Thai Forest Tradition and Advaita-Vedanta
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Abstract
From a purely theoretical perspective the non-dual teachings of Advaita Vedanta are seen as irreconcilable with the teachings of Theravada Buddhism. However the teachings of the Masters of the Thai forest tradition, based entirely on their own practice of the Buddha’s path which culminated in their liberation, seem to be quite in consonance with those of the Advaita Vedanta. In this paper an attempt has also been made to show how some of the so-called ‘enigmatic and obscure’ Suttas of the tipiṭaka also point in the same direction. The points of difference between the traditions are also brought out too.

1. Introduction
When viewed as two philosophies which originated in ancient India, Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist philosophy are seen as irreconcilable. The eminent scholar monk, Bhikkhu Bodhi, summarizes this perspective quite emphatically:

For the Vedanta, non-duality (advaita) means the absence of an ultimate distinction between the Atman, the innermost self, and Brahman, the divine reality, the underlying ground of the world. From the standpoint of the highest realization, only one ultimate reality exists — which is simultaneously Atman and Brahman — and the aim of the spiritual quest is to know that one’s own true self, the Atman, is the timeless reality which is Being, Awareness, Bliss. Since all schools of Buddhism reject the idea of the Atman, none can accept the non-dualism of Vedanta. From the perspective of the Theravada tradition, any quest for the discovery of selfhood, whether as a permanent individual self or as an absolute universal self, would have to be dismissed as a delusion, a metaphysical blunder born from a failure to properly comprehend the nature of concrete experience. According to the Pāli Suttas, the individual being is merely a complex unity of the five aggregates, which are all stamped with the three marks of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. Any postulation of selfhood in regard to this compound of transient, conditioned phenomena is an instance of “personality view” (sakkāyadīṭṭhi), the most basic fetter that binds beings to the round of rebirths. The attainment of liberation, for Buddhism, does not come to pass by the realization of a true self or absolute "I,"

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but through the dissolution of even the subllest sense of selfhood in relation to the five aggregates, "the abolition of all I-making, mine-making, and underlying tendencies to conceit."

Before proceeding on to bring out the teachings of the Masters of the Thai forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism, a few points on the powerful critique quoted above. Consider the last sentence. The Advaita Vedanta also recognizes that four of the five aggregates - the body, feelings, perceptions and the volitional formations - are ‘not mine, not me, not myself’. In fact, the famous “nirvana shatakam” of Adi Shankara reads:

I am neither the mind, nor the intellect, nor the ego, nor the mind-stuff;
I am neither the body, nor the changes of the body;
I am neither the senses of hearing, taste, smell, or sight,
Nor am I the ether, the earth, the fire, the air;
I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute–

I am without form, without limit, beyond space, beyond time;
I am in everything; I am the basis of the universe; everywhere am I.
I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute–

The difference clearly lies in the last line of these verses, viz. the Advaitic assertion that in reality we are the pure consciousness (personified as the Śiva) which has the nature of ‘sat-cit-anand’, or existence, knowledge and bliss. This is termed as the Atman or the Self, and its realization is referred to as self-realization which leads to complete freedom from the saṃsāric cycle. This pure consciousness is postulated to be the unborn, deathless, formless substratum from which everything emerges and into which it eventually subsides.

In contrast, the Buddha clearly specifies that the viññāṇa, which is usually translated (including by Bhikkhu Bodhi too) as the consciousness, is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, and so the two traditions seem to be irreconcilable.

However the Thai masters seem to bridge this gap, via their own understanding and practice of the teachings of the Buddha which led to their complete liberation. Let us see what they have to say on this issue of ‘pure consciousness’.

2. Thai Forest Masters’ Teachings
Venerable Ajahn Sao Kantisilo (1861-1942) and Ajahn Mun Bhūridatta (1870-1949) are recognized as the progenitors of the Modern Thai forest tradition. Ajahn Mun was the

3 http://www.ramakrishnamath.in/completesources/?p=66
pupil of Ajahn Sao but the teacher had such respect for his disciple that he treated him as his peer. Both attained all the abhiññas associated with the Great Arahants of yore, and attained full liberation. Many of their disciples, notably Ajahn Maha Boowa and Ajahn Chah also attained full liberation. Their teachings, as recorded by their disciples, form the basis of the following presentation.

Ajahn Maha Boowa has written a spiritual biography4 of his teacher Ajahn Mun wherein he records his experiences in great detail. Describing in detail the three stages of attainment of full liberation, the description of the final stage reads:

At that moment, he felt as though he had died and been born again into a new life – a uniquely amazing death and rebirth. The quality of awareness, intrinsic to this transformation, was a state of knowing that he had never before experienced, even though it had always been there, unchanging. Suddenly, then, it became apparent – spectacular, and inconceivably amazing…. Citta and Dhamma were then one and the same – ekacitta ekadhamma. The true nature of the citta is synonymous with the true nature of Dhamma. Unlike relative, conventional reality, there is no duality. This is vimuttidhamma5 pure and simple. It is absolute in its singularity and devoid of any trace of relative, conventional reality within. This pure Dhamma is fully realized only once. It never requires further perfection.

In the Appendix II of this book Ajahn Maha Boowa’s comments about citta are recorded, which further expound on this realization. An excerpt from these and the explanation of citta in the Glossary:

Of foremost importance is the citta, the mind’s essential knowing nature, the fundamental quality of knowing that underlies all sentient existence... The true nature of the citta is that it simply “knows”. There is no subject, no object, no duality; it simply knows. The citta does not arise or pass away; it is never born and never dies. Normally, the “knowing nature” of the citta is timeless, boundless, and radiant, but this true nature is obscured by the defilements (kilesās) within it. Through the power of fundamental ignorance, a focal point of the “knower” is created from which that knowing nature views the world outside. The establishment of that false center creates a “self” from whose perspective consciousness flows out to perceive the duality of the “knower” and the “known”. Thus the citta becomes entangled with things that are born, become ill, grow old, and die, and therefore, deeply involved it in a whole mass of suffering.

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Arahants, being khīnāsava, are free of all contamination. Their knowing is a pure and simple awareness without any adulteration. Pure awareness, devoid of all contaminants, is supreme awareness: a truly amazing quality of knowing that bestows perfect happiness, as befits the Arahant’s state of absolute purity.

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5 Ajahn Maha Boowa equates it with sa-nādīsasa-nībāṇa
Although all conditioned phenomena without exception are governed by the three universal laws of anicca, dukkha, and anattā, the citta’s true nature is not subject to these laws. The citta is conditioned by anicca, dukkha, and anattā only because things that are subject to these laws come spinning in to become involved with the citta and so cause it to spin along with them. However, though it spins in unison with conditioned phenomena, the citta never disintegrates or falls apart. It spins following the influence of those forces which have the power to make it spin, but the true power of the citta’s own nature is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is a quality that lies beyond disintegration. Being beyond disintegration, it also lies beyond the range of anicca, dukkha, and anattā and the universal laws of nature.

