

Dear Super Fox,

Here is my reply to Omega Point's many points:

First, a bit about my background. I started meditating in the Mahasi tradition but ran into problems mostly beginning in the territory after moving on from what I think of as second path, when suddenly I was seeing the luminosity of phenomena and noticing that all energies, all emotions, all of this fluxing space, all seemed to be luminous, and this seemed really important, but the Theravada didn't talk about it, and the people who were my teachers then didn't talk about it, and they had no idea what I was talking about, and I got frustrated, as I was seeing something they didn't see, so I started looking elsewhere.

Specifically, I started looking at sources like Chögyam Trungpa, as well as books like *The Light of Wisdom* by Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, as well as things like *Tracing Back the Radiance* on the teachings of Chi Nul, a Korean Chan monk. I was particularly taken with some very specific things, such as the section on the 5 Buddha Families in *Journey Without Goal* by Trungpa, which talks about seeing the enlightened aspect of all qualities of being. I was also influenced by *Introduction to Tantra*, by Lama Yeshe, as well as Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's book *Dharma Paths*, and later by books like *Secret of the Vajra World*, by Reggie Ray, as well as texts such as *Liberation on the Palm of Your Hand*, by Pabongka Rinpoche. I read a lot of Taoist stuff in odd sources, such as the cartoons of Tsai Chih Chung, examples being things like *The Roots of Wisdom* (which is not actually strictly Taoist, but it is in the ballpark). I read *Moon in a Dewdrop* about the teachings of Dogen many times. This is a very incomplete list, but it gives you a sense of the thing. I also played around with Ceremonial Magick, but that is another story for another time.

At some point, I realized that all moments must spontaneously realize emptiness, luminosity, centerlessness, selflessness, undifferentiated suchness, or whatever you wish to call it, and that this must be the all-the-time, walking-around way of being. About 95% of the field knew it, and chasing down the 5% that didn't became my obsession. So, my practice changed in some ways, but kept basic facets of the Theravada in others.

I played around with vipassanizing (seeing the Three Characteristics of) the 6th subjhana aspect of the 4th jhana (meaning the Boundless Consciousness sub-  
aspect) of the formed fourth jhana. I played around with noticing all thoughts as colors of space, as textures of space, and practiced really hard to see space in all its aspects as the utterly transient thing that it is, spending time vipassanizing the 5th jhana itself. I sought to bring the light of clear, direct comprehension to layer up on layer upon layer of subtle illusory duality, trying hard to figure out how to get the last subtle layers of duality to untie themselves, to realize their true nature. I got really good at being mindful of all of the sensations of my scalp and face, trying to get so good at seeing all categories of sensations that could make up the illusion of a separate self or Subject that nothing would be left to create this illusion, as the habit of seeing it as it was would be too strong, too automatic. It was a long process that went on for about 6 years of hard work.

I also played around with my own version of what might loosely be termed tantra (which OP warns about, and I can see why, as, were one not to guard the mind really carefully when it gets that strong, that level of practice can really quickly turn to some really screwed up stuff and crazy-land). On a kasina retreat using candle flame, I got so that I could find myself in a totally different realm with remarkably detailed visualizations of luminous, 3D, intelligent and interactive tantric deities (particularly this white male one with white female consort in the classic pose) and then get No-Self Door Fruitions as the light of their awareness collapsed this way into the sense of intelligence on this side. I did this again and again and again on retreat with a high degree of concentration.

This is a short summary of a much longer and more complex process that took years, spanning the time from December or so 1996 to my last retreat in 2003 in April.

Oddly enough, after lots and lots of playing around with things that might be considered relatively fancy, and after getting very frustrated with the whole thing, I actually turned back to some very Theravadan assumptions on my last retreat: do not let any single sensation anywhere in the entire space of experience go by without instantly comprehending its true nature, not a single friggin' one. After a week of doing that at an extremely high degree of intensity, things flipped over for

the first time to the pristine, direct, non-dual, centerless, etc. way of perceiving things, and then that would fade and it would feel like my heart was broken. I would get it back, it would fade again. I went through a week of that, which was basically awful half the time (the half when I was not in the better way of perceiving things), and then finally, a week later, it stayed that way and that was that on that front.

