitor, while at other times it is behind an enclosure–much as many Hindu temples keep their central deity behind closed doors in an inner sanctum, with the doors being open only at certain times for *darśanam*, or viewing.) Major life rituals, especially marriage, are conducted by Shinto priests at a shrine, and to encounter a wedding party while visiting a shrine is believed to be a sign of good luck. (When visiting the Itsikushima shrine on the island of Miyajima, near Hiroshima, our group once encountered three wedding parties! Lots of good luck that year.)

Shinto, however, while clearly distinct from Buddhism, at least on an institutional level, cannot be wholly separated from it. The stories of the high kami such as Amaterasu and Susanō, as well as the creation of the islands of Japan by the divine couple, Izanagi and Izanami, are narrated in a set of texts called the *Kojiki*, the closest thing in Shinto to a scripture. But this text was first compiled and set in writing by Buddhist monks. This was long before the development, also by Buddhist monks, of the Hiragana and Katakana systems of Japanese writing, so this text was first written entirely in Chinese characters. The very name *Shinto* is a Chinese name for this tradition. Literally, 'the way of the kami,' the Japanese term for Shinto is 'kami no michi.' *Shinto* is a Japanized form of the Chinese *shen dao*, 'way of the spirits' (just as *zen* is a Japanized form of the Chinese *chan*, which is itself a Sinicized form of the Sansrkit *dhyāna,* or meditation). In fact, that most 'Shinto' of Shinto symbols–the *torî*, or gate of a Shinto shrine, which is often used as a symbol of this tradition–is an adaptation of the *torāna*, the gate of a Buddhist temple in India.Very often, the *torî* is protected by Buddhist guardian deities, and it is similarly not uncommon for Buddhist temples and monasteries to be protected by kami. There are even Japanese Buddhist texts which give extensive lists of Shinto kami that identify these beings with specific Bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Before the Japanese Buddhist sage, Kōbō Daishi (774-835), established the central monastery of the Shingon Buddhist tradition at Mount Kōya, he sought the permission of the guardian kami of the mountain, who appeared to him as a black dog and a white dog. They guided him to the top of the mountain, which he took as a sign of their blessing. They are

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depicted in temple art at the Mount Kōya monastery as a nobleman wearing black and his wife wearing white. The shamanic and nature-oriented character of Shinto is never far from Buddhist practice in Japan, where Tāntric ritual, in particular, has often been employed to ensure the peace and prosperity of the nation. Indeed, historically, this was the principle reason the ruling class in Japan was interested in importing this tradition into their country (not so much out of an abundance of enthusiasm for the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path–though the famed Prince Shōtoku (574-622), often credited with first bringing Buddhism to Japan, was an ardent student of Buddhist philosophy).

The other question that can be raised about spirituality in Japan is the question of whether the Japanese people, on the whole, are even religious at all. I have found a large number, probably the majority, of Japanese people with whom I have discussed this question have told me that they are not religious. Interestingly, however, I have also observed that these same people will not fail to celebrate all of the major Buddhist and Shinto holidays or to visit temples and shrines when given the opportunity (including performing observances such as paying respect to the kami at a shrine or lighting incense at a Buddhist temple).

One interpretation of these observations is that, for most Japanese people, Buddhist and Shinto activities are 'cultural' rather than 'religious,' being performed mechanically, with no element of personal devotion or belief intruding. While this may certainly be the case for many people, though, it is clearly not the case for all, or even most. My own sense, rather, is that when my Japanese friends say they are 'not religious,' what they mean is that there is not, for them, a separate realm of spiritual activity and belief that can be distinguished sharply from everyday life: that the split between the religious and secular realms that is commonplace in the western world does not exist for them. They are also communicating, I think, that they are not fanatical, that they do not believe in following an exclusive path that differentiates them sharply from others. If there is, for Japanese people, something that differentiates them from the rest of the world, it is their sense of being Japanese. I have suggested to some Japanese friends that the religion of people in Japan consists simply of being Japanese, and I have received ready agreement with this proposition.

The westernization of Japan has proceeded in a fashion quite different from that which has occurred in other parts of the world. It has been a highly controlled process since the Meiji restoration (1868-1912) opened Japan to European and American influence. And it is notable that Japan is one of the few nations in the world not to be colonized by western powers, maintaining its independence until the American occupation that followed World War Two. Even under American occupation, there was not a concerted attempt to change Japanese religion, with the important exception of the de-divinization of the emperor and the separation of religion and state under the post-war constitution. The argument can be made, I think, that the division of life into a private religious sphere and a public secular sphere that has penetrated deeply into western consciousness has largely not occurred in Japan. The same goes for the understanding of spiritual life as involving an adherence to mutually exclusive traditions called 'religions': if this is what westerners mean when we talk about 'being religious,' then no, Japanese people are not, for the most part, religious.

