

WHAT ENLIGHTENMENT MEANS:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NONDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS
AS EXPERIENCED BY TEACHERS OF NONDUAL MYSTICISM

by

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Abstract

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The intention of this dissertation was to qualitatively study nondual consciousness, known in nondual mystical traditions as enlightenment, by examining the lived experiences of purportedly enlightened spiritual teachers. Nondual consciousness was theorized as the culminating stage of psychospiritual development. The literature review surveyed transpersonal theory, research, and mystical literature related to nondual consciousness, which was contrasted with egoic consciousness. Sixteen participants were interviewed in depth, using a semistructured format. Participants were spiritual teachers of nondual mysticism. Attention was focused on gathering a rich thematic description of the essential qualities of nondual consciousness. Thematic analysis identified key themes. Themes among participants described gradual transition from egoic consciousness to nondual consciousness through the process of nondual realization. Stable traits associated with mature nondual consciousness included nondual ontology, disidentification from mental constructs, timeless awareness, mental lucidity, nondual action, beatific peace, spontaneous joy, absence of neurotic suffering, unitive relationships, unitive love, awareness of spiritual immortality, and awareness of positive cosmology. Results help define the most advanced stage of transpersonal development discussed in the noetic literature and carry implications for the study of consciousness and human potential.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated with gratitude
to my mother, Joan,
who taught me what it means to love.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of *nondual consciousness*, the culminating stage of psychospiritual development that mystical traditions often refer to as *enlightenment* (Huxley, 1944). Several transpersonal models of human development propose that nondual consciousness, as opposed to egoic consciousness, reflects humanity's highest expression of awareness and psychological maturity (Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986). Nondual consciousness is thought to be associated with many extraordinary psychological qualities, including unity awareness, freedom from emotional suffering, and unconditional love for others (Conway, 1988; Goleman, 1988; Nagle, 2004; Wade, 1996). However, empirical research on nondual consciousness is lacking.

Nondual consciousness, or enlightenment, is a transformation of consciousness that is considered, in classical mysticism, to be the goal of human development (Huxley, 1944; Schuon, 1984; Smith, 1976; Underhill, 1955). Mysticism is concerned with direct realization of the fundamental nature of reality, which is said to liberate human consciousness from a false ontology, a mistaken sense of self and world (Huxley, 1944; Underhill, 1955). Mystical traditions posit that this realization creates permanent characterological transformation, as reflected by the unusual grace, wisdom, and kindness of the world's authentic saints and sages (Caplan, 1999; Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001; Underhill, 1955).

Considerable evidence for nondual consciousness is found outside of mystical traditions or spiritual contexts. For several millennia, people from diverse cultures have reported experiencing this life-changing transformation, even in the total absence of

previous spiritual training or belief (Chang, 1959; Cheney, 1945; Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Hixon, 1978; Huxley, 1944; Jourdain, 2001; Katie & Mitchell, 2002; Tolle, 1999; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001; Underhill, 1955). Alan Watts (1958) provided a lucid summary of the catalyzing event:

The most impressive fact in man's spiritual, intellectual, and poetic experience has always been, for me, the universal prevalence of those astonishing moments of insight which Richard Bucke called "cosmic consciousness. . . ." From all the historical times and cultures we have reports of this same unmistakable sensation emerging, as a rule, quite suddenly and unexpectedly and from no clearly understood cause. To the individual thus enlightened it appears as a vivid and overwhelming certainty that the universe, precisely as it is at this moment, as a whole and in every one of its parts, is so completely *right* as to need no explanation or justification beyond what it simply is. Existence not only ceases to be a problem; the mind is so wonder-struck at the self-evident and self-sufficient fitness of things as they are, including what would ordinarily be thought the very worst, that it cannot find any word strong enough to express the perfection and beauty of the experience. Its clarity sometimes gives the sensation that the world has become transparent or luminous, and its simplicity the sensation that it is pervaded and ordered by a supreme intelligence. At the same time it is usual for the individual to feel that the whole world has become his own body, and that whatever he is has not only become, but always has been, what everything else is. It is not that he loses his identity to the point of feeling that he actually looks out through all other eyes, becoming literally omniscient, but rather that his individual consciousness and existence is a point of view temporarily adopted by something immeasurably greater than himself. The central core of the experience seems to be the conviction, or insight, that the immediate now, whatever its nature, is the goal and fulfillment of all living. Surrounding and flowing from this insight is an emotional ecstasy, a sense of intense relief, freedom, and lightness, and often of almost unbearable love for the world, which is, however, secondary. (pp. 17-18)

The consciousness of the mature mystic is said to have awakened to its true or deeper nature, which is found to be the essence of reality itself (D. T. Suzuki, 1962). This study refers to this ultimate spiritual awakening as *nondual realization*. According to mystics, the realization of nonduality—unity, or oneness—indicates that perceived reality, in all its apparent forms, reflects a singular, unmanifest source that paradoxically transcends, yet is immanent within, all of its manifest expressions (Blakney, 1941; Blofeld, 1978;

Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Cooper, 2005; Huxley, 1944; Kapleau, 1965; Nisargadatta, 1973; Ramana Maharshi, 2004; Ruiz, 2004; Spencer, 1990; D. T. Suzuki, 1962). Thus, the unity implied by nonduality refers to an already seamless whole rather than the secondary joining together of separate things (Loy, 1998).

Interviews and autobiographies of mystics indicate that nondual realization releases consciousness from exclusive identification with the mental and body-based ego-identity, revealing egoic consciousness to be a provisional and fragmentary mode of perception (Besserman & Steger, 1991; Chang, 1959; Hixon, 1978; Kapleau, 1965; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Nisargadatta, 1973; Parker, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Thompson, 2002; Tolle, 1999; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001; White, 1984). Mystics consistently attest that consciousness, upon awakening, suddenly recognizes its nature as the ineffable substratum—and veritable *substance*—of existence, a mystery transcending all conceptualization and dualistic categories. Being omnipresent, irreducible, and sentient, this substratum has been described as *Absolute reality*, *Allah*, *Brahman*, *Godhead*, the *Ground of all being*, *pure consciousness*, and the *Void* (Huxley, 1944; Smith, 1976; Underhill, 1955). This astounding discovery is said to eradicate the prior, illusory feeling that consciousness is merely an epiphenomenon of the material body.

