

ASCETICISM AND ILLUMINATION

Jeffery D. Long

The Question: The Relationship between Asceticism and Illumination

As a scholar of religion and a practitioner of Vedānta in the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna, the question of the relationship between asceticism and illumination is one which I find to be of both intellectual interest and practical significance. For I am not only seeking, as a scholar, to understand how this relationship functions in the lives of others. I am also seeking, ultimately, to experience illumination myself.

My approach to this question therefore includes both a comparative scholarly and a practical Vedāntic dimension. It is, in other words, a *theological* approach—one that draws upon the intellectual resources of the contemporary academy, but ultimately in the pursuit, not of knowledge for its own sake, but in the service of a spiritual practice and the community to which that practice is vital.

More specifically, my approach could best be characterized as a Hindu process theology. Rooted in the practice and the broad worldview of the Ramakrishna Vedānta tradition, I have found in the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (and other thinkers in the process tradition) an excellent way of articulating the varied teachings of Sri Ramakrishna as a systematic and coherent metaphysic.¹

How does asceticism contribute to the experience that is variously described as *illumination, enlightenment, awakening, or realization*? What is the relationship between ascetic practices and this experience? That there is a relationship is presupposed by a great many spiritual traditions, which see ascetic practices as a necessary (although not a sufficient) condition for the awakening experience. Though not directly productive of the experience of awakening in the way that contemplative practices such as meditation are held to be, they are nonetheless seen as beneficial, and even essential. Why is this so?

In keeping with the eclectic orientation both of my tradition and my own religious background, I shall examine this relationship in a comparative context, with my central focus being on Indic traditions: Vedānta (including both the modern and traditional forms of Vedānta), Buddhism, and Jainism; for different traditions can serve to illuminate this relationship from a variety of perspectives and in a corresponding variety of ways.² I see each tradition as offering a specific insight to the issue of asceticism and illumination.

A particular focus will be upon the Indic concept of the “two truths” as expressed by Sri Ramakrishna, Śaṅkarācārya, Nāgārjuna, and Kuṇḍakuṇḍācārya—representing the modern Vedānta, Advaita Vedānta, Mahāyāna Buddhist, and Jain traditions, respectively. Part of my thesis is that illumination is a radical shift in consciousness from the subject-object mode of perception, typical of the relative, *vyāvahārika* level of truth, to a purified mode of perception, a mode that is free from the subject-object distinction (or in which this distinction is greatly attenuated or profoundly modified), which is called the ultimate, *paramārtha* or *nīścaya* level of truth. In these terms, the question becomes that of the role of asceticism in facilitating this radical shift in consciousness.

I will also address the role of *bhakti* (devotion) in this transformative process and the issue of what Christians would call the relationship between “works” (e.g. asceticism) and “grace” in it (an important issue in Pure Land Buddhism as well). One sometimes notes a tension between practitioners—as well as entire traditions—that emphasize ascetic practice—“achieving” enlightenment through particular works—and those that emphasize a moment of illuminating grace that is not the direct outcome or product of a practice, but that comes most decisively from “beyond”—whether from “outside” the practitioner, as a gift from a transcendent divinity, or from a depth level “within” that is nonetheless well beyond the boundaries of the practitioner’s conscious ego. But even in those traditions in which divine grace is given the primary emphasis, one finds ascetic practices encouraged, not so much as a direct means to enlightenment—in an instrumental sense—but as in some way facilitating the reception of this divine gift. The question, again, is why is this so?

Finally, I will also draw upon my own experiences as a practitioner of Vedānta in my attempt to articulate the relationship between asceticism and awakening as I conceive of it. Briefly, the conclusion to which I find myself drawn, is that the state of awakening is, in a sense, already “there”—a claim many traditions have made. Its attainment is then not so much a matter of reaching a goal or accomplishing a task as creating the conditions in which what is already “there” can be realized, and asceticism is a tool for doing this. In this sense, I am at one with those traditions that deploy the “two truths” doctrine. But I also see an important place for theism and *bhakti* in the enlightenment process.

What is Enlightenment?

What is the relationship between ascetic practice and the experience referred to variously as *illumination*, *enlightenment*, or *awakening*? Why are practices like fasting, celibacy, and simple living held by so many traditions to be helpful—and in some cases, necessary—to the attainment of this experience?

It would be helpful, first of all, to define with some specificity what, precisely, we mean when we speak of *illumination*. As a first attempt, several things can be said about experiences of this kind, as described by practitioners from a wide array of traditions.

The Eradication or Radical Attenuation of the Subject-Object Distinction

Experiences of enlightenment typically involve a degree of transcendence of the sense of a separate subject and object—a *self* and an *other*—that typically characterizes the mundane waking state. The degree of this transcendence of the subject-object distinction can vary amongst practitioners and traditions. That it can involve a complete effacement of the subject-object distinction is affirmed in traditions such as Advaita, or non-dualistic, Vedānta, and most forms of Buddhism, which tend to emphasize either the absorption of the practitioner in an impersonal ultimate reality—or rather, the realization that there was never anything other than this impersonal ultimate reality to begin with—or the absorption of the practitioner into an infinite mystery.³ Such realization, illustrated with metaphors like a drop of water falling into the ocean, is affirmed as a salvific goal in these traditions.

Alternatively, illumination can involve a radical attenuation of the subject-object distinction, as in the experiences of mystical union more prevalent in theistic traditions, in which the ultimate reality is a personal deity upon whom one is wholly dependent. At least in the theistic traditions of the West—the Abrahamic traditions—such an experience is commonly not held to be a realizable goal in this life, or even a proper goal to desire, but is seen as a sign of an exceptional divine grace. Many who have had such experiences have been regarded as saints. But those who have actively pursued it have tended to be marginalized.⁴ On the other hand, it is a central goal of *Hindu* theistic practice.

When speaking of theistic mystical union in contrast with the absorption into an impersonal ultimate reality characteristic of non-theistic traditions, one can say, perhaps, that the subject-object distinction is not so much effaced as collapsed. To use the terms of Martin Buber, it is not that the distinction between *I* and *Thou* is eradicated so much as that the *I* melts into the *Thou*—that the *Thou* becomes, for the *I*, all that there is. There is an *emptying* (*kenosis*) of the self into the other. Of course, something similar can be said about the more impersonal absorption experiences as well. The difference rests, at least to some degree, in the impersonalist claim that the subject-object distinction was never real to begin with, whereas the theist affirms this distinction as a basic metaphysical fact.