If we overlook the linguistic connotations of the terms ‘Self’ and ‘Atman’ used by advaita, we see that this description of the ‘pure awareness’ experienced by an arahant is not much different from the goal of Advaita Vedanta. Its goal is realization of the ‘Atman’, which is stated to be the pure consciousness, of the nature of existence-knowledge-bliss (sat-cit-anand), and leads to breaking the cycle of birth and death! This realization of ‘the essential knowing nature of the citta – existing alone, by itself, in all its amazing splendor’ has been reported by many other monks of the Thai forest tradition.

**Some quotes:**

**Ajahn Dune Atulo**[^2]:

“Knowing is the normalcy of mind that’s empty, bright, pure, that has stopped fabricating, stopped searching, stopped all mental motions—having nothing, not attached to anything at all.”

**Ajahn Chah**[^3]:

… that which watches over the body is consciousness – just this ‘one who knows’, this single awareness…… This consciousness is just one but when it functions at different places we call it different things. Through the eye we call it one thing, through the ear we call it another. But whether it functions at the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind it’s just one awareness. Following the scriptures we call it the six consciousnesses, but in reality there is only one consciousness arising at these six different bases. There are six ‘doors’ but a single awareness, which is this very mind.

**Ajahn Sumedho**[^4]:

We are not trying to confirm somebody’s view about the Pāli Canon, but using the Pāli Canon to explore our own experience. It’s a different way of looking at it. If you investigate this a lot, you begin to really see the difference between pure consciousness and when self arises. It’s not hazy or fuzzy — “Is there self now?” — that kind of thing; it’s a clear knowing. So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around “Ajahn Sumedho.” It takes off into orbit — my views, my feelings and my opinions. I can get caught into that world, that view of me that

[^2]: Phra Rājavaragūṇa [2016], Phra Ajaan Dune Atulo, Translated from the Thai by Thānissaro Bhikkhu Metta Forest Monastery, CA, U.S.A.

[^3]: Abott, Wat Nong Pah Pong [2001], The Teachings of Ajahn Chah, p137, Ubon, Thailand.

arises in consciousness. But if I know that, then my refuge is no longer in being a person, I’m not taking
refuge in being a personality, or my views and opinions. Then I can let go, so the world of Ajahn Sumedho
ends. What remains when the world ends is the anidassana viññāṇa – this primal, non-discriminative
consciousness; it’s still operating. It doesn’t mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends, or that I’m
unconscious.

Ajahn Amaro

The quality of ‘knowing’ is an attribute of the fundamental nature of reality… the primary attribute of Dhamma
is wakefulness… There is that which is aware of all the mental activity of perception, of thought, of feeling
– and that awareness is not going anywhere. That awareness is outside of the world of space and time.
That awareness is perfectly still. It is not something which is subject to movement or change. It is the ever-
present quality of knowing – ‘the one who knows,’ that which is aware………This knowing quality is free
from bondage to the realm of time and space. It is un-located.

The above quotes clearly bring out that the Thai Forest tradition masters of the yore, and the living masters of present,
do affirm the existence of a pure-consciousness, the basic ever-present faculty of knowing. This they do primarily on the basis of the actual
experience of reflective meditations. As Ajahn Sumedho puts it: ‘This is Luang Por Chah’s “Pen paccattam”, something that you realise for yourself’. And he doesn’t see it
as contradicting the scriptures; rather he indicates references in the Tipiṭaka (which have traditionally been ignored as being ‘an enigma’ or ‘obscure’) which point to the
existence of unlimited, objectless consciousness10. These are discussed in detail in section 4 after a brief exposition in the next section clarifying the terms viññāṇa, citta,
mana and sati used in the suttas.

3. Reflections on viññāṇa, citta, mana and sati
In the suttas we find many Pāli words referring to the mind – viññāṇa, citta and mana
-- which often get conflated; and this does create confusion. An attempt is being made
here to remove this confusion.
First of all we need to appreciate that these terms (viññāṇa, citta, mana and sati) describe various aspects of mental functions, all of which emanate from the
fundamental quality of sentience in all living beings, sometimes called the life force or
the vital force, or in colloquial language, as just being conscious. These are not four
different ‘things’. The basic ability of ‘knowing’ which is found in all sentient beings

9 Ajahn Amaro [2016], The Breakthrough, p49, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery Publications, UK.
10 This point is also brought out by David Loy in his paper “Enlightenment in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta:
Are Nirvana and Moksha the Same? Available at: http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-AN/26715.htm
is usually referred to as the citta. In an un-enlightened being the ‘quality’ of this ‘knowing’ is adulterated by the presence of defilements, the three kinds of taṇhā; but when the defilements are absent, the person abides in the peace of ‘pure knowing’. The fundamental knowing ability, mediated by the six senses, is generally referred to as viññāṇa; and out of these six-senses, the ‘thinking sense’ is called the mana. Let us corroborate this from the use of these terms in the tipiṭaka.

First the term viññāṇa which ‘generally means a discriminative consciousness that acts via one of the six sense doors: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind. It means the act of cognizing a knowable object’11. Thus seeing is the result of arising of cakkhuviññāṇa due to the interaction of a good eye-base with form when other conditions are met; similarly hearing is the function of sotaviññāṇa which arises on interaction of ear base and sound, and so on. Madhupiṇḍika sutta explains it succinctly:

cakkhuñcāvuso, paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ
sotāñcāvuso, paṭicca sadde ca uppajjati sotaviññāṇaṃ 12

Since ‘mind’ is also taken as a sense-akin to the other five physical senses, manoviññāṇa is responsible for thinking process which happens when thoughts (mind-objects) interact with mind-base, the mana:

manañcāvuso, paṭicca dhamme ca uppajjati manoviññāṇaṃ12

Thus the term viññāṇa refers to the sensory consciousness; and the term mana to the mind base which enables thinking (just as eye enables seeing). Unlike other five senses, which have a material sense-base, mind being formless it is not possible to identify its location13.

Now let us see the usage of the word citta in the tipiṭaka. We find that this word is used when referring to the basic overarching faculty of knowing that all sentient beings have. The sensory consciousness is just one expression of that faculty. But we also have other direct ways of becoming aware. Thus while listening to someone speaking with pauses in between, we are not only aware of the sound of the words,

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12 MN 18 : Madhupiṇḍika Sutta

13 In commentaries the heart-base (badaya vatthu) is sometimes mentioned as the ‘physical support’ of mana, but it is only a way of speaking since thoughts seem to emerge from there. Mana is basically formless.
but also aware of the ‘silence’ in between spoken words. While looking at a row of trees in a forest, we also become aware of the formless space in between the trees. In Satipatthana sutta\textsuperscript{14} we find classifications of citta like:

\begin{center}
\textit{\textquotesingle}sarāgaṃ, vītarāgaṃ, sadosam, vitadosam, samāhitam, asamāhitam \ldots\ textit{citta}\textsuperscript{m}
\end{center}

These are clearly the descriptions of the quality of general awareness as being veiled by passion or free from passion, veiled by aversion or free from aversion, concentrated or not concentrated.