Nondual realization is often described as a momentous homecoming, as well as the beginning of a new way of being (Adyashanti, 2004; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003). According to numerous direct accounts, the awakening of consciousness initiates the dismantling of egoic structures of perception, which leads to the permanent stage of nondual consciousness (Adyashanti, 2004; Chang, 1957; Kapleau, 1965; Lumiere &

Lumiere-Wins; 2003; Parker, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Thompson, 2002; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001). At the outset, nondual consciousness can be defined as the stage in which consciousness no longer constructs a separate self through identification with the body, mind, or any other phenomenon. Thus, egoic consciousness includes all stages of development in which consciousness identifies with a separate self. Throughout this study, the terms ego and egoic consciousness are used to indicate a particular mode of identity and should not be confused with the personality structure or psyche as such. These provisional definitions of egoic consciousness and nondual consciousness are expanded and clarified in the literature review.

In nondual consciousness, mental, emotional, and bio-energetic processes are no longer organized around a fixed and contracted sense of self (Adyashanti, 2004; Greenwell, 2005; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995). In the absence of chronic psychological tension—created by the illusory division between self and world—the personality becomes imbued with the positive traits of nondual consciousness (Druker, 1994; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1972). Mystical literature and transpersonal research strongly indicates that nondual consciousness is marked by the following core qualities: freedom from separative identity, equanimity, serenity, joy, love of reality in all its forms, unconditional compassion for sentient beings, altruistic motivation, spontaneity, mental clarity, freedom from fear, and keen discernment as to the causes of psychological suffering and peace (Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Brown & Engler, 1980; Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Conway, 1988; Goleman, 1975, 1988; Hixon, 1978; Jourdain, 2001; Kapleau, 1965; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Nagle, 2005; Ramana Maharshi, 2004; Sheng-yen, 1999; Thompson, 2002; Tolle, 1999; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman,

2001; Underhill, 1955; White, 1984). In short, transpersonal models describe the final stage of development as a condition of genuine selflessness, whereby consciousness sees itself everywhere and expresses itself in human life as love and wisdom (Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986). This research project aimed to gather descriptive data on these and other possible traits of nondual consciousness.

Nondual consciousness is paradoxical and challenges the structure of language, which is based on the convention of subject-object duality. Nondual experience is difficult to express accurately, so mystics have always relied heavily on figurative language (Mitchell, 1989; Metzner, 1980). Ralph Metzner (1980), surveying common metaphors for spiritual transformation, observed,

For here is the problem: how *can* we know or describe anything about the changes we have not yet experienced, changes that by universal consensus take us *beyond* the realm of everyday reality, for which our words and concepts were fashioned? It may be that all we can really go by are the reports of those who have gone ahead. (p. 48)

It is hoped that effective metaphors and technical explanations throughout the text will clarify esoteric subtleties. Meanwhile, the following sections attempt to establish a pragmatic framework of rudimentary definitions for approaching the subject of nondual consciousness.

This study defines mysticism as a form of spirituality focused solely on freeing consciousness from the ego-identified, dualistic mode of perception through realization of the nondual ground of being. Throughout this study, the term *mystic* is used somewhat exclusively, referring to a person through whom consciousness has realized its

transpersonal nature and who—according to transpersonal theory and the best traditional guideposts—can be regarded as an authentic exemplar of nondual consciousness.

From a developmental standpoint, it can be said that mysticism is concerned simply with the transition from egoic consciousness to nondual consciousness. This definition accords with Evelyn Underhill's (1955) *true mysticism*, Ken Wilber's (1986) highest transpersonal stage of *nondual mysticism*, and the *perennialist philosophy* of mysticism (e.g., Assagioli, 1991; Bucke, 1960; Cheney, 1945; Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Huxley, 1944; Schuon, 1984; Smith, 1976). Perennialist scholars claim that mystics testify in diverse ways to the fundamental nature of reality, which is considered to transcend all culturally conditioned viewpoints. According to this perspective, mystical testimony forms a recurring, perennial theme running through many cultures and historical periods (Huxley, 1944). Chapter 2 discusses the perennial philosophy, along with alternative views of mysticism, in further detail.

Mysticism should not be confused with occult or spiritual practices that do not share its defining ethic. Jenny Wade (1996) explained, "Mysticism seeks to transcend individuality only to be One with Absolute Reality. Its aim is wholly spiritual and self-transcendent" (p. 291) as opposed to paths that seek to use spiritual development for personal gain or manipulation of events. In the ethic of mysticism, many spiritual experiences are viewed as lacking ultimate significance, which lies in the realization of unity, the ground of all being. For example, mystical traditions universally caution against enthrallment with paranormal phenomena and extraordinary yet temporary states of mind, as these are considered a powerful distraction for the ego-identified mentality (Caplan, 1999; Hixon, 1978; Kapleau, 1965; White, 1984). The sole, guiding motivation

for mysticism is devotional love—a love that intuitively grasps the truth of unity and expresses itself as the urge to free the heart from every kind of narrowness (Hixon, 1978).

In this study the terms awakening and nondual realization are used synonymously to signify the process that leads from egoic consciousness to nondual consciousness. The terms enlightenment and nondual consciousness are also used synonymously, on the basis that enlightenment is one of the most common vernacular terms for this stage of development (Metzner, 1980). Some clarifications about enlightenment should be made at the outset. The common failure to distinguish between awakening and enlightenment has been a frequent source of confusion about the nature of enlightenment (Caplan, 1999).

