

# THE STILLED MIND

## Bonaventure's Illumination Theory and the Vedānta School

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### 1. Introduction

Despite the disparity between various schools of philosophical thought, philosophy in its essence is focused upon the attainment of wisdom. This is demonstrated in Plato's allegory of the cave when the man who had gone up and out into the light descends, once again, into the darkness in order to free the other fettered men. The problem that arises is this: how does one gain this wisdom? How is it that a confined man becomes unbound from his own chains within the cave of the mind?

In his theory of illumination, Bonaventure proposes that man becomes wise when he becomes aware of his mind's illumination by the eternal reasons. For Bonaventure, it is through participation with the eternal reasons in the divine mind that one gains certainty of knowledge. All men can possess this knowledge, but only the man of wisdom is able to understand the illumination by the eternal reasons as it pertains to all creation. Man's mind, however, begins in ignorance of these reasons because of the deformity caused by the original sin. How then does man's mind achieve self-awareness of the eternal reasons when he is initially unconscious of them?

Though Bonaventure never explicitly elucidates the issue, he does propose a general sketch of the ascent to Wisdom through the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues coupled with contemplation. While Bonaventure offers a solution, it is not a practical one to the problem at hand, for he omits *the process* by which one cultivates virtue and contemplates. In the end, the question still remains unanswered: how does man obtain consciousness of the eternal reasons so that he may attain wisdom?

This article proposes that a synthesis can be formed between Bonaventure and the Advaita Vedānta School of Indian philosophy because the latter offers a process, called Yoga, in which man can become conscious of the eternal reasons. I begin by outlining Bonaventure's Illumination theory and the metaphysical and epistemological background

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of the Advaita Vedānta, drawing out the similarities and dissimilarities between the two. I, then, explicate the practice of Yoga, for it lends a precise procedure for breaking away from ignorance and ascending to Wisdom. It is accomplished through a stilling of the mind. Since the Hindu form of Yoga has a radically different metaphysical and epistemological foundation from Christianity, I will finally propose my own form of Christian Yoga, using the symbol of water as the central element.

## **2. Knowledge versus Wisdom in Bonaventure and the Vedānta School**

The human mind attains knowledge of the world primarily through sense perception, memory, and experience. While these methods of cognition are sources of knowledge, they are nevertheless imperfect. Empirical forms of knowledge are limited because they are continually subject to change. This is demonstrated in two ways: the mind itself can often be erroneous. It can perceive wrongly, misunderstand, and even forget. In addition to this, an object of itself has a certain mutability to it, becoming another possible cause for error. Consequently, these created principles produce a deficient understanding of the world. Man, as a result, is perpetually modifying his knowledge of the world in order to perfectly comprehend it. In *The Historical Constitution of Saint Bonaventure's Philosophy*, Quinn states: "Human knowledge is caused by its objects, so that, depending on them, it can change according to the exigencies of the things that cause it. Thus, the certitude of human knowledge depends on the things causing it."<sup>1</sup> This poses a dilemma: if human knowledge is imperfect and limited due to its dependence on an object which is mutable, then how can man ever achieve certitude?

Bonaventure asserts that every living creature is engendered with an inherent immutability because it contains within it a *logos* (pl. *logoi*) – the expression of God imprinted in their being. The *logoi*, nonetheless, are not restricted to being only found in creation, for their origin is found within the Logos. As contained in the Logos, they are known as the eternal reasons and are the *perfection* of creation since the Logos is unchanging and absolute. This is akin to a multi-faceted diamond.

Each facet is the perfect idea of a living creature radiating out from the Logos. When light radiates from the diamond, each facet refracts the light, projecting many rays from the diamond. It is the eternal reasons

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<sup>1</sup>John F. Quinn, *The Historical Constitution of Saint Bonaventure's Philosophy*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973, 444.

contained within the Logos which project outward like the rays from a diamond, shining within creation and upon the mind of man. Certitude, then, is attained by the human mind when it is illumined by the eternal reasons and becomes aware of the cause and *telos* to which the object at hand is oriented.<sup>2</sup>

Illumination, nevertheless, does not depend on man's consciousness of it; for, as the Gospel of John states, "the Word is the light that enlightens all men" (John 1:9). Bonaventure stresses, however, the significance of man's awareness of the eternal reasons because without this realization man can be *knowledgeable* but *unwise*. Wisdom, according to Bonaventure, is acquired when man not only realizes his mind's illumination through the eternal reasons but when he also actively partakes and reposes in the divine: For, the minds of people of science attain these reasons as principles that move the mind, while the minds of the wise attain these reasons as principles by which they are led back to a point of repose.<sup>3</sup> The mind's initial state is ignorant of the eternal reasons, however, because of man's fallen nature. How then does man attain consciousness of the eternal reasons so that he may obtain wisdom?

