



# THE PATH OF BLISS

An article by  
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on two different  
approaches to  
enlightenment

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Traditionally, there are said to be two main paths to what is variously called enlightenment, self-knowledge or unity consciousness. The end product, if there can be said to be an end, is the total realisation of our potential. That product is indescribable because it is so vast-ranging an experience. Enlightenment is more accurately described as the process that is our spiritual unfoldment or evolution. In this context, the word "spiritual" does not mean religious in the conventional sense but implies the cultivation of the finest possible qualities of the human being - and as we don't know what those qualities are unless we have achieved that full state of realisation, for most of us enlightenment remains something of a mystery. No-one can tell us what it is, anymore than the flavour of a strawberry can be described to someone who has never tasted one; we have to discover it for ourselves.

The fact that there are said to be paths gives a hint that there is a journey to be made. A little reflection will tell us that we don't need to travel to some distant Shangri-la but that the journey is an inner one. It is a transformation of consciousness and so the paths to self-realisation take us on an inward but upward path. "Upward" doesn't refer to any three-dimensional state but to a process of refinement. It is a refinement

that leads, in effect, to a kind of distillation, so that our essence or spirit - the most subtle aspect of our nature - can be released and known. For this to happen, there has to be a transformation not just in the way we think but in the way we perceive and experience everything. To put it another way, everything about us has to change: our mind, our emotions and our faculties of perception.

One of the two main paths is that of knowledge or, to use the Sanskrit term, *jñāna*. Many people think that this is a better path because they see it as "more grown-up". The path of knowledge initially requires understanding through intellectual analysis. It is a very noble path; it is also one which is exceedingly difficult to tread as, eventually, the intellect has to be transcended. While the thinking mind is busy, it is impossible to know one's true nature. That is because our nature is boundless and the intellect can only operate within boundaries. The thinking mind works by discrimination; it has to differentiate between this and that. This tendency makes it very difficult to stop thinking because, when we are following the path of knowledge, the process of differentiation is almost in a state of perpetual motion. The teacher on the path of *jñāna* has to employ great skill in setting things to think about which require the student's mind to stop. When the thinking mind takes a break and we remain sharply alert, the intuitive faculty is able to come into play so that, in the absence of thought, knowledge comes.

Knowledge helps to develop the important ingredient of enlightenment

that the Buddhists call wisdom. The other, equally important, ingredient is compassion, which requires development of the heart qualities. Total realisation demands the cultivation of both wisdom and compassion - head and heart. Developing heart qualities without those of the head can create a tendency to be over-emotional; conversely, head without heart is said to be like dry bones.

The path of compassion requires the individual to see others in a different way - even strangers are seen as souls who are actually very close to us. Through knowledge, we can understand that that is in fact so; there is nothing in the universe that is separate from us, or indeed that we are separate from. So an intellectual understanding may help us to overcome the habitual tendency we have to perceive ourselves as individual entities.

Seeing ourselves as separate from everything else generates a need to protect our identity at all costs and save it from annihilation. In everyday terms, that translates into looking after our own interests first and regarding everyone else's as secondary to our own. On the path of compassion, we have to correct that habitual tendency and instead learn to react to our environment and everyone in it in a new way - with a heart of understanding. In fact, it is necessary to develop what the intellectual type of person may often keep well hidden - feeling. Feeling in this sense does not mean becoming over-emotional, going into floods of tears at every moment; nevertheless, the compassionate person

does need to learn to cry - to cry from the heart. We need to learn, or rather remember, how to do this because even though we may think, "I'm okay, it's just everyone else who isn't," in reality there is no everyone else.

When we see suffering, it isn't independent from us - it's an aspect of our nature as well as of the nature of the person we see. If we have no internal reaction when we see pain, it is not because we are intelligent and so can conveniently, and rather judgmentally, compartmentalise it as the fruits of someone's karma. It is because we are ignorant and half asleep. We are numb inside. Knowledge, if it is deep enough, can help us overcome that lack of feeling because it shakes our perceptions so much that they start to wake up.

So really the two paths are not separate at all. Knowledge contains compassion and compassion contains knowledge. It is rather like the traditional t'ai chi symbol - yin contains the seed of yang, and vice versa. Either path is valid and, in theory at least, should get us to wherever we are ultimately headed; and as the destination is nothing other than ourselves, there should be nothing to stop us. But maybe it is possible to do a little better than doing what we normally do. In other words, if the intellectual type could access his or her feelings a little more and the one following the way of the heart could look a little more deeply, perhaps the journey would take on a faster pace.

Speeding up our enlightenment process by combining knowledge or wisdom with

love and compassion can give rise to the very pleasant experience of bliss. Bliss is not an end in itself but it can be a valuable indicator of forward motion on the path. Although the experience of bliss can arise during meditation, of far greater value is the arising of bliss during activity, because then we are almost certainly carrying out right action with right mental focus. When our psycho-physical system is properly integrated with itself, subtle energy channels are able to open up within the body and even more subtle currents of energy - the mental winds, as the Tibetans refer to them - open up pathways into more refined areas of awareness. Without losing focus on whatever project we are engaged in, life in that moment of bliss becomes extraordinarily rich and full. Total self-confidence arises. The outer world doesn't change but our experience of it does.

According to many teachings, our true nature is totally clear. The Dzogchen tradition in Tibetan Buddhism, for example, refers to the purity of unbounded awareness as *rigpa*. Everything arises as an appearance in rigpa but is not separate from it. To experience rigpa is rare and it is normally introduced to the student by an experienced teacher. But if we are fortunate, we may catch a glimpse now and again. It is initially seen as a state of pure clarity between thoughts. All knowledge is within rigpa and thoughts arise as the radiance of it. When we experience bliss, it is because our awareness is coming closer to the natural experience of rigpa.

It isn't so difficult to understand that pure awareness is only going to arise in our consciousness if our thinking becomes more correct, coherent and more aligned with who and what we really are, leading us towards an understanding of ourselves and a sense of unity with everything. Nor is it hard to appreciate that if our heart isn't fully open yet, we cannot love fully, and inevitably we are going to feel a sense of separateness. Bliss, on the other hand, can indicate that the two strands of wisdom and compassion are coming closer together and leading in the same direction.

Bliss is like the fragrance of the sea that can waft towards us on the breeze as we travel nearer to the coast. The smell of the salty air is not the sea but cannot be separated from it. Likewise, bliss is not enlightenment or pure awareness, but if our journey takes us along the dual road of wisdom and compassion, the perfume of bliss will draw us closer to where we want to go.

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Andrew has written two books – [The Great Little Book of Happiness](#) was published in 2008 and [Awakening Heart](#) was released on 1st June 2011.

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