From the temporal perspective, awakening occurs as a momentary event or process, whereas, from the ontological perspective, it reveals the timeless, omnipresent reality of consciousness (Hixon, 1978). Awakening is therefore not an excursion into an altered state of mind. Rather, through awakening consciousness knows itself absolutely, as the unchanging essence of mind and universe. Lex Hixon (1978) wrote,

Awakening to the One cannot, therefore, be regarded as an ecstatic experience, accessible only in some special state of consciousness, but is an awakening that pervades all states of consciousness equally. Enlightenment is to awaken as the One rather than to know or see the One in the way a subject experiences an object. (pp. 104-105)

Though Hixon used the terms awakening and enlightenment somewhat interchangeably, awakening ideally describes the initiatory gnosis alone, in that consciousness suddenly emerges from its “dream” of being confined to a limited body and recognizes itself as comprising, literally, the universe. In contrast to awakening, enlightenment refers to the

stage of life when this wakeful self-recognition has become steady, as expressed by traits that signal the absence of egoic confusion.

As the awakening of pure consciousness that contains all subjects and objects, nondual realization is not a subjective experience—it is veridical in the ultimate sense. The unconditioned ground of consciousness is both within and beyond the human being. Phil Nuernberger (1994) explained that the epistemology of nondual realization defies the materialist premise that consciousness is derivative to matter:

In a radical departure from the materialist's view, Tantra begins with . . . the realization (direct mystical experience) of pure Consciousness. The term "realization" is critical as it signifies to comprehend fully and correctly. Consciousness is a "Transcendent and Immanent Reality" that exists beyond time, space, and states of mind. It is the "stuff" of the soul, but exists far beyond individual soul or individual sense of "I." (p. 93)

After nondual realization, it could reasonably be said that consciousness has been "enlightened" to its nature as the transcendent-immanent ground of being. However, the clarity of the realization often remains unstable for some time: Depending on the strength of habit, mental-emotional structures may act like a dense cloud that easily blocks the subtle light of spiritual dawn. In other words, the newly awakened consciousness usually continues to identify with the old egoic conditioning that constricts awareness within the illusory perspective of duality (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003). Periods of clarity and confusion toggle, with the latter taking the form, at times, of the mystic's *dark night of the soul*, which is an intense confrontation with the most deeply entrenched illusions of the false self (Tolle, 1999; Washburn, 1995).

Nondual consciousness becomes a steady stage when consciousness no longer habitually identifies itself with the conditioned nature of the psyche and body. In turn, this liberation of consciousness transforms psycho-energetic structures to some extent

(Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Robinson, 2007). As Judith Blackstone (2006) pointed out, the transition to nondual consciousness is a process of clarification rather than construction:

[The] understanding of nondual realization as a process does not mean that nondual consciousness is something that we create or develop. It arises spontaneously and effortlessly, once we have reached a degree of openness, and continues to become a more full, complete realization as we become increasingly open and refined. (p. 28)

In summary, nondual consciousness describes the stage at which consciousness is vividly awake to its universal nature and no longer falls into identification with dualistic perception, or, if it does, will quickly notice and dispel the confusion (Nisargadatta, 1973).

It should also be acknowledged that many supposed exemplars of nondual consciousness fail to match the ideal-typical model presented here and in other literature on this stage. Most notable in this regard, many spiritual teachers who have met some criteria for enlightenment have demonstrated unresolved egoic pathology through blatantly selfish, destructive, and hypocritical behavior (Caplan, 1999). These cases often inspire doubt that spiritual awakening can lead to a truly integral and liberated psychology. However, such cases should be examined through further research and analysis, rather than interpreted according to existing misconceptions about enlightenment.

A pervasive myth about enlightenment is that spiritual awakening invariably and immediately elevates the personality to a state of perfection or infallibility (Caplan, 1999). This sensationalistic notion ignores the complex and subtle processes involved in spiritual maturation. Rightly interpreted, fraudulent or flawed teachers provoke necessary

disillusionment in spiritual seekers and scholars of mysticism. Yet, critics with legitimate concerns too often see these cases as grounds for dismissing the considerable evidence that spiritual awakening frequently fosters many far-reaching and positive psychological changes.

Authentic spiritual teachers are well aware of how challenging transpersonal development is (Caplan, 1999; Tart, 1987). Spiritual awakening may lead to tragic hypocrisy or psychological crisis precisely because of its power to inflate or disturb an imbalanced psyche with the dynamic energy of expanded awareness (Caplan, 1999; Washburn, 1995). The question, then, is not whether spiritual awakening is transformative—it clearly is—but what psychological conditions prevent or facilitate the subsequent integration of the personality at the transpersonal level. Meanwhile, against the many publicized cases of flawed spiritual teachers are perhaps many more anonymous teachers who successfully embody the qualities of compassion, equanimity, and nondual consciousness that they teach. As Carol Nagle's (2004) exemplar study suggests, the remarkable experiences and morally superlative lives of even a few notable sages should command psychologists' attention.

As an exemplar study, this research sought to examine individuals who represent the highest level of development postulated in transpersonal stage models. Higher development has been described as transpersonal because it permanently shifts awareness and motivation out of a strictly personal sphere of identification and concern (Sutich, 1969). In nondual consciousness, the awareness of unity eliminates the epistemological basis for separative attitudes, cognitive perplexity, and negative emotions (Goleman, 1975, 1988; Louchakova, 2005; Wade, 1996). Superlative moral qualities are believed to

thrive when the psyche is free from the sense of existential alienation (Goleman, 1988; Nisargadatta, 1973; Maslow, 1969a, 1969b; Wade, 1996).

This study is highly relevant to transpersonal psychology, which was founded on evidence of development beyond the conventional experience of selfhood (Maslow, 1969b, 1971; Sutich, 1969). Transpersonal stage models (e.g., Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986) describe the organic evolution of nondual consciousness, but qualitative data on this stage are minimal and mostly come from historical sources that are highly conditioned by culture, such as sacred texts.

