

“Knocking from the Inside”

by

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What is Nondual Awareness?

I have noticed that the term “nonduality” is still fairly unfamiliar to Buddhists even though it refers to the central Mahayana Buddhist teaching that form and emptiness are not different. This lack of familiarity is understandable given that the term “nonduality” derives from the Sanskrit *advaita* which means “not-two”. Advaita Vedanta largely draws from the wisdom of the Upanishads. It was consolidated by the Indian sage Shankara (788-820 CE) and continues as a vital current within contemporary Hinduism.

Interestingly enough, the development of Advaita in the early centuries of the first millennium CE was strongly influenced by the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddhist and Hindu scholars have politely quarreled for millennia about how to think about our true nature (anatta v. atma/Brahman, no self v. Self), yet when the sages of both traditions speak openly about their realization, their often poetic accounts are remarkably similar. They describe an awareness that is without subject or object, where the discrete “I” has disappeared along with an apparently objective world of “you” and “it”. Things are not as they conventionally appear. Not by a longshot. The penetrating clarity and power of this revelatory being-understanding is such that these sages compare ordinary dualistic ways of seeing life to a trance or dream state.

The essence of nondual perception is that *no-thing looks out and sees that it is everything*. Rather than being a discrete, substantial entity, the apparent perceiver realizes that she or he is no *thing* – not an object that can be defined or confined. One knows oneself as infinite open awareness – empty of any form, yet full of potential. As this open, empty,

formless awareness contemplates form it “sees” that form is an expression of itself: emptiness actually *is* form, form *is* emptiness. The appearance of duality collapses and life is experienced as it is – undivided, seamless, whole. Integral philosopher Ken Wilber describes it nicely:

You don’t look at the sky, you are the sky... (A)wareness is no longer split into a seeing subject in here and a seen object out there. There is just pure seeing.

Consciousness and its display are not-two...The pure *Emptiness* of the Witness turns out to be one with every *Form* that is witnessed, and that is one of the basic meanings of “nonduality.”

This is the point where the Zen master raps his or her staff on the zendo floor with the words, “This is it!”

Resistance

Even as there is a profound attraction to release into this Great Mystery, there is enormous resistance to it. We humans are very ambivalent creatures! From the point of view of a “me” (whose main job is to resist), this shift of perspective is not good news. It is seen as an end that is distinct from and more terrifying than physical death, especially if one believes in an afterlife. To the controlling ego it looks like personal annihilation (the Latin root “nihil” means “nothing”) – a freefall into a dark abyss. At the very least this opening signifies the dethronement of personal identity and the surrender to a deeper nonconceptual, undogmatic truth.

Even after experiencing a deep letting go, the conditioned self commonly reconstitutes itself in subtler ways, often as a spiritual seeker that keeps the self improvement project going by trying to attain or maintain certain spiritual experiences or states of consciousness. The mundane ego reincarnates into a “spiritual” ego and one can get stuck

in some very interesting places, like being proud of being “no one” or imagining oneself as an “awake” someone. The process can get very tricky and a good guide is invaluable.

This reminds me of a joke from the Hasidic tradition that goes something like this: Once a janitor, who was cleaning the temple after services, overheard two distinguished rabbis having a lively discussion about the immensity of God and their own insignificance. The first rabbi proclaimed, “God is a huge ocean and I am but a small fish.” The second rabbi responded, “God is greater and I am even less than that. He is like the vast, dark universe and I am just a tiny, flickering light.” Unable to contain himself, the janitor burst out of the shadows and added, “And I am only a dust mote floating in God’s endless depths!” Shocked, the first rabbi said to the second, “Look who thinks he’s nobody!”

Psychotherapy: Beyond Self Repair and Improvement

It seems that more people are beginning to have intuitions of the insubstantiality of their conditioned self and of an underlying unity with the whole of life. Some of these people happen to be psychotherapists and clients. So the discussion and direct experience of what we are calling nondual awareness, once largely confined to a small group of academics and renunciates, is finding its way into the life of ordinary people living ordinary, worldly lives. The implications for the field of psychology are important.