Hopefully that helps clarify the background to my answer, anyway.

Now, to answer Omega Point:

*If one is no longer resonating with the Theravada path and one observes that one's progress has stagnated, then moving on to either the path of transformation or the path of spontaneous liberation is perfectly reasonable to consider.*

I couldn't agree more. Doing that helped me a lot. In fact, if you read MCTB with an eye for it, you will see lots of Dzogchen in there, it is just not obvious. You will also see the Tantric perspective on emotions, though it is not that obvious.

*The contemporary Theravada path, relatively speaking, is still in an "early" experimental phase.*

Yes and no. Literally hundreds of thousands of people have trained in Mahasi Centers during the last 60+ years or so. It is a large sample size, larger than the number of people who have probably practiced some of the higher tantras. Are there problems? Yes. Do people run into problems in other systems (such as the Tibetan systems)? Yes. Are all the kinks worked out of any of those systems? No.

*This point is then used to seriously call into question the textual basis of most of 20th century Theravada meditation, no matter how effective.*

As a pragmatist, I love the qualifier...

*while in fact a small number of texts explain how the critical samatha practice evolves into vipassana.*

Such as my favorite Sutta MN 111.

*The vipassana-centric or vipassana-only approaches seem to have originated in the colonial era as part of the modernist Buddhism movement as the schools attempted to address the challenges of the modern age. It was a response born of a growing skepticism of samatha, or more precisely, the degeneration of samatha found across many of the theravadas which allowed local folk customs and lore to inform and taint their practice.*

Totally true.

*Additionally, “access concentration” or “momentary concentration” which are commonly practiced now, are commentarial ideas and so a later interpretation and thus it is argued that interpreting the texts and thus one’s practice through such a lens may indeed amount to a misinterpretation of those very texts and thus of what is designated as proper practice in regards to the supermundane path laid down by the Buddha (regardless of their efficacy)*

Scholastically he is spot on, and again, as a pragmatist, I love the qualifier...

*it appears that in many instances both a degenerated samatha and an overemphasis on vipassana persists in modern practice.*

I totally agree. Hence, I advocate for both and using them skillfully to help augment and balance each other. Years of watching those who try it too “dry” frying themselves here should convince anyone reading that this view makes sense.

*For example, there is a tendency to reinterpret the qualities of jhana in some cases totally leaving out listed qualities and having a “good enough” attitude; an over-willingness to bend the descriptions of the qualities in favor of one’s experience, to exaggerate aspects of one’s experiences of samatha/jhana to fit the listed qualities, even if they are but an extremely weak shadow or imitation of the actual quality in question; and thus to iterate, an overall tendency for complacency, a settling for a weak and generally unstable samatha that one self-soothes oneself, in quite a deceptive and gullible fashion, into thinking that it instead is a strong samatha or at least qualifyingly enough.*

Omega Point writes truth. I would add that I still argue against those who are in the "only really, really ultra-hard jhana is jhana" camp, as even moderate jhana has real benefits and can be used for lots of useful things, but I also totally agree that people often settle for really weak jhana not knowing that the stronger versions can be much stronger than the imagine.

*Lastly, that samatha and vipassana are not two separate baskets, but two sides of something indivisible, very simply put, the vipassana side dealing with discrimination, discernment, understanding and thus the overcoming of cogitative defilements; while samatha deals with peace, bliss, energy, heart qualities and thus the overcoming of non-conceptual (or super-subtle conceptual/perceptual), somatic, and emotional defilements.*

I also totally agree, as it is basically impossible to do either pure samatha or vipassana, as there will always be some mix of these, and this gets more and more true as realization progresses, though it is possible to use the artificial dichotomy to provide some useful guidance for those who are getting stuck one way or the other.

*There of course are still the looming issues of the original challenges from many of the schools predating Theravada, that of the status of the arhat, the particular emphasis or lack thereof of the Bodhisattva path, and the status of the true nature of mind whether it was originally pure etc.*

Actually, there are some Thai Forest schools that place more emphasis on the Bodhisattva path, but they are clearly a small part of the complex thing, and you find the ideal of being a Bodhisattva in the Pali Canon, as the Buddha himself was one for countless lifetimes before becoming a Buddha, so it says. The status of the arahat is a problem, as I go on and on about.