As Jean Piaget (1970) noted, a developmental theory does not stand upon its early stages but rather “hangs” from its highest proposed stage. Thus, exemplars of nondual consciousness hold one of the keys to substantiating transpersonal theorists’ argument that egoic consciousness does not reflect the height of human well-being and awareness (Assagioli, 1991; Sutich, 1969; Tart, 1975; Wade, 1996; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993; Washburn, 1995). Specifically, it was hypothesized that thematic data on the lived experience of nondual consciousness would help clarify key areas of uncertainty in noetic theories (e.g. Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986), including how this final stage evolves, the universal versus relative aspects of mystical experience, and the ontological status of the self and its transcendence or higher-order integration (Funk, 1994).

Therefore, the premise of this study was that it would be both useful and possible to gather data from individuals who are enlightened. At this point, transpersonal stage theory is based primarily on themes translated from mystical literature. As Wade (1996)

observed, “The fact is that this population is so rare that they have tended not to be studied as a group, so very little information exists” (p. 219). Indeed, exemplars of nondual consciousness may be few among the general population, but as a group they are easily located in spiritual communities where, traditionally, the most mature sages serve as spiritual teachers (Caplan, 1999; Thompson, 2002). Many of these teachers regularly speak and write on nondual consciousness and have proven themselves accessible to the public (e.g., Adyashanti, 2000, 2004; Blackstone, 2008; Fenner, 2002; Jourdain, 2001; Katie & Mitchell, 2002; Kornfield, 1993; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Tolle, 1999). The effort to gather descriptive data from purportedly enlightened individuals represents the next step in an important extension of mainstream psychological research.

Due to both its esoteric and culturally embedded aspects, spirituality has historically been a controversial and disregarded topic in Western psychology (Scotton, 1996). Since the late 20th century, transpersonal psychologists have demonstrated a rare willingness among psychologists to study the role of spirituality, religion, and exceptional experiences in human development (Scotton, 1996). Since that time, scholars in humanistic psychology, psychoanalytic psychology, and other schools of psychological inquiry have assumed a more open attitude toward spiritual themes in human growth (Chinen, 1996). However, nontranspersonal psychologists often remain deeply skeptical when asked to consider mystical traditions’ claims about human potential. For example, Daniel Goleman (1985) attested that many psychologists scoff at the classical Buddhist description of an *arhat*—an individual who has realized the psychological condition of *nirvana*, or nondual consciousness. Goleman wrote,

“Nirvana” is a technical term for a particular transformation of consciousness, not for some misty heaven world. These transformations include the absence of certain conditions that never arise in the Arhat’s mind. The Buddhist literature is very explicit that they . . . are not even to be found anywhere in the hidden unconscious of the person. These include the total absence of greed for sense desires; the absence of anxiety, resentments, fears of any sort, dogmatism . . . the absence of aversion to loss, disgrace, pain, or blame; the absence of lust, anger, or the experience of suffering, or the need for approval, for pleasure or praise; and the absence of desire for anything for oneself other than what one needs as essential. When the mind is cleared that way, what happens is that one becomes full of loving kindness, of impartiality towards others, or a calm delight in absolutely everything happening around one, no matter how seemingly boring. . . . I have read that list to Western psychologists, and they typically say, “That is absolutely absurd. It could not happen.” (pp. 188-189)

In Goleman’s view, this skepticism stems from the materialist paradigm that dominates Western psychology.

If, however, you read [the Buddhist description of an arhat] to anyone who’s familiar with any of the great world religions, they will say, “Oh yes, that is a saint. I recognize it as the prototype of a saint.” Every great religious tradition describes a similar transformation of being. Yet nowhere in Western psychology is it even plausible. It is seen as just too good to be true. Western psychology’s view of reality does not fit the religious world view. (p. 189)

Goleman’s comments highlight the fact that Western psychology largely denies that spiritual revelation is a real phenomenon and cause for transformation toward the highest human potential. In contrast to mainstream psychology’s materialist epistemology, transpersonal psychology has opened its epistemological lens to consider the role of mystical experience in the clarification of consciousness (Scotton, 1996). According to many transpersonal theorists, the essential thrust of mysticism is to realize the oneness of existence and its nature as consciousness, which is generally obscured by the individuated, surface stream of sensory-mental experience. Thus, Roger Walsh and Francis Vaughan (1993) defined transpersonal psychology as a field that focuses on experiences, states of consciousness, and ways of being in which the sense of identity

extends beyond the personal or individual to include wider aspects of humankind, nature, or cosmos.

As Chapter 2 articulates, nondual consciousness implies more than a temporary expansion of identity, state of mind, experience, or attitude that one practices. Rather, nondual consciousness is a stable stage of genuinely transpersonal, integral awareness. If this definition is accurate, nondual consciousness can be considered the *summum bonum* of transpersonal phenomena. Given the ostensible significance of nondual consciousness to transpersonal psychology, it is striking that so few studies have been conducted to explore how it is experienced by exemplars.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that nondual consciousness poses a unique challenge to researchers. Considering that such an advanced stage of consciousness is relatively rare, Georg Feuerstein (1990) defined the challenge of transpersonal research as the following:

[Transpersonal psychology] aspires to a model that comprises the totality of human phenomenon. As Wilber readily admits, it does so with all the encumbrances of an intellect that has not yet been transformed by the higher realities that are described, categorized and therefore judged in the transpersonal model. (p. 193)

In other words, researchers cannot genuinely understand a territory of experience they have never personally encountered, especially if that territory diverges sharply from consensus reality. Aldous Huxley (1944) clarified this epistemological principle in his seminal treatise on nondual consciousness, *The Perennial Philosophy*:

Knowledge is a function of being. When there is a change in the being of the knower, there is a corresponding change in the nature and amount of knowing. (p. vii)