Bonaventure outlines a general procedure of man's journey from the state of ignorance to the state of wisdom through the symbol of the mirror. Man's mind is akin to a mirror, obscured by dust (ignorance and moral imperfection) which has settled upon its surface.<sup>4</sup> This obscurity caused by ignorance and moral imperfection impedes the eternal reasons from clearly reflecting onto the mind as dust obstructs light from clearly shining onto the surface of the mirror:

... but because it [the soul] is never fully conformed to God in this life, it does not attain to the reasons clearly, fully, and distinctly, but

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<sup>2</sup>White writes: "...the act [illumination] permits the philosopher to grasp not only an object but understand it in the light of the divine Idea, which is the exemplar of its being and the ultimate source of its intelligibility." John R. White, "The Illumination of Bonaventure: Divine Light in Theology, Philosophy and History according to Bonaventure," *Fides Quarens Mindum* 1, 2 (Winter 2001), 344.

<sup>3</sup>*Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, q. 4. Corpus; V:19, trans. Zachary Hayes, New York: The Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, 1992, 141.

<sup>4</sup>For, as St. Paul says, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror..." 1 Cor. 13:12.

only to a greater or lesser degree according to the degree of its conformity to God.<sup>5</sup>

The removal of the dust must come through the act of polishing the mirror. This act of polishing, in Bonaventure's *The Soul's Journey to God*, comes through the contemplation of God, which is achieved through mastery of the senses and the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues within oneself.<sup>6</sup> Bonaventure, however, does not explicitly state how one develops this self-mastery, cultivates virtue, or contemplates God. The question remains on how one fosters moral and intellectual virtue so that the mind can clearly reflect the eternal reasons, partake and repose in the divine.

The Advaita Vedānta, while differing in its cosmology from Bonaventure, offers a practical solution to the quandary surrounding man's path leading to self-awareness of the eternal reasons. Before that method is explicated, however, it is necessary to understand the philosophical background of the Vedānta School as well as its similarity to and divergence from Bonaventure's thought.

The Advaita Vedānta stems from a pantheistic belief in an Ultimate Reality (also known as Brahman, the Self, or Puru•a) that is in all of creation.<sup>7</sup> All living and non-living entities are dependent on the life of the Ultimate Reality living within them. It is erroneous and ignorant of one to believe, therefore, that *any* entity is independent of this Reality. While this seems similar to Bonaventure, in the sense that all living creatures are dependent upon God in order to be kept in existence, this concept is wholly different. The Advaita Vedānta believes that objects are only different forms of the same Reality.

In order to comprehend this, *The Upanisads* (sacred texts in Hinduism) use the analogy of clay. Clay, while it can take on many

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<sup>5</sup>*DQKC*, q. 4. Corpus, 136.

<sup>6</sup>It is interesting to note that Bonaventure's symbol of the mirror is not just symbolic of man's mind but also of moral perfection. For Bonaventure, it is through moral perfection and intellectual cultivation that one is able to repose in the eternal reasons and come to understand God's manifestation in the world and in himself.

<sup>7</sup>There is not enough room in this article to engage in the differentiation between the name variations for this Ultimate Reality; however, a standard book on Hinduism would provide the reasons for these variations. For this article, however, the *Puru•a* and the Self are both names for the Reality which is found in man. Brahman is another name for the Ultimate Reality which has not taken on a finite form.

different physical appearances, like a vase or a bowl, is still clay.<sup>8</sup> There is no uniqueness and individuality is non-existent. This also means that the individuality of humans is non-existent.

Since all things *are* Brahman, there is a certain immutability to objects because this Reality within is absolute and unchanging (this is analogous to Bonaventure’s *logoi*). The Advaita Vedānta asserts that man is in ignorance of this Ultimate Reality which composes both the world and himself. It is man’s duty, therefore, to break from this perpetual cycle of ignorance and become enlightened of this truth through a realization of the Self or Brahman that lives within him.<sup>9</sup> It is when man becomes enlightened by this truth that he finally obtains wisdom.