- 1. Arhats are not truly enlightened and do not truly reach nirvana.or*
- 2. Arhatship entails an enlightened state and reaches nirvana, however this enlightenment and nirvana is not maximally consolidated.or*
- 3. Arhats are totally enlightened, reach nirvana, and are very close if not virtually identical to Buddhas.*

There are other options, actually... Consider the point of view presented in MCTB: that arahats have dissolved artificial perceptual dualities, stopped habitual subject-fixation, ended the misperception of the true nature of phenomena, eliminated the sense of the split between the internal and external spaces mentioned above, unified the field into an empty, transient, luminous, intrinsically self-revealing flux, and thus accomplished the end of that particular axis of development, while leaving the question of many other axes of development open, those being dependent upon the individual in question. How can there be consolidation of something that is perceived that way? There is nothing at that point to consolidate.

One must then posit the definition of a Buddha. It is relevant, as to compare two things, one must know what we are comparing. Certainly, by the standard Theravadan definition, in which Buddhas have necessarily perfected all sorts of other aspects of development, including having 40 teeth and arms that hang down past their knees, as well as having perfected all samatha jhanas, as well as eliminating all unskillful personality traits, as well as having mastered all the powers, the two are very far apart except along the single axis of direct realization of the truth of things and whatever benefits that specific aspect of perceptual transformation necessarily and always brings with it.

Concerning anicca, dukkha, and anatta, they are deep and profound things, much more deep than most generally give them credit for, and shouldn't be so easily dismissed. It is easy to not take them as far as they can go. While I can see the appeal of the Tibetan versions, I still like those personally.

Concerning 3rd path and energy practices, that was actually the territory in which I found them to be most useful, and actually did some on that same retreat where I got my concentration strong and could see and merge with images of deities and the like. I got so that I could see them all, manipulate them all, just like one would intend to do anything else. It produced some very interesting effects, and now this later lead to anything else, I can only barely speculate. I categorically disagree that ejaculation necessarily impedes spiritual practice, as much as it gets tossed around. I think it helps some at times, may help to balance and chill some things out, may also cause some at times to be sleepier or have less energy, but also can calm restlessness and provide ease and a sense of well-being. I think it is more contextual and individual/situation-specific, at least in my view.

Regarding his commentary on the Theravada necessarily being the path of the strict renunciate, the more modern practice of alternating heavy, intense single-technique retreats with basically no breaks in technique while awake with getting one's daily life back together and pursuing worldly goals actually works better than he thinks it does, though I agree that being sure to take daily life as path and to work whenever possible to see its true nature as one goes about it really helps, as it helped me make that oscillation between the two extremes work a lot better.

I also categorically disagree that it isn't possible to understand the true nature of sensations as a householder, though I definitely think that really solid retreats and really solid practice during them with plenty of daily life practice makes things much more likely to happen, something that most don't do.

It is true that when I was in my most serious practice years (1995-2003), I barely watched TV, didn't hang out with friends much, read dharma books like crazy (way over 100 during that period, many studied seriously and read again and again, including things like the Middle Length Discourses, the Visuddhimagga and Vimuttimagma, the Long Discourses, and lots of other Pali texts), burned nearly all available vacation time on retreats, and practiced daily-life mindfulness like a person possessed, like my hair was on fire (maybe that is where it went?). I did some sort of formal practice a minimum of at least an hour each day and, for some of the early years (1996-1997) actually sat at least 3 if not 5 hours each day, this while working some part-time jobs and living on very little money.

I totally agree that Westerners are generally slackers/cynics/meditation-in-a-pill-if-possible-type who don't want to disrupt their life while Easterners are more into the folk/religious aspects and that the transplanted Easterners are cynics and all interfere with practice.

The lack of qualified tutors and the critique of free-for-all freestyle practice with poor direction and guidance is also a totally valid point, just as parts of their critique of ultra-dogmatic, hyper-traditional traditions also makes some very important points.