Charles Tart (1971) further defined the nondual epistemology of knowledge through identity. Tart posited that there is no objective knowledge distinct from the subjective experience of the researcher, for knowledge ultimately amounts to a “feeling of congruence” (p. 98) between (a) what one has perceived or sensed and (b) a theory or conceptual system of understanding. Tart therefore concluded that, “All knowledge, then, is basically experiential knowledge” (p. 98). Acknowledging this principle, Olga Louchakova and Kathleen Wall (2002) explained that limitations in experience negatively affect the ability to recognize the existence of higher stages of development:

The trajectory of the evolution of consciousness cannot be mapped at the level of consciousness in which humans are currently immersed. The present rational, mental mode is only capable of acknowledging consciousness on its own level or below. (p. 255)

Similarly, Wade (1996) noted that researchers’ developmental stage has far-reaching effects on consciousness research and theory:

The Newtonian yardstick is inadequate to measure it, but that hardly means that the [nondual] Unity level is pre-Newtonian. What is the significance for developmental theory? It should be clear that the literature based on empirical assumptions—the materialist brain research, reductionist psychological theories, traditional developmental theory, and many other Western intellectual conventions dependent upon assumptions of a fixed, material, external Newtonian reality—derive from the middle range of consciousness. Such assumptions may not be adequate for measuring the realities revealed by Transcendent and Unity consciousness. (p. 270)

The meaning of enlightenment continues to be surrounded, as it has been for ages, by controversy and mystique (Caplan, 1999; Funk, 1994). Meanwhile, contemporary sages express concern that such a natural, simple condition is often mistakenly considered taboo or the exclusive province of holy figures and exotic monastic traditions (Adyashanti, 2004; Tolle, 1999). At the same time, a number of observers (e.g., Ardagh, 2005; Butlein, 2005; Greenwell, 2005; Louchakova, 2005; Louchakova & Wall, 2002;

Prendergast, 2003; Tolle, 1999) have suggested that nondual consciousness is becoming more common. Contemporary spirituality shows a trend toward candid, down-to-earth mystical literature (e.g., Adyashanti, 2004; Ardagh, 2005; Blackstone, 2008; Fenner, 2002; Jourdain, 2001; Katie & Mitchell, 2002; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parsons, 1995; Robinson, 2007; Tolle, 1999) that helps people progress by clarifying that enlightenment has nothing to do with becoming infallible, abolishing the intellect, suppressing emotions, ignoring the body, escaping mundane life, or learning to maintain a constant state of undifferentiated bliss. Thus, it may be that enlightenment is being democratized by the translation of mystical teachings to everyday contexts, whereas access was formerly limited by the cultural barriers that surrounded monastic traditions (Caplan, 1999).

These trends in contemporary spirituality may stem from the same cultural shift that gave rise to transpersonal psychology. Commenting on this shift, physicist and Nobel Laureate Wolfgang Pauli stated, “I consider the ambition of overcoming opposites, including also a synthesis embracing both rational understanding and the mystical experience of unity, to be the mythos, spoken or unspoken, of our present day and age” (Zinser, 2003, p. 156). This research project was conceived in this spirit, and, it is hoped, provides much-needed empirical guidance for transpersonal models that have been shaped by a century of research in psychology and mysticism.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Little empirical research into the experience and nature of nondual consciousness exists. Psychological research on spirituality has focused mainly on meditation, spiritual practices, exceptional or peak experiences, and spiritual emergency involving psychic phenomena, kundalini, and altered states of consciousness. Though such studies explore transpersonal phenomena, they do not directly address nondual consciousness as a developmental stage. Whereas empirical studies on nondual consciousness are relatively few, a wide range of theoretical and mystical literature exists. This chapter first discusses classic scholarship in psychology that relates to nondual consciousness and then uses transpersonal theory and mystical testimony to describe psychological development from egoic to nondual consciousness.

The Perennial Wisdom

Interest in spirituality among psychologists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was overshadowed by the predominance of positivist assumptions in academic theory and research (Hastings, 1999). However, a few notable psychologists explored the relevance of spirituality to psychology in considerable depth. Like contemporary transpersonal scholars, they examined mystical traditions and reviewed accounts of extraordinary transformation. Psychologists who came to regard mysticism as an experiential science of consciousness (e.g., Assagioli, 1991; Bucke, 1960; James, 1901) have contributed to the perennialist perspective that informs much of transpersonal theory.

A number of *contextualist* scholars have challenged the perennialist interpretation of mysticism. Their central argument holds that mystics do not share the same experience of a universal reality and that their experiences differ according to culturally conditioned,

cognitive factors such as language and doctrinal beliefs (Jones, 1993; Katz, 1983).

Contextualist scholars contend, for example, that “the Hindu experience of Brahman and the Christian experience of God are not the same” (Katz, 1983, p. 5) and that each type of mystic has an experience that is at least partially constructed by expectations about what will be experienced. The contextualist perspective denies that human beings are at any time able to access a revelatory awareness of reality that is superordinate to subjective processes of cognition.

In response, perennialists argue for the universality of the “pure consciousness event,” which, according to Eastern and Western mystics alike, transcends all subjective and objective referents (Evans, 1989; Forman, 1998). Perennialists point out that the pure consciousness event, along with meditative practices, deconstructs identification with dualistic concepts so that consciousness may apprehend the nondual nature of reality (Blackstone, 2006; Forman, 1999; Rothberg, 1986). Contextualists contend that the experience of pure consciousness, if it exists, does not necessarily reveal an ultimate reality and that a conceptual lens is always required to interpret such an experience (Jones, 1993). Yet, mystics consistently report that nondual realization carries an utterly self-evident authority that does not depend upon the concepts that may be used to describe it (Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Merton, 1961; Thompson, 2002).