We also find ‘citta’ listed as one of the iddhipada. Clearly here too it refers to the basic faculty of ‘knowing’ which can be sharpened by the practice of concentration, i.e. focusing on an object, to reduce citta’s tendency of getting ‘enamoured’ of the ‘objects’ it knows due to the presence of latent defilements.

In Abhidhamma, we have the paṭisandhi citta, translated as ‘the relinking consciousness’ which is the very first citta of the next life of a person who has just died. That’s the reason, Ajahn Maha Boowa calls citta as the lord of birth and death. We train the citta by various kinds of meditation, keeping precepts, practicing generosity, loving kindness and compassion so as to make it pure, free from defilements so that no paṭisandhi citta arises at the time of death.

There is yet another quality of ‘knowing’ which is found only in human beings, i.e. the self-reflexive nature of consciousness, i.e. the ability to be aware of whatever appears in consciousness. This ability to be aware of the experience, is termed as sati, usually translated as mindfulness. This we find discussed in detail in the Satipatthana sutta\textsuperscript{15} which gives extensive instructions on developing sati, for example:

\begin{center}
\textit{sarāgaṃ vā citta\textsuperscript{m} \textit{\textquotesingle}sarāgaṃ citta\textsuperscript{nti} pajānāti\ldots\textit{Sadosam vā citta\textsuperscript{m} \textit{\textquotesingle}sadosam citta\textsuperscript{nti} pajānāti}}
\end{center}

when the citta has passion, one knows ‘the citta has passion’ … when the citta has aversion, he knows ‘the citta has aversion’.

In another section we have:

\begin{center}
\textit{Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu – \textit{\textquotesingle}iti rūpaṃ, iti rūpassa samudayo, iti rūpassa atthaṅgamo; iti vedanā, iti vedanāya samudayo\ldots\ atthaṅgamo; iti saññā\ldots\ Iti sankhārā\ldots\ iti viññāṇaṃ, iti viññāṇassa samudayo, iti viññāṇassa atthaṅgamo\textsuperscript{\prime} ti.}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{14} MN 10 Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta

Here Bhikkhus, a monk [knows]: ‘Such is material form, such its arising, such its passing away; such is feeling, such its arising, such its passing away... Such is perception...Such are formations... Such is consciousness, such its arising, such its passing away.’

Clearly to see the arising and passing away of viññāṇa needs a different type of knowing ability, and that is sati, the ability to be aware of whatever is being experienced. The sati is ‘pure’ in the sense that it is not soiled by what it ‘observes’ – whether passion, aversion or delusion. As Ajahn Sumedho puts it16:

... the awareness of that sadness is not itself sad. The emotion we feel is sadness but when the emotion is held in awareness then the awareness itself is not sad. The same is true when being present with thinking of something that gives rise to excitement or joy. The awareness is not excited, it holds the excitement. Awareness embraces the feeling of excitement or sadness but it does not get excited or sad.

Thus even in the primary teachings of the Buddha, we do find the clear distinction between the basic knowing ability of sentient beings, the citta; its refraction through various senses which is usually termed viññāṇa or sensory consciousness; and the reflexive ability of citta to “see itself” (which is present in human beings), termed sati or mindfulness. For an unenlightened being the sati is contaminated with self-view, and there is the notion: ‘I am observing’. As the mind is fully purified of greed, hatred and delusion, the citta becomes pure and so does sati; there is pure awareness as also the knowledge (awareness) of being aware.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Advaita sage, describes the difference between awareness and consciousness in similar terms17:

Awareness is primordial; it is the original state, beginning-less, endless, uncaused, unsupported, without parts, without change. Consciousness is on contact, a reflection against a surface, a state of duality. There can be no consciousness without awareness, but there can be awareness without consciousness, as in deep sleep. Awareness is absolute, consciousness is relative to its content; consciousness is always of something. Consciousness is partial and changeful, awareness is total, changeless, calm and silent. And it is the common matrix of every experience.

Of course it doesn’t imply that we have more than one consciousness operating in us. The citta, viññāṇa and sati are all different manifestations of our just being ‘conscious’. The term citta refers to the fundamental quality of knowing present in all sentient beings, viññāṇa refers to that knowing as mediated by the six senses, and sati is the

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16 Ajahn Sumedho [2004], Intuitive Awareness, p 154, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery Publications, UK.

quality of self-awareness present in human beings, through which they become aware of the quality of knowing.

4. Pure consciousness in Tipiṭaka (Anidassana viññāṇa)

There are two (not so popular) suttas in the Tipiṭaka, where the Buddha mentions about ‘anidassana viññāṇa’

“Consciousness (viññāṇam) which is non-manifest, invisible, formless (anidassanaṃ), limitless, infinite (anantaṃ), and radiant in all directions (sabbato pabhām)… It is here in this awakened consciousness that earth, water, fire and wind can find no footing, they get no traction. Here also, long and short, and coarse and fine, pure and impure can find no footing there is no landing-place for them in this consciousness. In this consciousness, name-and-form, all things material and mental, cease without remainder. Here they are held in check; they are understood and known without delusion.”

Ajahn Amaro commenting on this sutta says that these adjectives describe the pure heart, the enlightened mind:

“In this sutta the Buddha uses the Pāli term viññāṇa to describe this awakened form of consciousness. This is a very unusual deployment of the term viññāṇa, because it usually means a discriminative consciousness, the mental faculty which distinguishes ‘this’ from ‘that’. In this sutta it means instead an all-encompassing awareness. … This is the description of the pure heart. It isn’t just something from a 2,500 year-old story; this is your pure heart, this is your mind. When there is freedom from obscurations in the heart, when the hindrances have been dropped and there is full wakefulness and attention to the present reality, this is what is experienced: awareness, spaciousness, all-encompassing capacity, brightness, luminosity, radiance. When the heart is in tune with Dhamma, in tune with its own nature, this is how it appears – these are the natural qualities of the pure heart, of the enlightened mind: knowing, emptiness, spaciousness and brightness.”

As Ajahn Amaro clearly brings out, this anidassana viññāṇa is the pure citta mentioned by Ajahn Maha Boowa.

In another sutta where the term “anidassana viññāṇa” occurs, the Buddha adds a significant attribute of this special type of viññāṇa, viz. it doesn’t partake of the “allness of the all”20. Now as is well known, by the term “All” the Buddha always meant the six senses and their objects21. Thus, we have the Buddha himself saying that this anidassana viññāṇa is beyond this “All”, and thus not a part of the five aggregates. Being formless, it is outside the domain of space and time.

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18 Translation of the section from DN 11: Kevatta (Kevaddha) Sutta; In Ajahn Amaro , “The Breakthrough” p 235
19 MN 49: https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.049.than.html
20 sabbassa sabbattena ananubhūtaṃ
21 SN 35.23 : https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.023.than.html
This description matches with the description of pure-consciousness of Advaita Vedanta. The only difficulty, it seems, arises from the choice of words to describe it: “Atman, the Self, the real I” which seem to speak as if these are personal attributes of people. But it is quite obvious that when Adi Shankara says

“I am without form, without limit, beyond space, beyond time; I am in everything; I am the basis of the universe; everywhere am I. I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute”

… the reference is not to anything personal, even though the word ‘I’ is used to describe this pure consciousness; and this has indeed created confusion.