Which of these two is “right” is a topic to which we shall return; for it is a major concern of Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching actually to reconcile these two. In the service of articulating the modern Vedāntic reconciliation of the experience of ultimate reality as an impersonal truth and the experience of ultimate reality as a divine personality, in mystical union, I shall draw upon the process conception of multiple ultimate realities.⁵

Finally, the effacement of the subject-object distinction can be nothing more than an ecstatic experience of forgetfulness of self in the face of the profound—whether it be profound beauty, profound goodness, or profound truth. This is an experience perhaps less common to the world’s religions than to more secular pursuits, such as the study and appreciation of nature, or art, or even more basic realms of experience, such as sexuality.

The Rightness of Being

Illumination experiences also involve a deeply felt sense of what could be called the fundamental *rightness of being*, as reflected in the famous “all shall be well” of St. Julian of Norwich, and often described as a feeling of profound bliss or joy. In the words of the contemporary Advaita teacher, Andrew Cohen:

Never having tasted that eternal ground that is always untouched by anything that has ever happened, all we can know in our human experience is a happiness that is fleeting and a deep conviction that life itself is fundamentally limited. But when we have known that ground of being, even if it was only for a few moments, we will never be able to forget it. Indeed, that experience will inevitably determine that the deepest conviction upon which our life is based is that *nothing is wrong*.⁶

In modern Vedānta, the phrase “seeing God everywhere” is sometimes used to describe this experience of all-pervasive goodness.⁷ Saints of many traditions have been sustained by such a realization, or the memory of it, through times of personal trial and suffering.

Personal Transformation

One emerges from illumination experiences with a sense of renewal, profound inner peace, and fresh insight, all of which are reflected in a deep and enduring moral and psychological transformation. The presence of these positive transformative effects and their durability are used by many spiritual traditions as a measure of the authenticity of the illumination experience. “By their fruits shall you know them.”⁸

A topic, to which we shall be returning as we deal with the relationship between asceticism and illumination, is the dynamic in which the ascetic practices and the more general ethical rules that traditions tend to prescribe for those seeking illumination also reflect the spontaneous behavior patterns of those who have attained it. For example, as Christopher Chapple also explores in his article in this issue, there are the vows that are prescribed for practitioners of yoga in Patāñjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*, and the *mahāvratas* and *anuvratas* of the Jains, all of which are prerequisites for higher spiritual attainment. Is the relationship of ascetic practices to illumination such that one becomes an illumined sage by behaving like an illumined sage? Why might this be so? How does it work?

Cognitive Insight

Illumination experiences and their psychological effects often involve cognitive content. The illumination experience itself is described in terms of a specific worldview, and its psychological effects can include a strengthening of one's commitment to a prior worldview (as in a Catholic saint having a vision of Christ), a slight modification of that worldview (receiving "messages" in light of which one makes some alteration to one's existing belief or practice without abandoning it altogether), or a radical shift in it (such that one converts to another tradition, or becomes a "heretic" in one's own).

Beginning with these characteristics, then, we can say an illumination experience is one which (a) involves the sense of self being either effaced or greatly attenuated, (b) is deeply joyful, (c) issues in a positive personal transformation, and (d) can involve, in at least some cases, cognitive content ("insight" or "wisdom"). Let us call a person who not only has had an experience of this kind—or many such experiences—but who deliberately cultivates them, a *mystic*. It is such a person, a person actively seeking enlightenment, who will undertake ascetic practices in its name.⁹

Enlightenment, Liberation, and the Two Truths: Some Indic Perspectives

Turning now from a general discussion of enlightenment in a global comparative context to the specifically Indic traditions, it is important to point out that enlightenment is sought in these traditions not as an end itself, but in the service of the highest goal of all: *mokṣa*, or liberation, from *saṃsāra*, the beginningless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Enlightenment and liberation—*nirvāṇa* and *mokṣa*—are so closely connected that they are often conflated, the two terms being used synonymously, even by practitioners and scholars within the Indic traditions themselves. Enlightenment, or realization, is the state of awareness that is a necessary—and in some traditions, a sufficient—condition for *mokṣa*, the state of freedom from rebirth, the condition of no longer having to be born in a physical body, bounded by the limitations of time and space. We shall see that whether enlightenment is a sufficient condition for liberation has implications for asceticism.

Enlightenment and liberation are spoken of synonymously because—particularly in traditions where enlightenment is both a necessary and sufficient condition for liberation—an enlightened soul is also, necessarily, a liberated soul. But one does sometimes see the two distinguished, as in accounts of the life of the Buddha, in which he first becomes enlightened—thoroughly grasping the causes of suffering and rebirth, and understanding what is necessary to end this process—and then, a mere moment later, cuts off the *āsavas*, or “inflowings” of karmic imperfection that are what actually bind him to *saṃsāra*. This “cutting off” follows soon upon, but is distinct from, awakening.

This analysis suggests a distinction between what could broadly be called gnostic approaches to the relationship of enlightenment and liberation—approaches in which the state of enlightenment is a sufficient condition for liberation, perhaps even constitutive of it—and approaches that suggest that something additional needs to be done, that some act of will must occur above and beyond enlightenment, in order for it to lead to liberation. The former approach, in which enlightenment *constitutes* liberation, is a characteristic of Advaita Vedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism. The latter, in which *nirvāṇa* precedes *mokṣa*, but is not, technically speaking, identical with it, is found in both Theravāda Buddhism and Jainism—though there is a noteworthy exception to this rule in the Jain tradition.

It is in Advaita Vedānta, Mahāyāna Buddhism, and in the teachings attributed to the Jain master, Kuṇḍakuṇḍa (or Kuṇḍakuṇḍācārya) that one finds a strong articulation of the doctrine of the “two truths.” At its most basic, the doctrine of the “two truths” is the doctrine that, with respect to liberation and *saṃsāra*, reality is essentially one. In other words, one does not, upon liberation “escape” from *saṃsāra* to some other realm where there is unlimited happiness and freedom, although one may certainly speak in this way metaphorically. According to the “two truths” doctrine, enlightenment is constitutive of liberation because what *liberation* means is liberation from ignorance, from a false view of reality. The universe in which the enlightened sage lives and the universe inhabited by regular people is the same universe.