Perennialist scholars also point out that mystics’ radical insights are often received by religious institutions as heresy rather than confirmation of doctrinal tenets (Perovich, 1985). This trend would not occur if mystical revelation depended upon indoctrination. Moreover, mystics commonly attest that the astounding experience and

truth of revelation was not even remotely fathomed by their provisional, intellectual interpretations of mystical teachings. In further support of this point, awakened individuals frequently report being surprised by their newfound ability to confirm the esoteric truth of formerly opaque mystical texts (Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Kapleau, 1965; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Moss, 1986; Ramana Maharshi, 2004; Tolle, 1999).

Moreover, the claim that mystical experience necessarily begins with a specific set of doctrinal assumptions, arising from a particular mystical or philosophical tradition, is plainly contradicted by a wealth of documented testimony (Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Grof, 1998; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Robinson, 2007; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001). These sources show that mystical experiences that are strikingly similar in their phenomenology, metaphysical implications, and long-term effects occur to people who vary greatly in spiritual background. For example, awakening occurs to people who have a wholly dismissive attitude toward spirituality or who possess only vague or conventional notions about spirituality (Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Tolle, 1999). The following account, archived by Oxford University's Religious Experience Research Unit (Cohen & Phipps, 1979), is typical of such cases:

It was as though my mind broke bounds and went on expanding until it merged with the universe. Mind and universe became *one within the other*. Time ceased to exist. It was all one thing and in a state of infinity. It was as if, willy nilly, I became directly exposed to an entity within myself and nature at large. I seemed to be "seeing" with another sight in another world. (pp. 173-174)

It would be reasonable to suppose that this report comes from an experienced Buddhist meditator, Sufi mystic, or Hindu yogi, for it is identical to the many awakenings recorded in these traditions. Yet, the conclusion of the account indicates that this was not the case:

As an atheist and materialist my frame of reference did not provide for an occurrence such as this. I seriously wondered if I had taken leave of my senses.

My mind was on fire with feelings, visions, thoughts and ideas which came with such speed and clarity, but which were so new to me that at first I was bewildered and did not know how best to judge their validity. . . . Although my “cosmic experience” was irrational in terms of our accustomed view of the world, I am not satisfied that it was simply an illusion, or delusion. It affected me in a very real way, reorientated my outlook and enriched and enlarged my consciousness in many ways. (p. 174)

Formal mystical training, when present, not only fails to account for the ineffable nature and tremendous impact of spiritual awakening but is entirely absent in some of the most remarkable cases. For example, a conventional Hindu environment does not explain the dramatic awakening that suddenly turned an ordinary teenager into the renowned sage known as Ramana Maharshi, who never received spiritual training (Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001). Many similar cases involve the occurrence of mystical experiences throughout childhood or the sudden onset of awakening in adulthood, often following acute psychological crisis (Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Grof, 1998; Levenson, 2003; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000; Parsons, 1995; Tolle, 1999). In such instances, individuals often report that they had no conceptual framework for understanding their experiences until they discovered the esoteric, mystical teachings of various cultures.

In summary, a broad survey of mystical literature suggests that awakening involves a visceral change in perception that transcends cognitive expectations or happens in their absence. It is therefore possible that contextualist arguments stem in part from a failure to distinguish among various stages and states of consciousness discussed in the literature. Even the process of nondual realization, while revealing the fundamental unity of existence, varies in its tone and long-term influence for each individual (Greenwell, 2005; Grof, 1998). Scholars might easily be misled by contrasting individual

nuances in a given category of experience or by mistakenly comparing two different categories of experience, such as the archetypal revelation of a deity-form and the breakthrough to formless consciousness.

Given the limitations of understanding mysticism conceptually, transpersonal psychologists generally believe that personal exploration is a vital adjunct to intellectual analysis (Hastings, 1999). According to Wilber (1996), mysticism can best be understood as an empirical science of consciousness that necessarily relies on direct, inward experience. Wilber argued that individuals who have not performed—or stumbled into—the meditative “experiment” cannot comment meaningfully on the results that have been recorded over several millennia. As Wilber noted, skeptical commentary on mysticism stems largely from a materialist epistemology that regards all inward, qualitative experiences as merely subjective and devoid of intrinsic meaning. The developmental models described in this chapter are informed by the work of psychologists and perennialist scholars who eschew this basic reductionist stance.

The possibility that mystical experience may constitute a superordinate way of knowing compelled some early psychologists to expand the accepted framework for discussing the nature of the psyche. As Michael Washburn (1995) noted, it is due to this premise that transpersonal psychology, while attempting a synthesis of psychology and spirituality that does not reduce one to the other, gives theoretical priority to the spiritual view. Though the distinction between psychological and spiritual development may be largely semantic, transpersonal psychology views human development as a movement toward what has historically been understood as spiritual fulfillment. This view is the foundation of the perennialist perspective.

In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Huxley (1944) attempted to demonstrate that the great mystics of every place and age show far more agreement about the nature of reality than do the philosophers of any given age and that their disagreements are superficial. Huxley presented mystical testimony from the most well known traditions and historical figures in mysticism. For example, the following selections from Huxley's extensive review span millennia and cultures while precisely affirming the same transcendent-immanent Ground:

The more God is in all things, the more He is outside them. The more He is within, the more without. [Meister Eckhart] (p. 2)

All is everywhere. Each is there All, and All is each. Man as he now is has ceased to be the All. But when he ceases to be an individual he raises himself again and penetrates the whole world. [Plotinus] (p. 5)

The Atman is that by which the universe is pervaded, but which nothing pervades. [Shankara] (p. 5)

[The Principle] is in all things, but is not identical with beings, for it is neither differentiated nor limited. [Chuang Tzu] (p. 8)

The Beloved is all in all; the lover merely veils Him. [Jalal-uddin Rumi] (p. 15)

When the Ten Thousand things are viewed in their oneness, we return to the Origin and remain where we have always been. [Sen T'sen] (p. 14)

Huxley argued that whereas metaphysical thinkers typically have not fulfilled the conditions "upon which alone, as a matter of brute empirical fact" (p. vi) the ego-identified consciousness may discover its Ground, mystics demonstrate the unmistakable character transformation that is wrought by spiritual illumination.