How does man achieve this realization of the Self? The Advaita Vedānta differentiates between two types of knowledge: *vyavahārika-satya* (lower knowledge) and *pāramārthika-satya* (higher knowledge). Lower knowledge is formulated by man’s experiential knowledge of the world through sense perception, memory, and other sources of cognition. According to Advaita Vedānta, this provides a very limited understanding of the world because these modes of knowing are confined to the impermanence of objects.<sup>10</sup> This impermanence, otherwise known as the illusory part of an object, is the apparent form that Brahman takes – hearkening back to the analogy of clay. It is the higher knowledge which leads to the ability to see Brahman within all objects and within oneself. It is this type of knowledge that leads to Wisdom. This higher knowledge is not gained, however, through intellectual endeavours or the scriptures but through Brahman’s self-revelation to man and a process known as Yoga.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>*Chāndogya Upanisad* 6:1.4-1.6, Eknath Easwaran, trans. *The Upanishads*, Tomales: Nilgri Press, 1987.

<sup>9</sup>The *Bhagavad-Gita* states: “But ignorance is destroyed by knowledge of the Self within. The light of this knowledge shines like the sun, revealing the supreme Brahman” (verses 16-17).

<sup>10</sup>This is similar to Henry of Ghent’s interpretation of Illumination. Bonaventure himself did not hold to this position. He believed that man *can* know the certitude of objects despite his ignorance of the eternal reasons. Knowledge formulated through cognition, while faulty, is not unreliable – it *is* a source of knowing.

<sup>11</sup>The *Bhagavad-Gita* says: “To those steadfast in love and devotion I give spiritual wisdom, so that they may come to me. Out of compassion I destroy the darkness of their ignorance. From within them I light the lamp of wisdom and dispel all darkness from their lives” (verses 10-11). Does this indicate, then, that there is an

### 3. Yoga is the Suppression of the Oscillations of Mental Substances

Self-realization, i.e., the attainment of Wisdom, arises in the silence of an undisturbed mind through a practice known as Yoga. The word ‘yoga’ is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning to “make whole.”<sup>12</sup> The practice of yoga can, then, be thought of as the art of becoming whole. This wholeness unites a spirit fragmented by passions, pre-conceived judgments, imagination, dreams and other forms of inner disturbance.

The method of becoming whole is through the stilling of the mind. Yoga revolves around Patañjali’s teaching: “*Yoga citta vritti nirodha*” (“Yoga is the suppression of the oscillations of mental substance”).<sup>13</sup> These oscillations are the mind’s confinement to preconceived judgments, associations, imagination and other forms of fluctuation that are projected onto an object, distorting it from what it truly is.<sup>14</sup> This silencing of the mind does not give sudden enlightenment, but is a necessary first step. This stilling of the mind progresses to the next stage of Yoga, known as concentration (*dhāraṇā*).

Concentration is defined as the maximum amount of attention focused on a single spot. This state of maximum attention, as I stated earlier, can only be achieved when the mind is calm and silenced. There are, however, good and bad forms of concentration. They fall under the categories of *disinterested* and *interested* concentration.<sup>15</sup> The former is when the mind is detached from enslaving thoughts or passions whereas the latter is dominated by them. It is the former that leads to enlightenment while the latter is what brings about mental fluctuations. While these two types seem disparate enough, it is easy to mistake the interested concentration for the disinterested one. I shall give an example to illustrate further. A monk absorbed in prayer, repeatedly chanting the *mantra*, such as “*Om*” over and over again in order to focus his mind on contemplating

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essential darkness to the mind? This is a possible area for future research.

<sup>12</sup>Ravi Ravindra, “Yoga and the Quintessential Search for Holiness,” *Journal of Dharma* 20, 3 (July-September 1995), 245.

<sup>13</sup>Swami Hariharānanda Āranya, *Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali*, trans. P. N. Mukerji, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983, 6.

<sup>14</sup>Again, the *Bhagavad-Gita* states: “Just as a fire is covered by smoke and a mirror obscured by dust, just as the embryo rests deep within the womb, knowledge is hidden by selfish desire – hidden, Arjuna, by this unquenchable fire for self-satisfaction, the inveterate enemy of the wise” (verses 38-39).

<sup>15</sup>Anonymous, *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. Robert Powell, New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1993, 9.

Brahman, is a form of disinterested concentration. It is a form of disinterested concentration because the monk uses the *mantra* as a way of emptying and detaching himself from distracting thoughts or feelings that may enter his mind. Another monk absorbed in prayer, focusing on conjuring up a *feeling* of joy as a way of contemplating Brahman is a form of interested concentration. This monk differs from the former because he is becoming absorbed and attached *in* a feeling, leading him not towards Brahman but rather away from Him.