The perception of the enlightened sage, however, is not at all clouded by the false, limiting conditions of time, space, and subjectivity. Enlightened sages perceive reality as it truly is in itself—a *noumenal* reality. The rest of us inhabit the same universe as the sages, but we perceive it through the lens of the illusory subject-object distinction—and so *phenomenally*. Liberated beings don't "go" anywhere.¹⁰

In the Advaita Vedānta tradition, the two truths doctrine is exhibited in Śaṅkara's distinction between *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* Brahman. In keeping with the monistic teaching of the *mahāvākyas*, or "great utterances" of the *Upaniṣads*, Śaṅkara affirms that, "All this is indeed Brahman" (*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahman*). The true nature of existence is pure being, consciousness, and bliss (*sat-chit-ānandam*)—unlimited and unconditioned—and so *nirguṇa*: without limiting qualities.

Due to *māyā*, however—which can be translated both as "illusion" and as "creative power"—most of us do not typically perceive the true nature of existence as Brahman, as unlimited being, consciousness, and bliss. We instead perceive a universe of many varied beings, such as ourselves, with limited being, consciousness, and bliss. The universe of time, space, and rebirth is Brahman perceived through the veil of *māyā*, and so *saguṇa*—or *with* limiting qualities. We are liberated when we pierce through the veil of *māyā* with a true knowledge of Brahman. Knowledge, or gnosis (*jñāna*), is constitutive of liberation.

It is not that this universe of time, space, and rebirth is completely unreal. We are told by Śaṅkara that *māyā* is neither real nor unreal. It is ultimately not different from Brahman—since Brahman is all there is. It is not "other" than Brahman.¹¹ But it is also not Brahman as Brahman truly is, in its pure, *nirguṇa* state. But the goal is to move from this realm of the merely relatively real—the *vyavahāra satya*, or relative truth—to the absolute truth—the *paramārtha satya*. It is not, again, that these are different "realms" in a real, ontological sense. The shift, rather, is internal to oneself. It is a shift from a relative and limited perception of reality to an absolute and perfect perception of that same reality.

A similar conception is articulated some centuries before Śaṅkara by Nāgārjuna in the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism.¹² Critiquing trends in earlier Buddhist thought that he takes to be overly reifying, Nāgārjuna asserts the *śūnyatā*—the emptiness or relativity—of all verbal formulations of truth. The ultimate truth realized in *nirvāṇa*, is, according to Nāgārjuna, beyond the reifying grasp of words and conceptual formulations. This even includes fundamental concepts and distinctions, like the distinction between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. Because *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are both of the nature of *śūnyatā*, there really is no properly ontological distinction to be made between them. In the words of Nāgārjuna:

There is no distinction whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*; and there is no distinction whatsoever between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. The limit of *nirvāṇa* and the limit of *saṃsāra*: one cannot find even the slightest difference between them.¹³

There is no separate “realm of *nirvāṇa*” distinct from the “realm of *saṃsāra*.” The apparent distinction between these two arises as a function of whether reality is seen from the perspective of the ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) or that of conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*). The shift from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa* entails a shift from engagement with the limitations of the conventional truth—with words and concepts, or, to use Nāgārjuna’s terminology, with “views”—to the “middle way” (*madhyamamārga*), in which one avoids grasping at either of the alternatives presented by our conventional, dualistic modes of thought and perceives reality as it is—free or “empty” (*śūnya*) of such conceptualizations.

As mentioned previously, the weight of the Jain tradition appears to favor the idea of a distinction between enlightenment and liberation, in the sense that liberation requires a further act of will, of cutting off the intake of karmic energies into the soul, beyond the experience of illumination or awakening. But, like Śaṅkara for the Hindu tradition and Nāgārjuna for Buddhism, Jainism, too, has a champion of the “two truths” doctrine in the figure of Kuṇḍakuṇḍa, who makes a distinction between what he calls the *vyavahāranaya* or “mundane perspective,” and the *niścayanaya* or “absolute perspective,” which he also calls “ultimate” (*paramārtha*) and “pure” (*śuddha*).¹⁴

In order to understand Kuṇḍakuṇḍa's distinction between these two perspectives, one must attend to the Jain doctrine of the complex nature of the *jīva*, or soul. On a Jain account, souls have a substantial, unchanging aspect (*dravya*), characterized by intrinsic qualities (*guṇas*), such as infinite bliss, energy, and consciousness, as well as a constantly changing, karmically determined aspect, which includes their embodiment in physical forms of various kinds and their experiences, from moment to moment, of emotive and cognitive states (*pariyāyas*), release from which is the ultimate goal of the Jain spiritual path. Souls, though many in number (there being as many souls as there are living beings in the universe), are of one fundamental nature, not unlike the nature of Brahman in the Vedānta tradition. Beyond their numerical distinctiveness, the souls are distinguished by their karma, which is understood in the Jain tradition to be an actual physical substance. Kuṇḍakuṇḍa takes the distinction between the soul's essential nature and its accidental karmic distortions as his point of departure.

As defined by Kuṇḍakuṇḍa, the *vyavahāranaya*, or mundane perspective, which could also be called the perspective of epistemological relativity, is the less reliable of the two perspectives, it being the karmically determined lens through which one perceives reality as characterized by emergence, perishing, and duration.¹⁵ It is the perspective, in other words, of us normal, non-enlightened persons who are still trapped in *samsāra* and have not yet experienced the eternal bliss and omniscience that is the true, substantial nature of the soul. If we experience the soul in its true nature, we perceive all things as they really are—the soul being omniscient. Otherwise, karmic matter distorts our vision.

Non-enlightened persons therefore misunderstand the nature of reality, mistaking karmically determined activity for innate soul activity. As Kuṇḍakuṇḍa explains:

The soul does not cause the nature of substance or attribute in material *karmas*. Not causing these two in that [karmic matter], how [can the soul be] the doer of that [*karma*]?