The urge to purge the religion and strange and uncomfortable cultural trappings

from Buddhism is very much my thing, actually. Fire rituals with butter and meat offerings, bone trumpets, fancy hats, human skull bowls, freakishly high levels of binge alcohol consumption, medieval-feudal wars between traditions, virtual peasant slavery, sexual exploitation, sectarian arrogance, patriarchal dominance: not my things, to put it gently. It is easy to forget what Tibet has been like, particularly before the last 70 years or so, and particularly before kids like Jamgon Kongtrul helped to bring the warring sides together into something less preposterously violent and dysfunctional. Stripping all of that crap out sounds like a fantastic idea. I could launch into the problems with modern Zen in Japan, etc. but that would take all day, wouldn't it? You really want to keep all that?

I also do agree that reducing all the practices to some low-grade mindfulness is equally vile and misguided. Hence, I advocate for keeping the powerful techniques, the maps of high-level practice, the richness of the technical beauty, conceptual sophistication, and empowerment that comes from these things at their best while leaving so much of the insanity that comes along with the traditions to rot on the great trash-heap of the past. Just as I am no fan of lots of aspects of my American culture, just so I am not a fan of lots of aspects of the original cultures these traditions come from, just so you know I try to apply the same standards to all of it. Needlessly huge SUVs being driven by single people guzzling gas from ultra-conservative Saudi royalty-owned production facilities? Not into it. Global imperialistic robber-baron capitalist oligarchy? Not a fan. I could go on and on. What I worry about is when anyone buys so much into something that they will take the bad of it without feeling like they can seriously question its value and function. That happens with the meditative traditions all the time, and to me represents intellectual retardation.

His warning that the take what works approach can lead to a very watered down set of standards is frequently mentioned by others, such as myself, here on this forum and is worth perpetually guarding against, but this phenomenon is not anything new, as plenty of the history of all of the ancient and culturally-embedded traditions also demonstrate with equal obviousness, again consider travesty of modern Zen in Japan, consider the totally ritualized/lifestyle/prestige-building/political/etc. version of Theravada "practiced" today in most monasteries in Thailand, etc, and I could basically pick on all the others (Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Vietnam, etc.) in similar ways. I could also blast 99% of the Western Tibetan

practitioners I know for basically saying, “The Mahayana and Vajrayana are so much better than the Hinayana as they have the Bodhisattva Vow!” and then having the learning of that bit of dogma being the farthest their “practice” ever gets.

Wilber... What to say, eh? It is not that he doesn't make some good and interesting points and draw some fine correlations and the like, as he clearly does. However, while no expert in his stuff, I don't see him reaching the level he claims to. I could be wrong, as I don't know him well.

Stephen Batchelor: both times I met him we instantly didn't get along, to put it gently. I will leave it at that. His wife Martine is a great person and practitioner, though, with that great sense of light and humble humor that marks someone with a mature practice.

As to the global decline in realized beings, I am not sure, as firm numbers are damn hard to come by. I do know that in the Theravadan world until the last 120 years or so there were precious few enlightened beings and this really hit an upswing in numbers during the 20th century, producing some fine practitioners and great teachings. I am less aware of the numbers in Tibet and how they compare from, say, the 19th century to today.

I do know that I personally know a lot more people with strong practices, and I am not sure if this is the effect of some of the few that are out there gathering together to participate in forums like this one, and this thus just being a networking effect that obscures some true decline.

Regarding the problems with reconciling the paths and bhumis and the like, it clearly is problematic for very large numbers of reasons, not the last of which is what I call the “package models” that each entail, meaning that if you have this quality or realization then you will automatically have these other very specific qualities and aspects, favorite examples being that anagamis couldn't possibly have erections or orgasms as they can't feel ordinary lust, as well as bodhisattvas of the whatever bhumi definitely manifesting exactly 100,000,000,000,000,000,000, etc. copies of themselves to bring awakening to that many realms and beings at all times. Both barking crazy, if you ask me. OP: do you really believe in and like the full and unedited dogma of the bhumi models? So often we are quick to poke holes

in a tradition based on the worst parts of its dogma while making allowances for the worst dogma of our own tradition. I do this myself regularly and am doing it actually right now, but it makes the point that we must all be careful of this pervasive tendency.