Now, it is erroneous to presume that detachment is a form of passivity or non-thinking. Detachment does not focus on man being unemotional or unresponsive, but rather in not permitting these attachments to *dominate* him. Let's take the example that I had given in the previous paragraph concerning the monks. The monk who repeats the *mantra* could very well be feeling at peace or joyous in his communion with the divine. The difference is that he is not allowing the feelings or thoughts he is experiencing to hinder that communion. The other monk, on the contrary, permits the feeling to dominate his thoughts. This is what it means to be attached to something, whether it is an emotion, biases or thought processes. The monk who is attached to the feeling of joy cannot commune with the divine because, in a way, he has closed himself off through concentrating on the feeling and all the subsequent memories or images that it conjures up.

Moving onward, disinterested concentration leads into a meditative absorption called *dhyāna*. This state is where the attention between the subject and the object is undisturbed by mental fluctuations and the mind is entirely focused. When the mind becomes focused and completely emptied, it is not the self but *Purusa* that sees. This state is called contemplation or *samādhi*. When a person reaches this state he can attend to the object and see it for what it truly *is* because his mind is open to the intelligibility of the object (this state is called *buddhi*).<sup>16</sup> Yoga philosophers believe that it is the *Purusa* that sees the object for what it truly is and not the mind because they believe that the mind, like all things, is an object and, therefore, cannot be a knower. The subject has to be one who is not an object, leaving *Purusa* as the only capable knower: "[it is] when the mind

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<sup>16</sup>Ravindra, "Yoga and the Quintessential Search for Holiness," 252.

is totally silent and totally alert, both the real subject (*Purusa*) and the real object (*prakrti*) are simultaneously present to it.”<sup>17</sup>

Ravindra compares this to sculpting. The process of Yoga is a process of excavating the *Purusa* from the body, like chiselling a statue that is already within the piece of unformed marble, except that the “yogi himself is the stone and the tools.”<sup>18</sup> The purpose of the entire progression from the stilling of the mind to *samādhi* is so that the *Purusa* within man can become uninhibited from clearly and accurately seeing the object at hand for what it truly is – as Brahman.<sup>19</sup>

Yoga, though it believes that stilling the mind is the key to obtaining enlightenment, is useless if one does not also nurture his moral life in conjunction with this practice. For this reason, Yoga also believes that consciousness of the Self can be achieved through charity and moral uprightness.<sup>20</sup> So, in order for one to achieve this higher state of mind, he must have a compassionate heart as well as a clear mind.

The goal behind yoga is to gain knowledge of the Reality within creation and oneself so that man may become united with this Reality and ultimately liberated (*moksa*) from his enslavement to ignorance and his own individuality. For in being united to Brahman, man loses his false identity as a person independent of Brahman. This includes liberation from body, personality, desires, and other unique characterizations of man that are not Brahman and, therefore, *not* who he really is.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Christian Yoga and the Symbol of Water

Yoga, though rooted in a different epistemological foundation than Bonaventure, can be applied to Illumination as a means of solving the dilemma at hand. Instead of it being a practice to be liberated *from* one’s

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<sup>17</sup>Ravindra, “Yoga and the Quintessential Search for Holiness,” 249.

<sup>18</sup>Ravindra, “Yoga and the Quintessential Search for Holiness,” 247.

<sup>19</sup>Ravindra compares mind to a translucent jewel which allows the object to colour the mind with its own colouring, for the *Purusa* receives certitude of the object passively.

<sup>20</sup>“Consciousness [associated with the mind] can achieve clarity and calmness through the cultivation of friendliness towards the happy, compassion towards the miserable, joy towards the virtuous and indifference towards the non-virtuous.” Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *An Introduction to Yoga Philosophy: An annotated Translation of the Yoga Sutras*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2001, 30.

<sup>21</sup>This is a limitation in Hindu thought because it destroys the individual and creates a dualism between body and spirit which of itself leads to many philosophical problems, though it cannot be elaborated upon in this article.



self, the methods of yoga can be used as a means of a *reintegration* with oneself, the divine, and creation. Only when man reintegrates himself with the divine and the creation, can he finally be raised to that higher reality where he can perceive the eternal reasons clearly and repose in them. I will use the analogy of water in order to illustrate my point.