As Ajahn Amaro puts it:\(^{22}\):

“There is awareness. There is a fundamental quality of knowing. But we see that to call this knowing ‘me and mine’, an ego, is a faulty interpretation. It’s a case of mistaken identity.”

Rupert Spira, however, does indicate how this came to be:\(^{23}\):

‘I’ is the name we give to whatever it is that knows or is aware of all knowledge and experience. That is, ‘I’ is name that the mind gives to itself in order to indicate its essential knowing essence in the midst of all its changing knowledge and experience. I am aware of feelings and sensations…I am aware of perceptions…. I am thinking…. I am hungry… I am tired…

But surely, rather than saying, “I am That”, a better way to describe this pure consciousness could have been “There is that”; that would have eliminated much of the difficulties in understanding of Advaita.

It is interesting to note that even Ajahn Sumedho seems to give a somewhat “vedantic connotation” to the pure citta as “something” that unites us and is our “true nature”:

“That consciousness is not personal. It’s not consciousness in my head and then consciousness in your head. Each of us has our own conscious experience going on. But is this consciousness the thing that unites us? Is it our ‘oneness’? I’m just questioning; there are different ways of looking at it. When we let go of the differences — “I am Ajahn Sumedho and you are this person” — when we let go of these identities and attachments then consciousness is still functioning. It’s pure; it has no quality of being personal, no condition to it of being male or female. You can’t put a quality into it, but it is like this. When we begin to recognize that which binds us together, that which is our common ground is consciousness, then we see that this is universal.”…

“That which is aware of your thinking — what is that? Is that a person? Is it a person that is aware? Or is it pure awareness? Is this awareness personal, or does the person arise in that? This is exploring, investigating. By investigating you are actually getting to notice the way it is, the Dhamma, that there is actually no person who is being aware, but awareness will include what seems personal… Then you can see that your true nature is this knowing, this pure state, pure consciousness, pure awareness. You are learning to remember that, to be that…..what you really are rather than what you think you are according to the conditioning of your mind…………… This awareness, this awake-ness is the gate to the unconditioned.

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\(^{22}\) Ajahn Amaro [2016], The Breakthrough, p102, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery Publications, UK.

When we awaken, that is the unconditioned, the actual awake-ness is that. ... this awake-ness, is the essence of the Buddhist teaching\textsuperscript{24}.

Since the concept of pure citta which is beyond the five khandhās, is so radically different from the orthodox Theravada discourse, it seems necessary to point out that, though the term ‘anidassana viññāna’ occurs in only two suttas\textsuperscript{25}, the concept of “consciousness beyond viññāna” (the sense-sphere consciousness) is implicit in many other not-so obscure or enigmatic suttas. Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro’s anthology of the Teachings of the Buddha on Nibbāna has an entire chapter devoted to “Unsupported and unsupportive consciousness”\textsuperscript{26}. Some suttas wherein this concept of pure citta is implicit are presented below.

\textbf{Atthi Raga Sutta}\textsuperscript{27}: Where There is Passion

"Just as if there were a roofed house or a roofed hall having windows on the north, the south, or the east. When the sun rises, and a ray has entered by way of the window, where does it land?"
"On the western wall, lord."
"And if there is no western wall, where does it land?"
"On the ground, lord."
"And if there is no ground, where does it land?"
"On the water, lord."
"And if there is no water, where does it land?"
"It does not land, lord."

"In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food... contact... intellectual intention... consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or increase. Where consciousness does not land or increase, there is no alighting of name-&-form. Where there is no alighting of name-&-form, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair."

This sutta clearly points to the existence of an \textit{objectless consciousness}\textsuperscript{28} in a pure mind bereft of all defilements which differs from the discriminative consciousness, the viññāna, which as explained above has an ārammaṇa or ‘object’ which it cognizes. In contrast this ‘objectless consciousness’ is not dependent on any conditions and thus lies outside the domain of space and time.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ajahn Sumedho [2004], Intuitive awareness, p 135-136, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery Publications, UK
\item \textsuperscript{25} MN 49 \url{https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.049.than.html} and DN 11 \url{https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.11.0.than.html}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ajahn Passano & Ajahn Amaro [2009], The Island, Abhayagiri monastic foundation, CA, USA.
\item \textsuperscript{27} SN 12.64 \url{https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.064.than.html}
\item \textsuperscript{28} better termed as ‘pure knowing’ or awareness
\end{itemize}
Bāhiya Sutta\textsuperscript{29}, Malunkyaputta Sutta\textsuperscript{30}, Kālākārāma Sutta\textsuperscript{31}

In these three very well-known suttas the Buddha refers to the subjectless-objectless consciousness of an Enlightened being free from all taints (cf. pure citta of Ajahn Maha Boowa) which clearly is consciousness beyond the viññāna khandha.

The brief teaching given to the ascetic Bāhiya, which led to his attainment of arahantship almost immediately, was:

In the seen there is only the seen, in the heard, there is only the heard, in the sensed there is only the sensed, in the cognized there is only the cognized: This, Bāhiya, is how you should train yourself. When, Bāhiya, there is for you in the seen only the seen, in the heard, only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no ‘you’ in connection with that. When, Bāhiya, there is no ‘you’ there, then, Bāhiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

The implications of these pithy meditation instructions were expressed in verse by Malunkyaputta\textsuperscript{32} (and approved by the Buddha):

Having seen a form with mindfulness muddled,
Attending to the pleasing sign,
One experiences it with infatuated mind
And remains tightly holding on to it.

Many feelings flourish within,
Originating from the visible form,
Covetousness and annoyance as well,
By which one’s mind becomes disturbed.
For one who accumulates suffering thus
Nibbāna is said to be far away.

….similarly at other sense doors…

When firmly mindful one sees a form,
One is not inflamed by lust for forms;
One experiences it with dispassionate mind
And does not remain holding it tightly.

\textsuperscript{29} Ud 1.10 : Ajahn Pasanno & Ajahn Amaro[2009], The Island , p62-63
\textsuperscript{30} SN 35.95
\textsuperscript{31} AN 4.24: Ajahn Pasanno & Ajahn Amaro[2009], The Island , p119-120
\textsuperscript{32} He also received the same instructions from the Buddha; translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi[2000], Connected Discourses of the Buddha, Wisdom publications, MA, USA
One fares mindfully in such a way
That even as one sees the form,
And while one undergoes feeling,
[suffering] is exhausted, not built up,
For one dismantling suffering thus,
Nibbāna is said to be close by.

....similarly at other sense doors...