Most psychotherapy aims at helping people have a better story and image of themselves and to be more in touch with their emotions and bodies. There is real value in becoming a better, more integrated, authentic person. It enhances our relative happiness and makes the world an easier place to live for everyone.

Yet what if our deepest happiness comes through the dis-illusionment of the separate sense of self? What if the nagging sense of lack, emptiness, and disconnection that so many of us experience, albeit subtly, is an inevitable existential consequence of

misidentifying as a discrete somebody? What if a causeless joy and profound inner freedom are our natural birthright, available to anyone willing and able to undergo the pangs of a “second birth?”

There is an emerging possibility in the dialogue we call psychotherapy to take a step beyond the repair and improvement of the self, as important as this is. Instead of being a step forward, however, it is a step back, a deepening and settling in and down. This movement of attention back to its source in and as unconditioned awareness is accompanied by a flowering of presence, quiet joy, profound peace and deep connection.

While *in principle* there are no preconditions for the recognition of our deepest nature and it is not uncommon to have a brief glimpse of it, *in practice* it is very difficult to sustain this awareness when one’s inner sense of self lacks some degree of stability and coherence. Letting go into the “groundless ground” of Being or no-self can be profoundly destabilizing and terrifying, somewhat like being in a major earthquake. People who have experienced early trauma and/or absent and disorganized emotional attachments or bonds will often need to do careful reparative work to establish a functional resilience before their system can tolerate such a major letting go.

Good psychotherapy and disciplines of attention training can play a vital role in supporting the experience of inner calm and resilience. The potential pitfall of trying to fix or improve the self, however, is that it becomes an endless project in itself. After all, what is there that couldn’t use some improvement within each of us? This could keep us occupied endlessly. As my teacher Jean Klein would sometimes say, “The car is still stuck in the garage.” It is very easy for attention to be seduced and distracted from facing the underlying falseness of the constructed self, even a relatively authentic and well-adjusted one!

Of course, many people are not ready or even interested in exploring beyond the apparently safe, though sometimes rather miserable, confines of their familiar (and familial) self. This is not a problem. Yet it is important that someone who wants to look really deeply into who they are beyond all stories and images be able to work with a therapist or teacher who knows the territory well enough first-hand. A psychotherapist who is oriented in this way brings the additional capacity to work skillfully with difficult emotional and somatic states.

Scientific Research: A Cautionary Note

If what we are calling nondual awareness is the natural fruition of human consciousness, it would be very interesting to discover if there are certain conditions that optimally support it, along with certain neurophysiological markers that accompany it. For example, the recently formed (2009) Baumann Institute (<http://baumanninstitute.org/>) is funding scientific research and dialogue into these questions, looking beyond popular progressive approaches to ones that directly point to nondual awareness and to a natural, causeless well-being.

It is important that any research of this sort acknowledges the tendency towards material reductionism and the possible conflation of correlation with causation. That the brain may change states when nondual awareness is more foreground, does not necessarily mean that the brain is *causing* awareness. It could as well be a receiving instrument for it. It is tempting to reduce consciousness to an epiphenomenon of the brain, or “the heart” to the anterior cingulate cortex. It is doubtful to me at least that prajna or heart-wisdom originates in the brain. The consistent report of the great sages is that our true nature cannot be objectified, that “Buddha Nature” is autonomous. We would be wise in our research and thinking to be mindful of this, staying open, curious, and proceeding with some humility.

A Final Word

Nondual awareness is always here right now, whether we recognize it or not. The jewel of awareness is already hanging around our neck. It is not something that can be created or even attained. While effort is useful at one stage, in the end it becomes futile. All techniques will inevitably exhaust themselves. After all, how can we attain what we already are? As Rumi wrote,

Knocking on a door, it opens

I have been knocking from the inside!