That is why I prefer my Simple Model, my many and various axes of development that don't assume progress on one axis will guarantee progress on another, breaking the models down into their more component parts so that we may begin to address each aspect of them, and the like.

Will it be impossible to create reasonable models and correspondences that can adequately accommodate the wide range of the specific manifestations of individual practitioners and their various progressions along the many and various axes of development while maintaining high standards and strict criteria for essential aspects of the path that serve the basic function of helping to guide and direct and inspire better practice? I personally believe we will be able to do this when the various traditions get over themselves and people can sit down and talk like mature, rational adults and really let their hair down and swap notes and stories and try to line it up in a way that goes beyond the pathetic and infantile term-wars and dogma-spats and finally gets down to business.

Given that it may be hundreds of years before anything that functional happens, if ever (doesn't seem to have actually ever occurred during the last 2,500 years or so in the way I dream it will) we will probably be waiting a while, but those are the conversations I dream of having in my most optimistic fantasies. Omega Point: interested in something like that? I could spend a whole day talking about these things if you are up for it, and I doubt that would even really be more than a crude beginning. The problem with modern life is that we don't take the time to do the deep, very long conversations that would help to sort out so many things and so much is wasted in misunderstanding and confusion. This goes doubly for the "internal arts" we concern ourselves with here. The biases between traditions fly so thick and fast, we stumble over words from other traditions we are so sure we understand but don't, there is the issue of personal quirks of language usage, and the list of barriers to real dogma-transcending dialogue goes on and on and on. You want to talk about rare beings? Those who have realization and would be willing to talk about it honestly and without the armor of their tradition and social role all

around them: that's more rare than a live snow lion.

Regarding Omega Point's progression from Hinayana to Mahayana to Dzogchen-like/Rigpa-based practices to spontaneous liberation, makes sense to me and sounds like a nice way to go. It seems to have produced good results, which again is what I care about.

As to what OP calls consolidation, I also have noticed various things have helped to integrate some aspects of the thing I call arahatship, untying, centerlessness, non-duality, and other names, as those who have read this forum for a while know, so that progression and deepening makes sense to me also.

Regarding practice being crude at best without some minimum understanding of things, this is still where I think that the Mahasi practices kick ass, as I still don't know anything that is on average faster for getting people to Stream Entry than a good Mahasi retreat done really well as instructed. As my friend Sean Pritchard (ex monk who taught Mahasi retreats for years) says, if they do the technique, progress is basically guaranteed and is basically mechanical, in that it just steps along in a remarkably predictable way.

What is interesting is that as soon as I got stream entry, all I could think about was how everything was the balanced manifestation of empty compassion, and that this applied to all beings without exception, and I did this with very strict noting technique in a very Theravadan context and set of conceptual frameworks. Suddenly so much Mahayana stuff that had been so obscure suddenly made sense, and I also saw how I had misread plenty of the Theravadan stuff to miss those aspects in it. Thus, one should be careful to not imagine that there is no overlap, that one can't lead to the other, that they are unrelated, that realization is totally different between traditions.

OP's commentary about how you should do some very specific energetic and visualizations practices is beyond easy ability to comment on, as I lack the fine points and haven't done those, so can't reasonably judge them.

As to the necessity of a guru, here we differ. I had no guru that I am aware of, though I studied with a bunch of people with very strong practices and various

degrees of understanding of various things. Does that count? I don't think so from the Tibetan point of view. Am I so rare as all that? I totally reject the idea, lest it poison the minds of those who would devalue their own abilities and shoot for something less than they were capable of as they also had no guru. I know plenty of great practitioners who have and had no guru.

His comments about energy and bodhichitta and the like are beyond me, as those seem very practice and tradition-specific and I didn't practice in his tradition.

As to the dangers of the path, I agree, can be dangerous, even just doing something simple like noting or following the breath, even more if one is playing around with energy and powers and visualizations, as that side of things is very powerful but also very risky, as psychosis crawls much closer to the surface, and without adequate protections can go horribly awry.

Any of that helpful?