To summarize, the instruction is that one should be fully established in mindfulness and wisdom so that the sensory impingement doesn’t lead to any mental reaction of craving or aversion – there is just seeing, hearing, etc. … which is not followed by any mental proliferation. In Kālakārāma Sutta, the Buddha gives details of this wisdom as:

“Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight; he does not conceive of an unseen; he does not conceive of a ‘thing-to-be-seen’; he does not conceive about a seer. He does not conceive of an audible… a thing to be sensed … a cognizable thing as apart from cognition; he does not conceive of an uncognized; he does not conceive of a ‘thing worth-cognizing’; he does not conceive about one who cognizes.”

Put together these three suttas give a clear understanding of how an Enlightened One, free from all mental defilements, “sees” sensory impingement. In every sensory-cognition, there is only the pertinent cognition, there is no conception of an external object being cognized or of one who cognizes. There is only the “experience” of just knowing. Expounding on this meditative experience Ajahn Amaro has this to say:

There can be those moments when all attachments and grasping has fallen away but the mind is awake, it knows, it is fully aware; but there is no sense of a subject and no sense of an object. So it is subjectless-objectless awareness. There is no I, me and the world but there is knowing and a quality of unlocatedness…. Subjectless objectless unallocated knowing!

Elsewhere, Ajahn Amaro explains the “subjectless-objectless consciousness” with an example:

When we hear a sound, we might think …‘That’s the sound of a plane going to Luton Airport.’ And we think that the sound is ‘out there’, the plane is ‘out there’. But if we know it clearly and directly, we recognize that the experience of hearing is not ‘there’; it’s happening in this awareness. The plane is in your mind. The experience of hearing is a pattern of experience in the mind. It’s happening here. The mind’s representation of that thing is experienced here and now in this field of awareness. And just as you see there is no-thing there, that the object is empty, so the feeling of a ‘me’ here who is the experiencer can be seen to be empty

33 Ajahn Amaro talk [2018] : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br57LUCpOoE
34 Ajahn Amaro
too. There’s no person who’s the experiencer. There’s just knowing. There’s just the awareness of this moment, the un-entangled participating in this pattern of experience.

Even the above statement might seem puzzling, for isn’t it an “obvious fact” that “the sound” is emanating from the solid object called “plane” which is clearly not “here” but “out there” in the sky? Further doesn’t the Madhupiṇḍika sutta clearly state “Dependent on the eye and the form arises seeing (eye-consciousness); dependent on the ear base and sound arises “hearing” (ear-consciousness)”? How can we deny the “existence” of “form” and “sound”, etc.?

Again, we need to remember, the statement, “there is no-thing there” is not an ontological statement, but a phenomenological one; it is not describing the “essential nature” of the world from the perspective of a neutral observer looking at it, but the actual experience of “the world”. It doesn’t deny the existence of the substrate of our experience, but we cannot know what “it really” is since our “knowing” is conditioned by the limitations of the sensory experiences.

Considering this particular example, what we call “seeing” is the primordial consciousness refracted through the eye, the cakkhuviññāna, and the naming of what is seen as a “plane” is happening in the manoviññāna, the same primordial consciousness refracted through the mana. The same is true of the “sound” with ear-consciousness replacing the eye-consciousness. Clearly the experiences through all the senses are happening in the field of primordial consciousness. The specific naming of these experiences as arising from various objects is only a helpful conventional description.

Four Suttas on Parinibbāna (Udāna 8.1 – 8.4)

In these oft-quoted suttas the Buddha gives some hints to describe the experience of Nibbāna, a reality which transcends the common-sense of notions of subject-object duality. Commenting on one of these descriptions:

“There is the Unborn, Uncreated, Unconditioned and Unformed. If there were not, there would be no escape discerned from that which is born, created, conditioned and formed. But, since there is this Unborn, Uncreated, Unconditioned and Unformed, escape is therefore discerned from that which is born, created, conditioned and formed.” (~ Ud 8.3)35

Ajahn Sumedho says36:

35 In Kathopanisad (Part I Canto ii verse 18) we find a similar description of the “Self”:

   It is neither born nor does it die. It did not originate from anything, nor did anything originate from it. It is birth-less, eternal, un-decaying and ancient. It is not injured even when the body is killed.

36 Ajahn Sumedho [2010], Don’t take your life personally, p367-371, Buddhist Publishing Group, UK.
The created and formed are five aggregates and the six spheres... All conditions are impermanent... But that which is aware of change – what is that? Can one condition know another? If all conditions are impermanent, can this condition know that condition? What is it that knows the conditioned? Is that a condition? This is an inquiry. I am not expecting an answer....

Maybe you will form some idea that consciousness is a condition which is somehow above all other conditions and can know those other conditions as conditions.....If you trust in awareness, you realize that consciousness is a natural state. When a baby is born it is a conscious being; it is a human body that is conscious. Consciousness, then, is natural and cannot be culturally perverted by anything. And that which is natural – that which is according to the natural law – is what we mean by ‘dhamma’. We are experiencing consciousness through separate forms. We each experience through ‘this’ body and the kamma of ‘this being here’. If we recognize pure consciousness, we then have a perspective on the limitations and conditions of the physical body and the emotional habits we have, the memories we have, and the ‘self’.

And we realize that consciousness has no personal quality. We create the personal, and the consciousness then combines with the sense of being a person. If we let go of ‘the person’, there is just pure consciousness which has no boundaries. And this is immeasurable.

It is worth mentioning that in the above exposition, which is based on transcription of a discourse given by Ajahn Sumedho, the term consciousness has been mostly used in the colloquial sense as the quality of being ‘conscious’ (in contrast to being unconscious) but also in the sense of sensory consciousness. The word ‘awareness’ is used to indicate our basic ‘knowing’ ability.

In the various discourses of the Buddha addressed to a wide variety of audiences we find similar use of various terms – e.g. atta - where their intended meaning has to be discerned from the context.

5. **Nibbāna and Moksha**

Some scholars believe that the goals of these two spiritual traditions are different. Thus Bhikkhu Bodhi points out that the goal of advaita tradition, Moksha, is to realize the identity of one’s real ‘Self’ with the ultimate timeless reality which is existence-knowledge-bliss (sat-cit-anand). This is in direct contradiction to Buddha’s denial of Self of any kind; the goal of spiritual quest being Nibbāna, which is the experience of abiding peace ensuing from “stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion”\(^{37}\). Considering the nature of experience, the traditional Theravada position is that the cessation of all formations is accompanied by the cessation of feelings, and sensory-consciousness (viññāṇa); in contrast Moksha is experience of pure universal consciousness. Since in traditional Theravada position, there is no consciousness beyond viññāṇa, the experience of Nibbāna is often described

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\(^{37}\) MN 26.19
as the experience of complete void; the common imagery being of a fire (taṇhā) getting extinguished.

However from the perspective of the Thai forest masters, even though sensory consciousness is not operative, the person is fully aware, the pure citta (or the anidassana viññāṇa) illuminates the consciousness like nothing else. In fact the Buddha himself speaks so eloquently about this experience ‘where no darkness reigns’:

When a sage, a brahmin, has come to know this
For himself through his own wisdom,
Then he is freed from form and formless,
Freed from pleasure and from pain.

Thus in the Theravada exposition of the Thai forest masters Nibbāna and Moksha are essentially the same experience.