But seeing the modification of karmic bondage by the [auxiliary] cause of [the mundane] soul's thought-activity, it is said from the mundane point of view that *karmas* have been caused by the soul).¹⁶

On the other hand, the ultimate perspective, according to Kuṇḍakuṇḍa—the true or certain (*niścaya*) perspective—is the *niścayanaya*, which perceives the soul in its intrinsic, unchanging nature: as eternally blissful, energetic, and omniscient. This, according to Kuṇḍakuṇḍa, is the perspective the aspirant on the Jain path must try to cultivate. The *vyavahāranaya*, on the other hand, is deluded and must be finally be superseded, the understandings of reality it yields being relative and uncertain. But the *niścayanaya* reveals things as they truly are. The understanding of reality this ultimate perspective yields, in contrast with that derived from the mundane perspective, is true and authentic:

The mundane perspective does not yield the real meaning. But the pure perspective has been said to give the real meaning. The soul dependent on the real perspective is a right-believer.¹⁷

Kuṇḍakuṇḍa’s approach resembles Buddhist and Vedāntic models of salvation, which locate the roots of spiritual bondage in ignorance, or *avidyā*, a false *consciousness* of the true nature of reality, rather than in a state of affairs external to consciousness that *causes* such ignorance, as the Jain tradition affirms with its doctrine of material *karmas* obscuring the true, omni-conscious nature of the soul; for he seems, sometimes, to be saying it is not the bondage of the soul by karmic matter, but rather, the *perception* of it as being so bound, that is the real problem. As W.J. Johnson elaborates, for Kuṇḍakuṇḍa:

...[L]iberation is seen to be attained not by the destruction of that *karman* which (very tenuously) has been said to bring about *moha* [delusion], but by the destruction of *moha* itself through meditation on the essential purity and complete separateness of the soul. In other words, it is lack of knowledge of the true nature of the self which really *constitutes moha*; consequently, it is the knowledge (gnosis) and realisation of the self’s true nature which banishes *moha* (*aśuddhopayoga*) and, by revealing and realising the inherent purity of the soul, accomplishes liberation. The role of material *karman* in this mechanism of bondage and liberation has thus for all significant purposes been forgotten. And it can be forgotten because the logic of the system no longer requires it.¹⁸

With regard to liberation, then, Kuṇḍakuṇḍa seems to take a position—like that of Buddhism and Vedānta—which holds that it is the *transcendence* of the realm of action—of *karma*—through gnosis which leads to liberation, rather than ascetic practice.

The Jain tradition, however, at least in its early form, seems to have leaned quite radically in the other direction.¹⁹ From this perspective then, Kuṇḍakuṇḍa's views could be seen as constituting a major departure from early Jain teaching. Resembling the 'two truths' theories of both Nāgārjuna and Śaṅkara, this approach seems to embrace a Buddhistic or Vedāntic illusionism—or *māyāvāda*—in its account of the character of reality as perceived by ordinary, non-enlightened persons—for ordinary perception is ultimately delusory, and indeed a hindrance to liberation. As we have already seen, by conceiving of such deluded perception, or *moha*, as *definitive* of spiritual bondage rather than as an *effect* of such bondage, Kuṇḍakuṇḍa could be seen to embrace a similarly Buddhistic or Vedāntic gnosticism with respect to soteriology, in contrast with what could be called the 'karmic realism' of traditional Jainism.

As it relates to the question of the relationship of asceticism to enlightenment, the important point here is that the Indic schools of thought which have adopted the doctrine of the two truths have, albeit to varying degrees, tended to downplay the importance of ascetic practice. This is especially true of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in which, in texts such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, the possibility of householders attaining enlightenment—that is, persons who do not take ascetic vows as monks and nuns do—is strongly affirmed. In this particular, and highly influential, text, the householder Vimalakīrti actually takes on the role of teacher to a group of Buddhist ascetics. And although Śaṅkara's Advaita tradition retained a strongly monastic orientation in practice, Śaṅkara does claim that it is the *inner attitude* of renunciation, rather than formal asceticism, that is most important.²⁰

As for Jainism, while the Jain community has maintained a quite strong ascetic orientation, it is perhaps not coincidental that Kuṇḍakuṇḍa's *vyavahāranaya/niścayanaya* distinction has not played a very large role in the subsequent development of the Jain intellectual tradition, despite the great regard in which he and his writings are held.²¹ And Theravāda Buddhism is of course similarly marked by a continued commitment to the ascetic ideal of its founder.

Clearly, the two truths doctrine, if one adopts it, problematizes asceticism; for if what is at issue in the pursuit of enlightenment is not so much a matter of *action* as one of *knowledge* or *gnosis*, then it is possible, at least in principle, for such gnosis to emerge without the practice of asceticism—not as a monk or nun, but as a householder, such as the famous king Janaka, who receives prominent mention in the *Upaniṣads* and is renowned in the later Vedāntic tradition as a *jīvanmukta*—one who has attained liberation while still alive, and while still retaining his role and responsibilities as a king, at that.

Even in the earlier Buddhist tradition, prior to Nāgārjuna’s articulation of the two truths, one finds the assertion that enlightenment is not a product of action. Despite the strong emphasis on ascetic practice that one finds in early Buddhism (at least relative to, for example, Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism), it is never claimed that asceticism *produces* enlightenment. Otherwise *nirvāṇa* would be a product of action, or *karma*, and so subject to the very impermanence from which it is an escape. Enlightenment simply is the way reality really is, once we perceive it without the distorting lens of desire. As the monk Nāgasena explains to the inquisitive king Milinda, “Your majesty, nirvāṇa cannot be made to arise, and no cause for its appearance has been proclaimed.”²²

The two truths doctrine therefore seems to suggest something almost like an idea of divine grace, albeit without a divine agent to bestow it. It seems to suggest, in other words, that enlightenment *just happens*. There is no action that can *make* it occur. It is not a product of karma. It is the mind reflecting the actual nature of reality. In fact, in the *Katha Upaniṣad*, there is a most intriguing verse which suggests that enlightenment is not the product of any action on one’s own part, but is a spontaneous gift from the self, a result of something very much like divine grace: “The self cannot be won by speaking, nor by intelligence or much learning. *It can be won by the one whom it chooses*. To him the self reveals its own form.”²³ Of course—to anticipate the answer to this issue that I will suggest below—one can argue that, although one cannot *make* enlightenment happen, one can train the mind through asceticism to make it a worthy instrument of its reception.

However, it is important to note that the downplaying of asceticism that is made logically possible in a two truths model of enlightenment *can* be overemphasized. While one can argue that traditions such as Jainism and Theravāda Buddhism—which claim that awakening is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation—have also placed a stronger emphasis on asceticism—on *doing* rather than on simply *knowing* or *realizing*—asceticism remains a strong emphasis in practice even in those traditions that accept a two truths model, holding that once one is awakened, one has accomplished what needs to be accomplished, the ontological state of liberation being not metaphysically different from the epistemic state of awakening, enlightenment, or illumination, and the universe itself being fundamentally of the nature of mind, or consciousness. Put simply, the adoption of the two truths model does not so much undermine asceticism in practice as give rise to the question, “Why do it?” This does not mean that answers to this question are unavailable. It simply means we have more thinking to do before we can say precisely what the connection between asceticism and enlightenment is.