According to Huxley's (1944) analysis, humanity's basic misunderstanding of reality is both *expressed* and *perpetuated* through self-centered, misguided aims. Therefore, *gnosis* demands an investigation of life that penetrates beyond discursive

reasoning to the root of one's orientation to life. Access to the abiding awareness of unity depends upon transcending the everyday narrowness of perspective that enthralls consciousness in the fear-driven pursuit of sense-pleasures and other illusory forms of security and fulfillment. Huxley wrote,

When there is a change in the being of the knower, there is a corresponding change in the nature and amount of knowing. . . . The Perennial Philosophy is primarily concerned with the one, divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit. (p. viii)

Thus, in the perennialist view, mysticism is not merely concerned with supernormal experiences—of timelessness, unity, and awe, for example (Goleman, 1988; Underhill, 1955)—as isolated events in awareness. Huxley and other perennialist scholars (e.g., Cheney, 1945; Schuon, 1984; Smith, 1976) have argued that these experiences reflect the *telos* of consciousness to achieve a visceral appreciation of its total reality.

Refinement of awareness culminates in the realization that subjective and objective worlds are united in the Ground of being, which liberates the mind from the symptoms of its former confusion (Huxley, 1944). At this point the implications of mysticism become particularly compelling to the psychologist, who is concerned with the alleviation of suffering through developmental maturity. Accordingly, the perennialist view has become a cornerstone of contemporary transpersonal theory (Rothberg, 1986; Vaughan, 1982; Wade, 1996).

A forefather of transpersonal psychology, William James (1901) proposed that the essence of religion lay in direct experience, by which the everyday, waking awareness might discover its actual expanse.

There is a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge, as into a mother-sea or reservoir. (James, 1912, p. 204)

Expressing a central mystical ethic through his American pragmatism, James believed that the worth of spiritual experiences is best judged by their impact on character, that is, the truth a person is able to live. Of course, mystical traditions claim that nondual realization alone has the power to reform character along the broadest lines of insight (Goleman, 1988). This notion would ostensibly have interested James. According to Wilber (1986), James had intellectually grasped the concept of nonduality but did not pursue its psychological implications very far. His radical empiricism therefore succumbed to subtle reductionism, which prevented him, like many other Western thinkers, from fully appreciating the impact of nonduality on egoic consciousness (Wilber, 1986).

A contemporary of James, Canadian psychiatrist Richard Bucke (1960) explored nondual consciousness by case study of historical exemplars in *Cosmic Consciousness*, his seminal work. In this extensive treatise Bucke identified the most typical aspects of nondual realization. According to Bucke, these aspects include moral elevation, intellectual illumination, subjective experience of light or flame, loss of the fear of death, loss of the sense of evil as a substantive force, awareness of immortality and eternity, change in appearance (transfiguration), and identification with the transcendent-immanent principle. From his diverse sample of exemplars, Bucke distills the essence of nondual realization, which is the awareness of unity:

One of the characteristics of the Cosmic Sense many times touched, and to be touched, upon is the identification of the person with the universe and everything in the universe. When Guatama or Plotinus expresses this fact it is called "Mysticism." When Whitman gives it voice it is "Yankee bluster." (p. 148)

Bucke's analysis of noetic development proposes the three main phases of *simple consciousness*, exemplified by animals; *self-consciousness*, exemplified by most human beings; and *cosmic consciousness*, exemplified by relatively few people. Contemporary transpersonal theory expands upon this rudimentary framework and integrates available research on each level (Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Cook-Greuter, 1999; Wade, 1996; Wilber, 1986).

Like Bucke and James, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1959) recognized the esoteric, psychological depths of religion and the universality of spiritual awakening. Jung's intensive scholarly exploration of archetypal themes from the world's spiritual traditions, along with his profound personal experiences, led him to describe reality as a psycho-physical unity. Jung described the totality of the psycho-physical continuum as the archetype of the *Self*, a transcendent-immanent principle that contains all archetypes.

Jung's (1959) *analytic psychology* centers on the ego's immersion in the Self. The individualized consciousness is informed by transpersonal, archetypal forces of which it must become conscious. Jung observed that these forces often express themselves in symbols that appear in dreams or visions in service of spiritual growth and healing. Jung found the *mandala*, or circle, to be a common symbol of wholeness and the process of becoming conscious of wholeness. Elias Capriles (2000) explained,

Jung discovered that mandalas which appeared spontaneously to some neurotic patients in dreams or hallucinations were maps pointing out the path to sanity—which, in its supreme form, is not merely the overcoming of neurosis (which Jung correctly understood to be spontaneous, potentially self-healing processes), but the overcoming of basic human delusion. Jung pointed out that the center of the mandala represents the essential nonduality or nonplurality of both the physical and psychic universe, while the periphery represents the world of duality and plurality—which, when these two characteristics are taken as absolute, self-existing, and given, is a world of deceit and delusion. (p. 169)

Thus, symbols help to inform the ego-identified consciousness of its delusions and its capacity or means for shedding them.

According to Jung, through the process of *individuation*, the overly rationalized ego—veritably haunted by the unconscious *shadow* created by the forces that it represses out of awareness—learns to bring the implicit unconscious into explicit cognizance. The ego gradually surrenders its pretention to sovereignty, recognizing that selfhood is transpersonally received and guided. Otherwise, life remains a frustrating enterprise with destructive consequences for the psyche and the world, its reflection. Individuation enables one to become wholly oneself, simultaneously at home in one's uniqueness and unified with life. Thus, through conscious relationship to the archetypal ground of the psyche, the insular ego is penetrated and made increasingly transparent to the influence of the *Self*, allowing personal life to unfold in creative harmony with the whole.