Interestingly the Upaniṣadic sage also uses similar imagery to describe the ‘self-luminous’ nature of “pure consciousness”, personified here as “He”:

More specifically the realization of Moksha, though described philosophically as identity with the real Self, the pure consciousness, is also described in practical terms in a manner which resonates with the description of Nibbāna; for example, the famous verse of Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad:

By seeing the One, omniscient and transcendental, the knots of the heart get untied, all doubts are resolved, and all karma become dissipated.

Thus Moksha has the same practical implication as Nibbāna, viz. Visaṅkhāragataṁ cittaṁ, taṇhānaṁ khayamajjhagā, the ending of all taṇhā, the “knots of the heart”.

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38 Ud 1.10 : Bāhiya Sutta, from The Udāna and Itivuttaka, translated by John D Ireland, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy[1997].


40 Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, Part 2, Canto II, verse 8

41 Dhammapada, verse 154
David Loy sees this congruence even between Nibbāna of traditional Theravada Buddhism and Moksha of Advaita:

The familiar everyday "natural" world of material objects was formerly balanced by an ego-consciousness that was supposed to be observing it. The evaporation of that separate consciousness requires a new explanation of what awareness is. The awareness which was previously understood to be observing the world is now realized to be incorporated within it. No longer do "I" as the locus of consciousness, see something external; rather, the self-luminous nature of the thing stands revealed. This phenomenon could be described either as no-consciousness, or as a nondual consciousness. Early Buddhism opts for the former, claiming that consciousness is nothing more than all those things that are experienced; Shankara opts for the latter, insisting that all those things are consciousness. Buddhism says there is no self, there is only the world (dharmas), Shankara says the world is the Self. To say that there is no self, or that everything is the self, would also then be equally correct -- or false, depending on how one looks at it. Both descriptions amount to the same thing; what is clear in each case is that there is no longer a duality between an object which is observed and a consciousness which observes it; or between the external world and the self which confronts it.

6. **The Spiritual practice**

One of the main critiques of advaita is that many modern advaita teachers discount the need for any practice of self-restraint, moral purification or any mental training for realization of the true nature of Self. This neo-advaitic position of “direct path” to Self-realization – ‘You have to do nothing to be who you are!’ -- is a recent stance which seems to have started with the eminent advaitic Teacher H.W.L Poonja (popularly known as Papaji), a direct disciple of Ramana Maharshi. The typical argument is that training or effort is needed to attain anything in the external world, and it only strengthens ego…the “doer”, but to realize “one’s own self” there is no role of any training. It is just a case of reflecting on our experience and realizing that what we call as I, in statements like ‘I am seeing, I am hearing, I am angry, I am happy’ is essentially the pure consciousness, the knowing faculty which is ever present fundamental reality. This discovery is termed as awakening and the ‘post awakening work’ is suggested to integrate this with our daily life.

Says Rupert Spira, a modern advaita teacher:

> Awakening (in the way I use the word) is the experiential understanding that what we are is unlimited, unlocated Consciousness. It is instantaneous but not necessarily immediate.

> Self-Realisation is the realignment of the mind and body with this experiential understanding and takes time. So ‘the clearing of unconscious, limiting beliefs’ is something that happens naturally as a result of awakening to our true nature. Having said that, it is possible to cooperate with this realignment.

42 Leesa S. Davis [2010], Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism, Continuum International Publishing Group, London.

43 https://non-duality.rupertspira.com/read/awakening_and_selfrealisation
He suggests some Tantric Yoga practices of Kashmir Śaivism, based on visualizations to do this realignment. However most other modern teachers do not feel any need for even this and suggest that this re-alignment would naturally occur over time, though paradoxically, most of them did intensive inquiry or meditation practices over many years, before their ‘Enlightenment’.

This is clearly in great contrast to the eightfold Noble path advocated by the Buddha, wherein we find a great emphasis on sense restraint, keeping moral precepts, mental training and reflective meditations to purify the mind and eventually break through the delusion of an individual differentiated self.

However if we go to the primary sources of Advaita, the Upaniṣads, and the teachings of the progenitor of Advaita, Adi Śankara, we find that a whole lot of preliminary practices similar to those advised by the Buddha are enjoined. The following quotations from the Upaniṣads bring this out quite clearly:

i) The bright and pure self within the body, that the monks (with habitual effort) and attenuated blemishes see, is attainable verily through truth, concentration, complete knowledge, and continence, practiced constantly 44.

ii) One who has not desisted from bad conduct, whose senses are not under control, whose mind is not concentrated, whose mind is not free from anxiety, cannot attain this self through Knowledge. 45

Adi Śankara, the progenitor of the Advaita in this era also mentions the need for these preliminary practices for realization of the Self. His famous composition “Moha Mudgara” 46 (popularly known as Bhaja Govindam) stresses on the need to give up attachment to wealth, women, family, sensory enjoyments and the importance of simple living and associating with good people. The concluding verse summarizes these prerequisites succinctly:

The control of all activities (of life’s manifestations in you), the sense-withdrawal (from their respective sense objects), the reflection (consisting of discrimination between the permanent and the impermanent), along with japa and the practice of reaching the total-inner-silence (samādhi) – these, perform with care... with great care. 47

Even the greatest Teacher of Advaita in 20th Century, Ramana Maharshi, advised most of his students various kinds of practices like meditation, chanting mantra, breathing exercises and selfless deeds as stepping stones towards self-realization 48. So this approach of modern advaita teachers, who advocate the so-called direct path where no preliminary

44 Mundaka Upaniṣad , Part 3, Canto 1, verse 5
45 Kaṭha Upaniṣad, Part 1 Canto 2 verse 24
46 Moha: delusion, Mudgara : hammer , so literally this title means hammer to shatter delusion
48 Sri Ramana Maharshi, Upadesa Saram, Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, 1970 ; and also https://sriramanamaharishi.com/my_keywords/sadhana-chatushtaya/
preparation is necessary, is a new phenomenon, not the pristine Advaita tradition. Many modern scholars like David Frawley have also pointed out the fallacy in this neo-advaita position:

Ramana keeps the requirement for Advaita simple yet clear – a ripe mind….. Yet a ripe mind is not as easy as it sounds either. .. A ripe, pure or sattvic mind implies that rajas and tamas, the qualities of passion and ignorance, have been cleared not only from the mind but also from the body, to which the mind is connected in Vedic thought………… Advaita does require considerable inner purity and self-discipline, developing which is an important aim of practice which should not be lightly set aside49.

It is interesting to note that the main spiritual practices of both Advaita and Buddhism leading to “Self-realization”/ “development of insight” are reflective meditations which, in the words of Adi Śankara, can be described as “nityānitya vivekavicāram”, inquiry into what is permanent and what is impermanent.

7. World an illusion?

The Advaita teachings consider the conventional reality – the world as perceived by us – as an illusion. Believing the world to be Real is seen as the reason for inability to realize the Self, pure consciousness50:

The seer and the object seen are like the rope and the snake. Just as the knowledge of the rope which is the substrate will not arise unless the false knowledge of the illusory serpent goes, so the realization of the Self which is the substrate will not be gained unless the belief that the world is real is removed.