Enlightenment and Grace

In terms of the broader typology of enlightenment experiences discussed earlier, all three of the traditions explored in the preceding section can be classified as traditions in which the dissolution of the subject-object distinction in enlightenment is complete. These are not, in other words, traditions of loving mystical union with a personal divine being, but rather, traditions of realization of a nature of reality that was already the case. In Advaita Vedānta, enlightenment is the liberating realization of the illusory character of all but the fundamental, *nirguṇa* nature of Brahman. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is the realization on an experiential—rather than merely cognitive—level that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are *śūnya*. In Jainism, as interpreted by Kuṇḍakuṇḍa, it is the realization of the pure nature of the *jīva* as the ultimate truth, rather than its karmically bound and conditioned states.²⁴ We have also seen that two truths models of enlightenment operate from what could be called a broadly *idealist* ontology, in which reality is of the nature of consciousness.

But we have also seen a verse from the *Katha Upaniṣad* that is suggestive of the other major type of enlightenment experience—the mystical union, realized through the grace of a loving God, the distinction between oneself and whom is a basic ontological fact. Unlike the two truths model of enlightenment, mystical union presupposes a dualist ontology in which real distinctions exist, and are indeed necessary to the experience of the union itself. A mystical union, as conceived by at least the mainstream of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, as well as the theistic traditions of Hinduism—especially the Vaiṣṇava tradition—requires a duality between the practitioner and the divine reality. Such a union is not an effacement through realization of a unity that was actually always already the case, duality being an illusion. It is a real coming together of metaphysically distinct entities. This has been one of the strongest objections that theistic practitioners have consistently given to attempts by practitioners of traditions like Vedānta to assert an ultimate unity of mystical experience. These two types of mystical experience have a basic metaphysical difference. They operate from logically incompatible ontologies.²⁵

This has not only been an issue, as one might imagine, between Western theistic traditions such as Christianity on the one hand and Hinduism on the other. It has also been *the* major source of theological controversy within Hinduism, amongst the various systems of Vedānta. Lesser known in the West than Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta are the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta of Rāmānuja and the Dvaita Vedānta of Mādhva. Reacting to the potential undermining of *bhakti*, or religious devotion, which they perceived in Advaita, Rāmānuja and Mādhva each developed interpretations of Vedānta that asserted the reality of duality. Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita, or “Qualified Non-Dualism,” affirms the ultimate unity of all beings with Brahman, as does Advaita. But Rāmānuja’s is an *organic* unity, a unity into which a real diversity is integrated. Mādhva’s Dvaita, or Dualism, goes even further, making difference a fundamental category of existence. Both systems have acted as theological supports for Vaiṣṇava devotional practice, in which the cultivation of a loving union with the divine rather than an impersonal realization is the ultimate goal.

However, if the two truths model can be said to problematize ascetic practice, this seems even truer of the affirmation of the necessity of divine grace that characterizes theistic systems. If the experience of the divine can only “be won by the one whom it chooses,” then how can any practice on one’s own part—including ascetic practice—be at all effective in its realization?

Again, as with the two truths, this question is not a rhetorical one. But it is one that needs answering, and that returns us to our central issue: What is the relationship between ascetic practice and the experience of enlightenment?

The Two Truths, Grace, and Works: Ramakrishna’s Integral Approach

As a practitioner in the Vedānta tradition of Sri Ramakrishna, I see the various issues we have raised thus far as converging in my Master’s life and teaching. With my eclectic religious background and disposition, and a tendency to see profound truths in a variety of systems of practice and belief, one of the main characteristics that has drawn me to this tradition is its integral perspective, as illustrated in the life and teaching of its founder.

In Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching, based upon his many years of practice and his own experiences—multiple experiences—of enlightenment, through various modes of practice and corresponding worldviews, one finds a convergence of the impersonalist systems of realization, with their two truths model of existence, and theistic systems, with their very strong emphases on loving devotion as not only the key to achieving enlightenment, but as its very essence.

As a process theologian in this tradition, I have also found that if one applies the system of process thought developed by Alfred North Whitehead as lens to interpret the teachings of Ramakrishna, one is able to discern an ontology in which both impersonalist and theistic models of enlightenment can coherently co-exist. The conflicts between their respective ontologies prove, in the end, to be merely apparent.

Finally, and most pertinently to the topic under consideration here, one also finds an answer to the question of the relationship of ascetic practice to spiritual awakening.

Ramakrishna, like Śaṅkara, Nāgārjuna, and Kuṇḍakuṇḍa before him, also teaches a doctrine of two truths. Amongst these three, the thinker whose system Ramakrishna's most closely resembles is Śaṅkara, in that Ramakrishna is explicitly theistic. Buddhism and Jainism not being theistic traditions, at least in the conventional sense, Nāgārjuna and Kuṇḍakuṇḍa do not concern themselves a great deal with the question of God.²⁶

But for Śaṅkara, the universe of time and space, viewed through the veil of *māyā*—the *saguṇa* dimension of Brahman—is a straightforwardly theistic one. God—Īśvara—exists and, like the God of process metaphysics, co-exists with the myriad beings that make up the cosmos, guiding them on their path to liberation—pre-eminently by proclaiming the *Veda* at the outset of each cosmic epoch, which contains the teaching that it is necessary for the spiritual aspirant to internalize in order to transcend the *saguṇa* realm and realize Brahman as the Self within (*ātman*). *Bhakti*, or devotion to Īśvara in a personal form, is, according to Śaṅkara, an effective device for purifying the mind of egotism and leading it beyond the *saguṇa* realm—beyond name and form—to the realization of *nirguṇa* Brahman. The personal forms which Śaṅkara endorsed were the five prominent deities of the Hindu tradition of his time: Gaṇeśa, Śiva, Śaktī, Viṣṇu, and Sūrya (the Sun).

As we have already seen, the complaint of subsequent Vedānta teachers against Śaṅkara's Advaita system was not that it was atheistic (though this charge is sometimes leveled by very hard-core Hindu theists). It was that it subordinated *bhakti* to *jñāna*, or gnosis, and the personal deity to the ultimately impersonal *nirguṇa* Brahman.

