

Home in Awareness



“The ocean already there before any thought about it, before any search for it.”



Hosshin Ananda
HEARTMIND

For those who feel the pull toward home.

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Why My Heart Rests in Kashmir Shaivism

The Buddha taught anatta, that there is no lasting self built from the five skandhas. Form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness: none of these, alone or together, is a fixed thing that owns experience or stands apart from it. What we call a self is a composition, and compositions come apart. In meditation this is observable directly: the sense of “I” arises and dissolves the way a wave arises and dissolves, never a separate thing, always the ocean moving.

This raises a further question, one the Buddha closed down rather than answered directly. If there is no self behind the composing, what is doing the composing. He would not accept the question in that form, because it assumes a composer standing behind the process the way a potter stands behind a pot. His answer, given in the Kaccayanagotta Sutta, is that there is no one behind it. The skandhas arise through dependent origination, each condition giving rise to the next, the way a flame passes from one candle to another without anything travelling across. There is no Who. There is only the process.

It is easy to hear anatta and slide into nihilism, and the Buddha named that slide as a wrong turn, just as he rejected the opposite error of a permanent, unchanging self. Nihilism says there is no fixed self, so nothing continues, nothing matters, nothing carries

weight from one moment or one life to the next. The middle way he taught says something more careful: nothing fixed persists, not a physical substance, not a conceptual one, not even an energetic one in the sense qigong points to with qi, but real conditioned continuity does. Karma still functions. One life conditions the next the way one flame lights another, nothing substantial crossing over, nothing severed either. This is not a compromise between two metaphysical pictures. It is a refusal of the assumption both pictures share, that persistence requires some unchanging thing to persist, held constant as matter, as an idea of self, or as an underlying energy.

Where this leads differently is in what is said about awareness itself, and even within Buddhism there has never been agreement on this point.

Classical Madhyamaka, the Rangtong position associated with Tsongkhapa and the Gelug school, holds that every phenomenon without exception is empty of its own inherent nature. This includes the ultimate. Emptiness itself is empty. Nothing survives analysis as a truly existing thing, not the person, not the world, not awareness, not even shunyata. This is called shunyata shunyata, the emptiness of emptiness, meant to stop anyone turning emptiness into a hidden absolute standing behind everything.

The Heart Sutra carries this same refusal in its closing mantra: gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha, gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond. It does not stop at gone. Form is gone, and then emptiness itself is gone, and then even the idea of

having arrived somewhere called beyond is gone. Each stage empties the one before it, including the stage that just did the emptying, so that nothing, not even emptiness, is left standing as a final place to rest.

This is why the text became so central to Chan and Zen practice rather than staying a philosophical statement alone. Dogen, who brought this lineage into Japan and founded Soto Zen, treated the sutra's form is emptiness, emptiness is form not as something to believe but as something to sit as, practice and awakening held as one continuous activity rather than a technique aimed at a future arrival. In China, Sengcan, the Third Patriarch of Chan, wrote the same refusal into the Xinxin Ming a few centuries earlier: the great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. Stillness against movement, one against many, being against nonbeing, each pair is dissolved into the next rather than settled in favour of one side, so that nothing is left standing to be preferred or held onto.

Shentong, associated with Dolpopa and the Jonang school, holds instead that the ultimate, buddha nature, tathagatagarbha, is empty of everything other than itself, empty of the conditioned appearances that obscure it, but not empty of its own qualities. It is described as luminous, aware, already complete, uncovered rather than manufactured by practice. Dolpopa read the tathagatagarbha sutras as literally describing this. Gelug opponents called the view close to the Hindu Atman under Buddhist language, permanent, aware, blissful, present in all beings, and that disagreement has never been resolved.

Dzogchen sits in similar territory. Rigpa is described as primordially pure and spontaneously present, naturally luminous awareness, already the case rather than attained, obscured rather than absent. Longchenpa held primordial purity and spontaneous presence together so that neither is said to be more real than the other. Whether this is a distinct middle position, or moves toward the same ground Shentong and Kashmir Shaivism describe, is argued differently by different teachers and scholars, and I don't take it as settled by any of them.

Kashmir Shaivism, which is where I find most of my own language for this, gives the clearest account of the one thing no tradition, Buddhist, Hindu, or scientific, actually disputes: we are aware. This cannot be argued away, because the act of arguing it away is itself an instance of it. The term for this is *svatah prakasha*, self luminous awareness. A pot, a thought, a memory, a pain, none of these reveal themselves; they require awareness to shine on them before they exist for anyone. Awareness itself needs nothing else to reveal it. You do not require a second awareness to know that you are aware, the way you require light to see an object.

Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva, in the Pratyabhijna school, gave this two names. *Prakasha* is the bare fact of illumination, the "there is appearing" without which nothing could show up to anyone. *Vimarsha* is that light knowing itself, turning back on itself as "I am," rather than being a blank, unwitnessed shining. Shiva is named as *prakasha*, Shakti as *vimarsha*, and the teaching is that these have never been separate.

This is the specific point where Kashmir Shaivism and Rangtong diverge. Rangtong says that even this self knowing quality, if claimed to exist inherently, must be shown empty like everything else. Kashmir Shaivism holds that awareness is the one exception, on the grounds that whatever is doing the emptying out is itself awareness, and does not vanish under its own conclusion. So where Rangtong ends with no phenomenon anywhere holding a fixed nature, Kashmir Shaivism ends with one nature held to be fixed, awareness, chit, and the universe, every form, every contraction into apparent separateness, described as that one awareness in motion, spanda, appearing as many without ceasing to be one.

Science doesn't close this question either. Neuroscience maps what fires when you see red. It hasn't explained why there is something it is like to see red at all, rather than the information simply being processed with no one there to notice. Philosophers call this the hard problem. Kashmir Shaivism was addressing the same gap a thousand years earlier, through direct recognition in meditation rather than experiment. The path it offers, pratyabhijna, recognition, doesn't ask for anything to be attained. It holds that you are already this self luminous awareness, and have mistaken yourself for one of the objects appearing within it.

This view came to me first through sitting, not through argument, watching objects of experience arise and dissolve while the awareness they arose in did not dissolve with them. The philosophy came afterward, as language for what the sitting had already shown.

I keep returning, in my own writing, to the ocean and the wave, because the image carries the whole of this without needing to argue it. A wave is never separate from the ocean. It has no independent substance of its own, nothing that could be kept once the wave has passed, which is anatta exactly. There is no fixed, lasting thing called “this wave” apart from the water. And the wave is not nothing either. It is a real shape the ocean is taking, with its own rise and fall, for as long as it appears. Nothing is annihilated when a wave subsides; it stops being wave shaped and remains what it always was.

The same image gives some shape to the Rangtong and Shentong disagreement, without needing to decide it for anyone else. Rangtong is describing the wave: no wave has ever been found holding an essence of its own, separate and self sufficient. Shentong and Kashmir Shaivism are describing the ocean: something that does not stop being what it is, aware, even as every wave on it rises and falls. My own reading is that I’ve never found it necessary to stop at the wave when describing what sitting shows. The wave is empty. The water it’s made of, in my experience of it, is aware.

This is what I mean by the Heartmind, which is the teaching I work from at Heartmind. It isn’t another name for Kashmir Shaivism. Kashmir Shaivism is the tradition whose language comes closest to what I’ve found, the lens I use most often, but it isn’t the source of it, and I try to keep that distinction clear in anything I write. Every tradition I draw on, Kashmir Shaivism’s Prakasha and Vimarsha, Ibn Arabi’s Wahdat al Wujud, Eckhart’s

ground of the soul, Dzogchen's rigpa, the Upanishadic Tat Tvam Asi, is a different vocabulary for the same water. The Heartmind is that water, awareness that is also love, prior to whichever tradition supplies the words for it. It is called the heart because that is where this is felt and lived, not analysed, where the wave stops mistaking itself for something separate from the sea.

That is why I keep coming back to the idea that people are looking for home. Home isn't a place to arrange or a destination to reach, since reaching implies distance, and there's no distance between a wave and the water it's made of. It's the ocean already there before any thought about it, before any search for it.

None of this, though, is how it is known directly. In the sitting itself, without thought, there is no self and no no self, no Rangtong and no Shentong, no wave and no ocean to compare. Those are only needed when the awareness is being shared, put into words for another person, or turned over afterward in thought. In direct awareness there is nothing to argue and nothing to settle, only the awareness itself, and the bliss inherent in it, ananda, which is the same awareness known without division into knower and known. This is what I mean when I call it love. Not a feeling added to the awareness, but what the awareness is, once nothing is being described.

There is an old Chan saying that says the same thing without any of this vocabulary at all. Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. The activity does not change. What changes is that it is no longer mistaken for a thing produced by a person, a result the body or the mind has

manufactured through enough practice or enough years of sitting. The awareness was never downstream of the doing. It is what the doing has always been happening within, before any of it was noticed, and after. What there is, is the practice itself, wood chopped, water carried, and the awareness that was never absent from either. What I call resting in the Heartmind. My sincere prayer is the recognition of it in your own life.



*With love,
Hosshin*

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