Advaita sees no difference between the dream world and the “waking state” world:

Waking is long and a dream short; other than this there is no difference. Just as waking happenings seem real while awake. So do those in a dream while dreaming. In dream the mind takes on another body. In both waking and dream states thought, names and forms occur simultaneously.

The Buddha points out that all that we know about the “external world of objects” is through the five senses - sight, sound, smell, taste, touch - and based on the sensory feedback the mind weaves a coherent picture of the “world”51. Since the sharpness of our sensory faculties, and the conditioning which forms the basis of our perceptions differ, each one of us lives in a different “world”, though from a conventional point of view, we live in the same world52. All that we know is the mind’s representation of the world as

49 David Frawley [2004], No2, Misconceptions about Advaita, 'The Mountain Path', the journal of Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai.

50 Who Am I? The Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, Translation by Dr. T. M. P. Mahadevan, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai.

51 SN 35.116: Loka Sutta

52 Modern science also points out that our sensory faculties are limited and can capture only a part of the “Reality” – for example the human eye, ear and nose have limited ability to see, hear and smell; birds and animals have different abilities. The colour of a flower as seen by us will be considerably different from what a bird or snake sees; thus there is
captured by our senses; further since there is incessant change in everything, the world doesn’t have an immutable essence. Our perception of the world is coloured by our lifelong conditioning and the Buddha likens it to a mirage, which is indeed an illusion arising due to the prevailing environmental conditions. Thus the Buddha in effect says that our perception of the “external world” is illusory. But like a radical phenomenologist, the Buddha only describes our experience and shuns making any ontological statements regarding “Reality” of the world as made in Advaita (see below).

8. **Non duality**

Non-duality, or Oneness of all existence, is the literal meaning of the word “Advaita”.

Rupert Spira puts this succinctly:

“No object, thing or separate self truly exists, be it made of matter or mind. Objects and selves borrow their apparent existence from the sole reality of pure awareness. Awareness alone is all that truly is... Existence is awareness itself.”

The traditional expositions deny the existence of any non-dual teachings in the Theravada Buddhism. As eminent scholar monk Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it:

The teaching of the Buddha as found in the Pāli Canon does not endorse a philosophy of non-dualism of any variety, nor, I would add, can a non-dualistic perspective be found lying implicit within the Buddha’s discourses. At the same time, however, I would not maintain that the Pāli Suttas propose dualism, the positing of duality as a metaphysical hypothesis aimed at intellectual assent. ...

When we investigate our experience exactly as it presents itself, we find that it is permeated by a number of critically important dualities with profound implications for the spiritual quest. ... -- of good and evil, suffering and happiness, wisdom and ignorance -- that make the quest for enlightenment and deliverance such a vitally crucial concern...

Where I think the teaching of the Buddha, as preserved in the Theravada tradition, surpasses all other attempts to resolve the spiritual dilemmas of humanity is in its persistent refusal to sacrifice actuality for unity. The Buddha’s Dhamma does not point us towards an all-embracing absolute in which the tensions of daily existence dissolve in metaphysical oneness or inscrutable emptiness. It points us, rather, towards actuality as the final sphere of comprehension, towards things as they really are (yathābhūta).

However the manner in which the Thai masters interpret their meditative experiences, point to a non-duality, though of a different kind from Advaitic pronouncements. In the

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no specific colour that “belongs” to the flower. The same is true of all other sense objects - sounds, smells, taste, and tactile objects.

biography of L.P Mun, Ajahn Maha Boowa explains how the subject-object duality arises due to ignorance (avijjā), and how it ends with awakening, the removal of ignorance:

The citta, the mind’s essential knowing nature, has been dominated by fundamental ignorance (avijjā) since time immemorial. This fundamental ignorance has created within the citta a center or focal point of the knower. The existence of that false center engenders an individual perspective which is the nucleus of self-identity. This “self” forms perceptions of duality (the knower and the known) and from there awareness flows out to produce the world of the 5 khandhas and of all sensory experience, which in turn reinforce the knower’s sense of individuality. It all begins with the currents of the citta, which flow out to create the entire sensory world, the world of conditioned phenomena. Because of this, it is said that all physical and mental phenomena are relative, conventional realities (sammuti). They exist only relative to the knower, the one who perceives them. As such they are merely conventions that the citta has brought into being and given a subjective identity to in order to experience its own manifestations. In turn, these manifestations become incorporated into the citta’s sense of its own identity. Thus the known becomes indistinguishable from the knower, and duality comes full circle, trapping the citta in a web of self-delusion. The citta is reduced to depending on its manifestations to assess the nature of its own existence.

When fundamental ignorance has been destroyed, the focal point of the knower disintegrates, which causes the “self” perspective to disappear from the citta altogether. With the disappearance of self-identity, all manifestations of the citta, all relative, conventional realities, are divested of their power to deceive and no longer appear within the citta.

Then the citta abides in its true nature, and as Ajahn Maha Boowa puts … it simply “knows”. There is no subject, no object, no duality; it simply knows.

Here again we find Thai masters talk of non-dual nature of the pure citta from their actual meditative experience; however, unlike Advaita sages, they are not making an ontological statement about Oneness of all that exists and conflating it with pure consciousness.

9. Concluding remarks

The two great spiritual traditions of ancient India, when viewed purely as philosophies seem to be diametrically opposed. One positing the existence of an ultimate Reality, which is Existence-Pure Consciousness-Bliss, the real nature of all beings, their inmost Self, the Atman. The other denying the existence of any self (anattā or anatman) and positing that all existence is a spectacle of “dhammas” which incessantly arise and pass away with such rapidity that it gives the illusion of continuity.

However, if we can get over this initial shock and leave aside the philosophical interpretations, and probe deeper into their goals, and the recommended practices to achieve this goal, we find a lot of congruence.

First of all we have to remember that the Buddha’s teachings only describe our experience of the world, not “The world” as it really is. Some 2000 years before Kant, the Buddha saw that all perceptions are like mirage – so the reality “as it is” cannot be known. The “dhammas” defined in Theravada Abhidhamma as the ultimate reality are the facts of
experience, just particular characteristics, and not some “entities” like the ultimate building blocks of the universe being “searched” for by scientists for over two centuries.

The existence of “pure consciousness” as the state of mind of an awakened being is mentioned by the Buddha directly, as well as indirectly, in a few Suttas. Most importantly this interpretation is validated by the meditative experience of highly accomplished and venerated enlightened sages of the Thai forest tradition. The Buddha didn’t mention it in many Suttas, as many scholars who doubt this interpretation would have liked, because it is neither one of the causes of suffering, nor does it form a part of the path of liberation from suffering – the two issues that were the main focus of his teachings. A fully enlightened being is always abides in this pure consciousness; but most good meditators can also have its fleeting glimpses during those moments when the sense of self is absent, for example while practicing as instructed in the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta. As Ajahn Amaro puts it nicely:

When ‘I am’ is seen through and is recognized as transparent, empty – when self is let go of – that is Nibbāna here and now. So you don’t think of Nibbāna as some glorious super-duper heaven off over the rainbow – Nibbāna is at breakfast with your family, on the train, in your Buddhist centre, pottering around in your garden or on the motorway. Nibbāna is that quality of clarity and peacefulness which is ever-present whenever the grasping stops, whenever the heart lets go of that urge to becoming. It is always accessible to us.