The great debate within Vedānta was thus joined between Advaita—with its two truths model of reality, which subordinated the personal to the impersonal and regarded the ontological split between the human the divine as a function of *māyā*—and the various *bhakti* schools of Vedānta, such as Viśiṣṭadvaita and Dvaita—which, like Western forms of theism, emphasized the divide between the human and the divine as fundamental, and which upheld not enlightenment, in a gnostic sense, but devotion, and the grace of God, as ultimately desirable. The aim of *bhakti* is mystical union, and not gnosis.

As we have seen, both approaches raise the question of the role of asceticism. At the same time, however, it must again be emphasized that the renouncer—the *sannyāsī*—is widely esteemed in the traditions represented by both approaches, and remains a highly respected ideal.

Ramakrishna retains Śaṅkara’s basic two truths model of reality—with God and the world on one side and *nirguṇa* Brahman on the other—but, in a move reminiscent of Nāgārjuna, he equates the two. In other words, he does not privilege the enlightenment experience of the Advaitic sage over the *bhakti* experience of the theistic devotee. The personal God and the impersonal Brahman are, for Ramakrishna, simply *different* modes of the existence of the same being. “Kālī,” Ramakrishna’s *iṣṭadevatā*, or preferred form of divinity, “is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kālī. It is one and the same Reality. When we think of It as inactive...we call It Brahman.”²⁷ In a departure from the Advaita tradition of Śaṅkara, Swāmī Vivekānanda, when articulating the kind of spiritual practice that Ramakrishna’s integral approach entails, claims that rather than there being a single supreme *yoga*, or spiritual discipline, all of the yogas presented by the Hindu tradition are valid ways of achieving the goal of realization. Rather than subordinating *jñāna* to *bhakti* or *bhakti* to *jñāna*, Vivekānanda affirms both as appropriate to different kinds of people. The yogas, he claims, essentially correspond to different personality types. One is not superior to another. Each is appropriate to its respective practitioners.²⁸

This, of course, raises a host of metaphysical questions, which I have attempted to address in my larger Hindu process theological project. I shall simply say here by way of summary that if one views Ramakrishna’s claims through the lens of process thought, one can see a way of articulating it coherently by identifying the different modes of the reality of Brahman with different ultimate realities—or aspects of reality as a whole—which are seen as metaphysically necessary to process thought. The traditional Vedāntic system to which this has the greatest resemblance is Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita, which sees Brahman as the Whole—an organic unity underlying the totality of actual existence.

The *nirguṇa* Brahman of Advaita Vedānta corresponds to process philosophy's unmanifest principle of creativity, the principle underlying all actual, temporal existence—the Ground of Being—whereas the personal God is the Supreme Being—the pre-eminent manifestation of the eternal and unchanging creative principle in time and space, and guarantor of the smooth running of the cosmos.²⁹

As it relates to the question at hand, the relevance of Ramakrishna's integral view of the various types of spiritual path (and my process interpretation thereof) is that it means the various types of enlightenment experience—specifically the two main types in the world's religions, the impersonal enlightenment of the sage and the mystical union of the saint—are both metaphysically possible and comprehensible without either one being reduced to the other. They are equally valid ways of experiencing different dimensions of ultimate reality at a depth level which, depending upon which dimension is the focus, either wholly effaces or radically attenuates the subject-object dichotomy upon which our conventional, non-mystical experience is based.

But what does Ramakrishna have to say about the role of asceticism in the process of reaching such an experience of awareness? As we have already seen, whether one is experiencing a state of being that was always already the case—as in the uncaused state of *nirvāṇa*—or an intimate nearness to God, there is a sense in which any action that we take is irrelevant. If *nirvāṇa* was always, in some sense, *there*, and is not produced by action, and if God reveals Himself or Herself to whom S/He wills, what role do we have to play?

Ramakrishna does not spend a great deal of time talking about asceticism, more often emphasizing the importance of *bhakti*, or the ultimate convergence and validity of both gnostic and *bhakti*-based paths. But he does give an image, which is suggestive of the role that asceticism plays in the impersonal absolute and the personal deity revealing themselves. He says, “The breeze of grace is always blowing. Set your sail to catch that breeze.” In other words, we cannot *cause* enlightenment. But we can create conditions to facilitate its occurrence.

Conclusion: Asceticism and the Spiritual Path

My own experiences of practicing in the tradition of Ramakrishna—and prior to formally taking *dikṣa*, or initiation, into this tradition as well—have again and again confirmed for me the fundamental truth of this tradition’s broad and open approach to the spiritual path. The central practice of the Ramakrishna tradition is meditation. As an initiate, I cannot go into detail about what, precisely, is involved in Vedāntic meditation.³⁰ But I can say that it incorporates elements of *jñāna* and *bhakti*—of Advaitic non-dualism and theistic dualism—to produce an experience that affirms the impersonal and the personal character of ultimate reality.

Meditation, in all traditions, involves both active and passive dimensions. One engages in certain deliberate actions—sitting in a particular posture, breathing in a specific way—but one is fundamentally *about* becoming receptive. In the meditative state, one is setting one’s sail, which is one’s mind, to catch the breeze of either the divine grace or the divine essence. To use another, contemporary metaphor which I once heard (I do not recall the source), meditation is like tuning a radio to catch a frequency. As with *nirvāṇa* and divine grace, one is not *making* the radio frequency happen. It is already *there*. It is being broadcast from beyond. It is already in the atmosphere. But one tunes one’s mind in order to catch that frequency and be transformed by it, in the ways described earlier in our first attempt to describe what illumination is like.

Asceticism, for me, is part of tuning the radio, or setting the sail. One does not, in engaging in ascetic practice, *make* anything happen. But one prepares oneself for what is to come, making oneself receptive to the divine reality that one knows is there, but that one longs to experience as a lived reality, rather than a mere abstract doctrine or inspiring idea. Specifically, the illumination experience involves an effacement or attenuation of the subject-object distinction, the sense of difference between oneself—one’s bounded and limiting ego—and either the totality of Being or the Supreme Being (depending upon the type of practice in which one is engaged).³¹

If the goal one wishes to attain involves the eradication of the ego, then a very useful and effective way to ready oneself for that experience is to begin working on the ego here and now. And this, of course, involves self-denial: getting the ego used to being told “No.” Ethical virtues in general exist to prepare us for enlightenment. In the words of Pravrajika Vrajaprana:

All moral codes are based upon the ideal of unselfishness: placing others before ourselves, forcing the ego to play second fiddle. Following selfish desires is always a detriment to our spiritual life. Whether the action is great or small, any selfishness will make the veil of ignorance thicker and darker. Conversely, any act of unselfishness, however great or small, will have the opposite effect.³²

Truly enlightened mystics—those who have experienced the transforming power of the ground of Being, or of intimacy with the Supreme Being—are generally free from ego. Or they wear their ego lightly, as Ramakrishna is said to have done. By imitating people of this kind, we can cultivate the insight that enables them to live this way spontaneously.