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Coming from a Vedantic perspective that is, again, far more familiar with India than with Japan, I have wondered if, in Japan, one is not observing what was also the case in India for most of its history. 'Religions' certainly existed in both countries, in the sense of a sect or lineage dedicated to preserving a particular practice: *shukyo* in Japan, or, in India, *sampradaya*. But *dharma* was simply how one lived life, often drawing upon elements from many distinct but interpenetrating traditions. Even the coming of Islam to India, a tradition which, in its origins, shares with its Abrahamic cousins a strong sense of 'inside' and 'outside' identities, did not obliterate this organically unified conception of life; and indeed, within a couple of centuries, Islam itself became a part of the Indic mix, it being not uncommon for persons to assimilate elements of both Islam and Hindu traditions into their spirituality. The coming of western thought, through colonization, with its bounded sense of religious identity, disrupted this process, and the rise of both Islamist and Hindu nationalisms is its bitter fruit. Japan, perhaps, shows us that another path is possible. All of this, of course, greatly simplifies the historical complexities involved with the histories of both countries. But these are the thoughts that have come to me as I have stood among the crowds at Buddhist festivals and have both observed and participated in the practice of Japanese spirituality.

Experiencing the Varieties of Japanese Buddhism :

Buddhism, of course, came to Japan from India, but through the intermediary of China, and Japanese Buddhism cannot be fully understood without some knowledge, also, of China and its indigenous Daoist and Confucian traditions, both of which made a profound imprint upon Buddhism before it reached the shores of Japan.

The Chinese influence on Japan is far more obvious to outsiders (as well as to Japanese people) than the Indian influence that I have already noted. The Indian influence–on both China and Japan–is no less deep. But it is obscured, as I have mentioned above, by the dominant ideology which has involved an erasure of memory of the extent to which Indic influence can be seen in Japanese Buddhism and in Japanese society more broadly. I would even venture to say that, to the degree that the dominant ideology is racist—, the fact that Chinese influence on Japan is more readily recognized than Indian influence is at least to some extent due to the superficial fact of the physical resemblance that Chinese and Japanese people have with one another.

None of this, however, diminishes the major impact that China had upon Buddhism. Nor does it alter the fact that, when Buddhism was brought to Japan, it was brought as part of a total Chinese cultural package–including Confucian ethics, Daoist aesthetics, and even a system of reading and writing. When we say, therefore, that most Japanese people have historically practiced a combination of Buddhism and Shinto, we are really saying that they have practiced a combination of Buddhism, Shinto, Confucianism, and Daoism; for Japanese Buddhism is inseparable, to the degree that it is an adaptation of Chinese Buddhism, from the latter two traditions.

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The Buddhist traditions that succeeded in China and managed to transmit themselves to Japan were primarily Mahāyāna traditions, though Tântra is an important part of the mix as well. Buddhist monks successfully presented Tântric ritual to Chinese and Japanese rulers not only as a path of personal transformation, but as a means of employing spiritual power for the protection of the state. This not only advanced Buddhism, but transformed it to the extent that the state became a Buddhist preoccupation in East Asia (though it is also the case that analogous developments occurred in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia). It is of course a central concern of Confucianism, as well, that the state be maintained in order to ensure the prosperity of the people.

The primary focus of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the path of the Bodhisattva: a being who is devoted not only to personal liberation, but to the liberation of all beings, even though to work for the good of all requires the postponement of one's own freedom from the cycle of rebirth. The historical Buddha, Siddhartha, or Sâkyamuni, becomes just one Buddha among many in Mahāyāna cosmology, which posits a vast universe that includes not only our realm, but numerous worlds–'Pure Lands'–each with its own Buddha. A pantheon of cosmic Buddhas and celestial Bodhisattvas emerges in whom Buddhist practitioners can find refuge, not only from suffering in the ultimate sense of bondage to samsāra, but from very specific forms of suffering in the material world, such as illness and poverty. As I have explored Buddhist temples in Japan, I have found that many have shops which sell amulets on which are inscribed the names and features of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, each of which has the ability to ward of a particular form of suffering. I am reminded of the Catholic tradition of my upbringing, with its similar 'pantheon' of saints, presiding over everything from childhood illnesses to lost car keys. This also reinforces a sense of the illusory nature of the boundary between the secular and the sacred. I recall a discussion I had with some of our American students who were disturbed by what they saw as the 'commercialization' of religion involved with things like selling amulets. Their sense that the spiritual and the mundane needed to be kept apart struck me as very Protestant. If non-duality is true, then can–or should–these two ever be kept completely apart?