In fact, Rodney Smith, a former monk and now an eminent meditation teacher terms the whole practice of the Buddha’s path as journey from “mindfulness” to “awareness”, or pure consciousness.

The pure consciousness of Advaita is thus not something beyond the ken of ordinary mortals, and its existence is not denied by the Buddha. The real confusion arises when advaita calls it the Atman, the Self, the real “I”, and some advaita Masters say, “I am That”. As an exultation of a sage after the experience of Nibbāna, the statement, “I am that” is understandable. It can be seen in the same light as the Buddha’s answer to brahmin Dona’s query, on what he was, as: “‘Buddhosmi’”. So it seems the issue may be merely semantic, just a ‘wrong’ choice of words for how can anyone claim the unborn, uncreated, formless pure consciousness as personal? Had the statement been “There is That”, then we could have easily said: The Buddha’s “No-self” equals advaita’s “All is self”.

Coupled with this is the advaitic assertion of Non-duality – the oneness of all existence, which follows from the view quoted above: “Objects and selves borrow their apparent existence from the sole reality of pure awareness”. On the same lines we could assert the Buddha’s doctrine of

54https://dhammaseed.org/talks/audio_player/148/27645.html
55 AN 4.36: Doṇa Sutta; “Buddhosmi” could be translated as “I am a Buddha” or “I am awake”.

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anattā as “Objects and selves are empty of self”. As the experience of enlightened Thai masters corroborates, the pure awareness is indeed “empty of self”. Putting these two statements together we can see their similarity. The Buddha, through concisely worded, pithy instructions guides Bāhiya to the experience of subjectless-objectless consciousness, the experience of ultimate non-duality or emptiness, which is the end of dukkha. However, he does not posit it as a philosophical assertion of “what is”, but as a reflective meditation experience which one can have with proper training.

The neo-advaitic stance of discouraging any preliminary practice since ‘You have to do nothing to be who you are!’ is clearly misplaced. It seems that a mere cognitive understanding of the Reality of pure consciousness is being mistaken as ‘Enlightenment’:

Just to merely have “the Understanding” (as some have made a fetish out of it) that “only the Self is Real,” or that "Consciousness is all there is" and think that there is nothing more to spirituality than this conceptual understanding and a corresponding "blanked-out" zombie demeanor is simply not sufficient for authentic awakening from the selfish "me-dream."

In an analogy, we can say that it is certainly true on one level that the little sapling is in some "potential" sense a tree, destined to grow into one if conditions are right. But the sapling is not yet fully functioning and serving as a full-grown tree, capable of providing shade, fruit, flowers, medicinal herbs from its bark, etc. In the same way, all sentient beings truly have the Divine Atma-Self as their real identity. But are they maturely functioning and fully serving as the Self? Are they really manifesting the Divine virtues of self-sacrificing compassion, generosity, empathy, goodness, kindness, and all-embracing love that we find in the true spiritual masters? Or are they still plagued by egotism in various subtle or not-so-subtle fashion, but rationalizing and justifying all such egocentricity as "God's will"?

Alan Jacobs’ brings out the importance of the preparatory work necessary for maturing of the sapling to a tree so that it bears fruit:

Neo Advaitin fallacy ignores the fact that there is an occlusion or veiling formed by the vasanas, samskaras, bodily sheaths and vrittis, and there is a Granthi Knot forming an identification between Self and mind which has to be severed. If this were not the case then the whole of humanity would be living from Absolute Consciousness. As it is humanity still lives from Reflected Consciousness, including the Neo Advaitin Teacher with his or her active vasanas, still identified with the mind.

That a person may have a ‘genuine enlightenment’ experience, where she sees through the illusion of ‘ego’ and be still identified with the mind, is well explained by the Buddha in his description of the four stages of liberation from fetters which bind us to the saṃsāra. The first stage, termed sotāpanna, is primarily characterized by the insight, “The body-mind complex is not mine, not me, not myself” which frees one from all doubts about the path to full liberation and from all rites and rituals. The instinctive tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion are attenuated, but still remain potent. These are substantially

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56 Timothy Conway, Nondual Spirituality or Mystical Advaita at: https://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/nondual-spirituality.html

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reduced in the second stage, termed sakadāgāmī, and finally extirpated in the third stage termed anāgāmī. But even then, the liberation is not complete. Even though the identification with the body-mind complex is not there, the conceit “I am” still remains due to deep seated latent ignorance and this is accompanied with very subtle sense of disquiet and wish to escape all that through rebirth in celestial realms. Proper investigation leads to the freedom from these so-called “higher fetters” and one is fully liberated, free from saṃsaraṇa, the cycle of birth and death, by attaining the final stage of liberation, the arahanta-phala. May be some neo-advaita teachers are mistakenly assuming earlier stages for full liberation!

The ‘nothing to do’ paradigm of neo-advaita contrasts with ‘strive night-and-day to remove impurities’ paradigm of orthodox Theravada Buddhism. Stephan Bodian makes interesting observations on these two paradigms:

Emphasizing the dangers of not having a practice for guidance and support, Buddhist teacher Stephen Levine has called Advaita the “high path with no railing” because seekers can fall off so easily. Whereas Buddhism risks becoming rigid in its insistence on certain prescribed practices and forms, the Advaita approach risks leaving seekers with no external guidelines or moral precepts to prevent them from becoming smug or complacent or assuming they are already enlightened when in fact, as Jean Klein used to say, they haven’t yet left the garage.

Prof. David Loy points out that, from a philosophical perspective, the difference between Advaita and Buddhism is like the difference between an object and its mirror image:

Buddhism, by denying the subject, and advaita, by denying the object, both resolve the problematic Subject-Object relationship. That they are mirror-images suggests that “nirvana” and “moksha” might amount to the same thing—Non-duality. “There is no self” equals “everything is the self.” Buddhism emphasizes “sunyata” because it is a phenomenological description of enlightenment. Advaita speaks of monistic “brahman” because it is a philosophical attempt to describe reality from the fictional “outside.”

Finally, would like to conclude this paper with an advaitic expression of the Buddha’s teachings on metta and anattā in the insightful observations of Nisargadatta Maharaj:


10. Acknowledgement

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57 https://tricycle.org/magazine/remove-seeker-remove-sought/
58 https://philpapers.org/rec/LOYEIB-2
59 Sunyata is the sanskrit word for emptiness which the Buddha explains implies “empty of self”.
60 Or pure consciousness
I would like to acknowledge with deep gratitude the valuable suggestions received from respected Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Amaro, Ajahn Asoko and many friends who went through various editions of the draft. The final responsibility for the contents of this paper, of course, rests with the author.