By denying self, even in small ways, we undercut the foundation of ignorance: the ever-grasping, ever-desiring ego. This is where the paths of *jñāna* and *bhakti* coincide—and is also why, arguably, ascetic practice is so widespread in the world’s religious traditions, whether they be theistic, devotional traditions, or gnostic wisdom traditions. True gnosis issues in the realization that the separate self—the ego—is a delusion that cuts us off from the deeper underlying unity of existence. And true devotion issues in the surrender of the individual self to the universal, divine self—to God, the “self” of the universe—such that we can say, “Not my will, but thy will be done.” Ascetic practice facilitates both, for it is a training of the ego in the habit of denying itself, of letting go of its desire to constantly be indulged. The more the ego is indulged, the more difficult it will be to overcome. But if it is already attenuated through the practice of renunciation—whether complete, as in the life of the full-time ascetic, the monk or the nun, or partial, as when laypersons, such as myself, deny ourselves in various small ways—then the divine breeze can catch our sails all the more easily, and carry us to the other shore of liberation.

End Notes

¹ In drawing upon process thought my approach is similar to that of Christian process theologians such as Jay McDaniel, who is also a contributor to this issue. When I say that process thought has given me a way to articulate Sri Ramakrishna's teaching as a coherent and systematic metaphysics, this is not in any way to denigrate the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. But he did not teach a systematic metaphysics. He taught in a fashion that was spontaneous and delivered with the particular needs of his interlocutors in mind. My understanding is that an implicit system of thought does underlie his teachings—one that is particularly conducive to an explication in process philosophical terms.

² On the eclectic character of modern Vedāntic discourse, see Brian Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 1999). While my approach may appear very much like that of secular, comparative scholar of religion, in that I draw upon a variety of traditions and cultural sources in exploring the question of the relationship between asceticism and illumination, such a pluralistic approach is a characteristic of the constructive theological method employed in modern Vedānta, with its claim that there are many valid paths to God-realization. For my own eclectic religious background, see the autobiographical introduction to my book, *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (London, I.B. Tauris Pvt. Ltd., 2007). Briefly, before identifying myself as a Vedāntic Hindu, I was raised Roman Catholic, and have had, in the course of my journey, varying degrees of involvement with Buddhism, New Age thought, and the Baha'i Faith, as well as engaging in some amount of study of all the major traditions. I was drawn to Hinduism from an early age by its ability to assimilate the insights of many faiths.

³ One must be cautious to avoid conflating Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta as essentially "saying the same thing." Although the modern Vedānta tradition sees the Advaitic goal of *Brahmanirvāṇa* and the Buddhist goal of *nirvāṇa* as not fundamentally different, one must respect the choice of practitioners to express their goals and experiences in their own ways. Vedānta is quite clear that even if that into which one is ultimately absorbed is *nirguṇa*—without qualities—it is nevertheless an "it"—a reality (albeit not an "object" in the conventional sense). Buddhist traditions, on the other hand, tend to be more non-committal on this topic—or even to take the contrary position. As a Vedāntin, I interpret the Buddhist experience through the matrix of a Vedāntic worldview. When I hear a Buddhist speak of *nirvāṇa*, I typically hear someone speaking about the same reality that I call *nirguṇa Brahman*—or refraining from speaking about it as a "reality" for principled reasons that are fully in harmony with my own Vedāntic understanding. But if, as a scholar, I am interpreting the Buddhist experience *to others*, I have a duty to add that seeing Buddhism and Vedānta as finally converging upon the same unitive mystical state is a function of my own perception, and not an interpretation of their experience with which all Buddhists would agree (though I know many who do).

⁴ The pursuit of mystical union with the divine in Western traditions is often looked upon as perilous, with those who have claimed to have attained it sometimes expressing their experiences in ways that have run afoul of established orthodoxy. Where a gulf between the human and the divine is posited as a fundamental doctrine, the pursuit of experiences in which that gulf is radically bridged can lead one into dangerous waters. Where a more intimate relationship is held to obtain between the human and the divine, as in Hinduism, such a pursuit is actively encouraged as a desirable and salvific goal.

⁵ The implications of the idea of multiple ultimate realities is for religious pluralism have been explored by the process thinkers John Cobb and David Ray Griffin in a number of their respective writings, culminating in Griffin's major edited volume, *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), to which I contributed the article "Anekānta Vedānta: Toward a Deep Hindu Religious Pluralism" (130-157). I expand upon this idea further in *A Vision for Hinduism*. Briefly, by "multiple ultimate realities," process thinkers are referring to the three distinct but metaphysically necessary beings making up existence: its abstract nature or "ground," the actual entities making up the universe, and the divine consciousness that coordinates these into a coherent reality.

⁶ Andrew Cohen, *Embracing Heaven and Earth* (Lenox, MA: Moksha Press, 2000), 72. Cohen is also the founder of the magazine for which this section of my article is named: *What Is Enlightenment?*

⁷ This is also the title of a book by a deeply respected monk of the Ramakrishna Order, Swāmī Śrāddhānanda (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1996).

⁸ Matthew 7:16

⁹ Finally, I should probably note that I am talking about a *waking* experience; for a good night's sleep can also have all of the characteristics just described. And if sleeping is an experience of illumination, then we are all mystics! This idea reminds me of my wife's dissertation advisor in India, who used to joke about his daily nap, calling it his "sleep yoga." This is not a point that I intend to pursue in this article, but I would suggest that the many similarities between mystical states and sleep states might indicate a deep truth about the human condition (and the condition of all the species that require sleep for their physical and psychological well being): namely, that it is essential for all of us—and not only the great mystics of the world's religions—to return regularly to our common Source, and to experience absorption in the ultimate Reality from which we have all emerged and to which we shall all return.

¹⁰ "The Vedānta never contended that there was a noumenal and a phenomenal world. There is one. Seen through the senses it is phenomenal, but it is really the noumenal all the time." (Swāmī Vivekānanda, *Complete Works* V, 279)

¹¹ Brahman being "One alone, without a second." (*ekam evādviṭyam*)

¹² Most scholars agree that Śāṅkara lived in the 8th century CE. Nāgārjuna is generally located around the 1st or 2nd centuries CE.