As I stated earlier, human mind is continually being illuminated by the eternal reasons, regardless of his awareness of them. Ignorance, however, does affect the clarity with which the eternal reasons reflect upon the mind. This ignorance impedes man's capacity to recognize the *logoi* within all of creation, rendering the *cause* and *telos* of living creatures unknowable. This can be symbolized with water. When the light of the eternal reasons shine, reflecting the image of the object on the water's surface, it is whole, complete and seen clearly for what it truly is. When turbulence appears, ripples form in the water, distorting the image. This turbulence is analogous to mental fluctuations, specifically preconceived notions, associations, passions, imagination and other forms of inner disturbance. These mental fluctuations cause fragmentation and disunity within man, distorting the reflection of the eternal reasons. The water has to once again become still and whole so that the obscuring of the image dissipates. This is accomplished through yoga.

When the water is settled and calm, then states of concentration, meditation and contemplation can occur. Meditation allows the mind to perceive the immutable *logoi* within all of creation. After meditation, it is in contemplation that one enters into communion with the divine. It is through this contemplation that man obtains wisdom because he is actively aware and involved in his cognitive participation with the divine. He apprehends the eternal reasons that illumine his mind and so, like with Hindu Yoga, he does not look with his own eyes when he views creation, but with the eyes of the divine. This stilling of the mind in of itself, however, does not lead to wisdom unless one also fosters moral perfection within him or herself.

The cultivation of virtues within oneself can also be akin to water. One may question already how water can be used as a symbol of *cultivation* when it is used as a symbol of passivity within the context of this paper. I respond that any conscious act requires both an *active* and *reflective* principle. While water predominantly symbolizes a passive, reflective principle, it should not be presumed that because of this it cannot

be used as a symbol of moral cultivation, as I will show in the following paragraphs.

When man's spirit is calm, undisturbed by personal passions and desires, it will be able to clearly reflect the active Spirit within man so that he can comprehend "whence it comes and whither it goes."<sup>22</sup> When water clearly reflects the Spirit, it then becomes the divine Breath:

Reintegrated consciousness must be born of Water and Spirit, after water has once again become Virginal and Spirit once again become divine Breath or Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

It is at the point when this unification between the Breath and Water occurs that man's consciousness is reborn into its original state before the Fall.<sup>24</sup> How can man be reborn into his original state before the Fall? When one is still enough to reflect the divine Breath, man becomes aligned with the divine will and better able to make decisions that lead to moral perfection. This is fulfilled *in* and *through* the body, for it is not liberation from one's body but through one's body. The person becomes whole again when his being becomes like water, being unified with and reflecting the divine Breath. This is Christian Yoga.

### **5. The Symbol of Water versus the Mirror**

Now one may wonder why I had decided upon using the symbol of water instead of Bonaventure's symbol of the mirror, for both are accurate in portraying the illumination of the eternal reasons on man's mind and the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues. What does the symbol of water have to illustrate that the symbol of the mirror cannot? To this I reply that the discrepancy between the symbol of water and the mirror is due to the area of emphasis.

The symbol of the mirror is insufficient in symbolizing the process of human awareness of the eternal reasons. A mirror, while it is accurate in depicting how the mind of man is illuminated, it cannot portray the different states of the mind, i.e., whether it is stilled or distracted, disturbed or quieted because the mirror remains the same in all states. It assumes that man's mind has a static nature and, therefore, cannot accurately reflect its dynamism.

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<sup>22</sup>Anonymous, *Meditations on the Tarot*, 30.

<sup>23</sup>Anonymous, *Meditations on the Tarot*, 30.

<sup>24</sup>For, Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of Water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." John 3:5.

While the symbol of water is sufficient in explicating the mind's path to consciousness of the eternal reasons and in cultivating intellectual virtue, I believe, however, that it is deficient in the area of adequately illustrating the development of moral virtue. I think that the act of polishing a mirror is better suited to describe this particular process because it stresses the *act* of fostering moral perfection by removing imperfections like dust or rust from the mirror. In other modes of thought, including Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, the symbol of the mirror is used to describe the process of moral perfection because of this physical act of removing dust and rust, which is symbolic of moral imperfection.<sup>25</sup> It would be valuable then in future research to delve into the strengths and weaknesses of both symbols as they pertain to Bonaventure.

Now, this also poses a deficiency that is in both symbols, namely, that neither of them can solely convey the entire process of attaining wisdom. They can illuminate specific areas within the idea, however, they also cast shadows upon other areas. It would be erroneous, therefore, for either symbol to be dismissed or diminished in value in light of the other. Explaining symbolism and its significance in philosophy would be another area of future research since it is crucial in understanding ideas like Bonaventure's Illumination theory.

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<sup>25</sup>Gail Eaton, in his article "Perfecting the Mirror," explains how Islam uses the mirror as a symbol for the heart, and how the mirror continually needs to be polished in order to foster moral perfection. This, however, is not restricted to solely Islam as I have stated above.