The most popular of the Mahayana cosmic Buddhas in Japan is Amida, the Buddha of infinite light, whose temples and images far outnumber those of the historical Buddha.In the Pure Land traditions, Amida serves as what Hindus would call the *istadevatā*. It is through devotion to Amida and the recitation of his mantra, the *nembutsu*, that one is able to reach *nirvāna*. According to Buddhist teaching, we currently live in the period of the decline of Dharma. Nirvāna is therefore no longer possible in this world, and will not be until the coming of the next Buddha, Maitreya (who is currently a Bodhisattva residing in one of the heavens). Maitreya, interestingly, is represented in Japan as Hotei, the famous 'fat Buddha' that many westerners mistake for the historical Buddha. (Probably the most frequently question I am asked when I speak about Buddhism is, 'If the Buddha fasted, why is he so fat?') Maitreya is depicted as a slender and wealthy prince in Buddhist art from India and Central Asia. In China, though, he comes to be identified with a fat, jolly, and generous deity who carries a bag of gifts for those who call upon him: a Buddhist Santa Claus, as it were (and I have wondered if there

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might be some ancient connection between the two, and between both and Ganesa, who is also depicted as having a pot-belly and as jolly and generous, and often as red in color, as is Hotei). People going to Hotei for this-worldly gifts (and rubbing his belly for good luck) might be seen as another example of the fact that the pursuit of both worldly and spiritual goods, seen by many in the west as incongruous, is perfectly natural from a perspective that does not bifurcate the world into secular and sacred realms.

But back to Amida–one who chants the *nembutsu* with faith and devotion will be reborn in Amida's Pure Land. A universe in which a Buddha is present is one in which the Dharma is still very strong; and in the early Buddhist Pali scriptures of the Theravāda tradition, there are numerous accounts of hundreds and even thousands of people who reached nirvâGa after hearing the teaching of Śākyamuni. Rebirth in Amida's Pure Land is thus a 'shortcut' to nirvāna. It cannot be achieved in our world until Maitreya comes; but one who has faith and devotion in the compassion of Amida need not be reborn in our world. They can be reborn in Amida's realm and then go straight from there to nirvāna. This is an effect of the Bodhisattva vow that Amida made when he first undertook the spiritual path. The nembutsu itself clearly displays its Sanskrit origins: *namu amida butsu*.'Homage to the Buddha Amida.'*Namo'mitābhabuddhāya*.

If Pure Land Buddhism is analogous to the theistic bhakti traditions of Hinduism, then the equivalent analog of Advaita Vedânta is of course to be found in the Zen traditions. Zen, as its name indicates, is focused upon meditation. More specifically, it is based on clearing the mind of conceptual thinking so its original, pure nature can manifest and shine forth. This experience, called *satori*, is at once deeply Buddhist and at the same time displays the interactions of Buddhism with the Daoist tradition in China. Daoism is a tradition aimed at cultivating a sudden and spontaneous awakening to one's true nature. It is not a tradition that emphasizes the concept of rebirth–at least not until it comes into contact with Buddhism, at which time this concept is assimilated to Daoist thought. The point is that, while traditional Indic forms of Buddhism emphasize the gradual nature of the awakening process as taking many lifetimes, the Chinese Chan–and then the Japanese Zen–tradition emphasizes awakening as a real possibility in the present. Philosophically, these two can be reconciled with the understanding that an awakening that occurs in one lifetime–an awakening that is seemingly sudden and spontaneous–is certainly possible by virtue of the fact that the conditions for its occurrence have already been cultivated over the course of many lifetimes.

What is interesting about the Zen perspective, in terms of this emphasis on suddenness and spontaneity, is that, while it does not deny the reality of rebirth, it does shift the focus of the practitioner from the idea of a long-term project of many lifetimes (a prospect that can conceivably be dismaying and demotivating) to the here and now. It could be argued that seeing awakening as something that takes many lifetimes can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Zen approach is not even to engage with this question, but to say, "Wake up! Here. Now. Wake up!"

While my experiences in Pure Land temples and temples devoted to Bodhisattvas bring to mind Hindu temples where *saguna bhakti*, personal devotion to a divinity with form, is cultivated, my experiences in Zen monasteries came the closest, for me, to the *nirguna* experience of Advaita

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Vedânta. At Daitoku-ji, in Kyoto, I encountered not images of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but carefully cultivated gardens, images of empty circles, and, in an especially striking moment that stopped me in my tracks, a simple, stylized version of the *Om* character as it is rendered in Japanese.

I recalled once again my experience on the beach at Cape Cod with my guru in the Vedânta tradition who had said, "See the ocean without seeing the waves." I thought, just as I mentioned in my last essay in this series, that a Zen teacher might say, "See the waves without seeing the ocean," given the differences in these two traditions.

But then, when I looked again at the Om–really looked at it–thought simply ceased. No waves. No ocean. Pure being.

Conclusion :

A Vedântin in Japan feels very much at home. Japan is not India, and India is not Japan; and Buddhism is not Vedânta and Vedânta is not Buddhism. But the experience of non-duality–neither oneness nor separation, but the interweaving interdependence of all–is the golden thread that unites them all.

Reference :

[1]Paul J. Griffiths,
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