¹³ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ* [*Root Verses on the Middle Way*], 25:19-20, as translated by John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations* (Third Edition) (Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2008), 162. The original Sanskrit reads: *na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam/na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam/nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ koṭiḥ saṃsāraṇasya ca/na tayor antaram kiṃcit susūkṣmam api vidyate*

¹⁴ The dating of Kuṇḍakuṇḍa's life is controversial. He is likely to have lived some time between Nāgārjuna and Śāṅkara. All three figures, interestingly, are believed to have lived in the southernmost portion of India, and it is tempting to speculate that all three are tapping into a common south Indian intellectual tradition that emphasizes the notion of two levels of truth—absolute and relative.

¹⁵ Umāsvāti, *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 5:29. For the mainstream Jain philosophical tradition, this is the definitive statement of the nature of existence, though for Kuṇḍakuṇḍa this is only true of the relative, *vyavahāra* level of reality.

¹⁶ *Samayasāra* 111-112. All translations from Kuṇḍakuṇḍa are based on that of J.L. Jaini (Jaini 1930). *dravyaguṇasya cātmā na karoti pudgalamayakarmāṇi/tadubhayam akurvaṃstasmin kathaṃ tasya sa karttā/jīve hetubhūte bandhasya ca dṛṣṭvā pariṇāmam jīvena kṛtaṃ karma bhānyate upacārmātreṇa* Sanskrit scholars may find it odd that the terms *jīva* and *ātman* are both consistently translated here as ‘soul,’ being used as functional synonyms, and that *pudgala* is translated here as ‘matter.’ In the better known tradition of Vedānta, the *jīva* and the *ātman* are *not* identical—with the *jīva* typically referring to the empirical soul or ego—the ‘self’—and the *ātman* referring to the ‘Self,’ which is ultimately identical, at least in Advaita Vedānta, with Brahman, or Ultimate Reality. Similarly, *pudgala*, in the Buddhist tradition, refers to the concept of the ‘person,’ introduced by the Pudgalavādins, or ‘Personalists,’ to account for the sense of ‘self’ to which the combination of the five *skāndhas*, or aggregates (matter, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness) gives rise according to early Buddhist thought. (To the rest of the Buddhist tradition, this concept looked too much like the self, or *ātman*, denied by the Buddha in his *anātman* doctrine, and the Pudgalavādins came to be regarded as heretics.) In Jain texts, however, *jīva* and *ātman*—and even *paramātman*—are typically synonymous. Both refer to the inherently omniscient, blissful, and energetic entity whose nature is obscured by karma and the experience of the true nature of which is constitutive of liberation—the entity which I am calling the ‘soul.’ In Vedānta, by contrast, *paramātman* is the ‘supreme soul’—God as dwelling within all beings. *Pudgala* refers, in Jainism, to matter—specifically, to atomically constituted matter, in contrast with non-atomic forms of *ajīva*, like space (*ākāśa*) and the principles of motion and inertia (*dharma* and *adharmā*).

¹⁷ *Samayasāra* 13 *vyavahāro’bhūtārtho deśitastu śuddhanayaḥ/bhūtārthamāśritaḥ khalu samyagdrṣṭir bhavati jīvaḥ*

¹⁸ W.J. Johnson, *Harmless Souls: Karmic Bondage and Religious Change in Early Jainism with Special Reference to Umāsvāti and Kuṇḍakuṇḍa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1995), 141

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 4-45

²⁰ This, at least, is the argument of Roger Marcaurelle, which I find quite compelling; for he has meticulously examined the corpus of Śāṅkara’s Sanskrit writings. See Roger Marcaurelle, *Freedom Through Inner Renunciation: Śāṅkara’s Philosophy in a New Light* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000).

²¹ See my forthcoming *Jainism: An Introduction* (I.B. Tauris Pvt. Ltd.) as well as my unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Plurality and Relativity: Whitehead, Jainism, and the Reconstruction of Religious Pluralism* (University of Chicago, 2000).

²² From the *Milindapañho* [*Questions of Milinda*], translated by John S. Strong in Strong 2008, 118.

²³ *Katha Upaniṣad*, 2:23, translated by Valerie J. Roebuck, *The Upaniṣads* (Penguin Classics, 2003), 280. Emphasis mine. *nāyamātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhayā na bahunā śrutena/ yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyastasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanuṃsvām*

²⁴ Recent scholarship suggests that rather than speaking of “Kuṇḍakuṇḍa” in the singular, we should, rather, make reference to a Kuṇḍakuṇḍa tradition, the writings attributed to this sage being perhaps the product of a series of teachers continuing a particular Jain school of thought. This historical point, however, is not especially pertinent to the point of this paper.

²⁵ Though, as we shall see, this logical incompatibility is not insurmountable if both are qualified not as total worldviews, but as valid frames of reference within a larger, more comprehensive system—which is what I take Ramakrishna’s Vedānta to entail.

²⁶ Though if one extends the meaning of “theism” to encompass the idea of a supremely sacred reality, these traditions, and these thinkers, would be, in that broad sense, theistic. They are certainly not atheistic in the contemporary sense, which involves commitments to materialism and nihilism as well as the denial of a creator deity. While these traditions have no place for a creator deity, Kuṇḍakuṇḍa dedicates considerable discussion to the “Supreme Self” (*paramātman*). And the *dharmakāya*, the cosmic “Truth Body” of the Buddha—discussed in one of Nāgārjuna’s texts and elaborated upon considerably by later Buddhist thinkers—certainly bears strong resemblances to Vedāntic concepts of Brahman as the Unmanifest, which appears as the many deities of Hinduism (as well as all other beings and the world itself).

²⁷ Swāmī Nikhilānanda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942), 134

²⁸ See Anantanand Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda’s Reinterpretation of the Vedas* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

²⁹ For a more detailed and adequate account of this process interpretation of Ramakrishna see *A Vision for Hinduism*, particularly the second chapter, entitled “Ramakrishna Meets Whitehead” (Long 2007, 59-100) and my article in Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman’s *Handbook of Process Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 262-273.

³⁰ I will say, though, in response to some of the Freudian interpretations of Ramakrishna’s life and teaching that have become fashionable in the last few years, that there is nothing about it that is even remotely sexual.

³¹ Or in some cases, both, where one senses the intimate presence of the Beloved, but also the eternal vastness of the Beyond.

³² Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Vedanta: A Simple Introduction* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1999), 38-39