Jung's understanding of transpersonal development describes a uniquely Western approach to the nondual Ground (Washburn, 1995). Jung (1959) drew heavily from the Western mystical tradition of alchemy as well as from the mythological and Christian roots of European culture. He cautioned Westerners against facile adoption of Eastern mysticism and likewise warned them not to underestimate the spiritual depth of the East (Jung, 1978). Jung's respect for the living reality of mystical experience, including daily engagement with the mysteries of the psyche, did much to remedy the West's thorough maligning of mysticism in medieval and modern periods (Washburn, 1995).

Like Jung, the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1965) had been a student of Sigmund Freud. Like Jung, Assagioli went on to include mystical insights in his psychological model. Assagioli's *psychosynthesis* approach is very similar to Jung's

theories. Psychosynthesis describes the process of integrating various conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche in service of transpersonal development. Assagioli (1991) was perhaps more explicitly aligned with the tenets of the perennial philosophy than was Jung. Assagioli drew upon many mystical traditions to outline what he considered the universal process of Self-realization. Assagioli recounts the mystical metaphor of a blossoming rose to describe the finest expression of human development. In Assagioli's vision of this achievement, when nondual consciousness flows through a balanced personality structure, one's endeavors are imbued with unusual joy, creativity, and wisdom.

Assagioli studied many cases of awakening and was equally familiar with the ecstatic and stressful aspects of transformation. Assagioli (1991) quoted from the memoirs of Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote of his awakening,

As long as this ordinary "I" was present . . . everything I perceived was confused and hidden by that personality. Now that the everyday "I" had been put to one side I could see the world as it really was. And there was nothing trivial about its appearance: instead it was full of beauty and joy. (p. 151)

After a further opening of consciousness, Tagore recounted, "Never again did the veil block out the joyful aspect of the Universe. Consequently no person or thing in the world ever seemed trivial or displeasing to me again" (p. 151). If the awakened individual displays a degree of equanimity and moral elevation that could be confused with mere religious zeal, Assagioli attributes this to the higher-order insights that flood into awareness. He explains,

The soul now appreciates that every contrast and every discordant feature are included in this supreme Unity, and it begins to understand the mysterious significance and true nature of evil. This is now seen as unreal, not in the sense that it does not exist, but in the sense that . . . it is transitory and insubstantial; it is the absence of good, disharmony, a partial imbalance which is destined to

disappear. The soul that has been thus enlightened sees every fact and every event as being connected with other facts and events, justified by a higher logic; it sees the universe upheld and permeated by a perfect justice and an infinite goodness. (1991, p. 147)

In the following excerpts, Assagioli described some of the experiential qualities of character transformation, along with the extraordinary force that drives this process:

The former personality, with its sharp corners and disagreeable traits, has been replaced with a new person who is full of kindness and sympathy, a person who smiles at us and at the whole world, wanting only to give others pleasure, to be useful, and to share his new spiritual riches which seem to be overflowing from within. (p. 123)

After the solemn, pivotal experience in which the soul is awakened, it truly begins a new life: it is now driven by an intense benevolence, feeling the need to come into complete harmony with the universal life and obeying in all things the divine will. (p. 153)

Assagioli's observations accord with myriad accounts from mystical literature, which testify to the culminating stage that transcends all separative mentality and neurotic suffering (Chang, 1957; Kapleau, 1965; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001; Underhill, 1955). Assagioli performed a great service, along with Jung, by surveying the intrapsychic terrain of transpersonal development and prescribing practical methods for its navigation.

In summary, Assagioli, Jung, Bucke, and James pointed to the transpersonal ground of the psyche, claiming that harmonization of the personality depends upon receptivity to this ground, if not a final, direct identification with it. Just as perennialist scholarship bridged cultural barriers by positing the esoteric unity of spiritual traditions, early transpersonal psychologists bridged disciplines by demonstrating the inseparability of psychological and spiritual development.

Transpersonal Development

Contemporary models of noetic evolution build upon earlier efforts by psychologists to survey the full range of human development (Cook-Greuter, 1994, 1999; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986, 2000). The noetic approach to development sees expansion of consciousness as the driving process of lifespan development. Other aspects of development are viewed as derivative expressions of consciousness. Wade (1996) explained,

My purpose . . . is to formulate a noetic theory of human development, that is, a theory focusing on the unfolding of individual consciousness. Developmental psychology has treated many dimensions associated with human awareness—moral reasoning, motivation, ego development, object relations, socialization, etc.—but consciousness per se has not been directly addressed in life span theories. In fact, the very plethora of developmental schools suggests that some higher-order theory focusing on consciousness itself, rather than the content or expression of consciousness, might bring greater integration to the field of developmental psychology. (p. 1)

Noetic models are informed by research on early and midrange stages of growth, while relying mainly on mystical literature to define higher development, where research is more scarce (Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986). Meanwhile, mystics tend simply to contrast consciousness that is “asleep” within the ego’s dualistic framework of “illusion” with consciousness that is “awake” in the nondual awareness of “truth,” which is unity (Caplan, 1999; Hixon, 1978; Kapleau, 1965; Ramana Maharshi, 2004; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001). The following subsections of this chapter elucidate this basic distinction by using stage theory and mystical perspectives to describe egoic consciousness, nondual realization, and nondual consciousness.

As a general framework, noetic models suggest that consciousness evolves through preegoic, egoic, and postegoic modes of perception (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Wade,

1996; Wilber, 1986). Wilber (1986) described these as *prepersonal*, *personal*, and *transpersonal* phases, each of which contains several distinct stages. These basic phases signify the process by which consciousness develops, among other things, a provisional, representational system of *self* and *other*—the primary dualism—before it can heal this split by realizing nonduality.

In prepersonal development, psychological identity is not yet continuous or defined (Wilber, 1986). The mind gradually develops the ability to work with representational symbols, which form the basis of personal identity, object relations, and abstract thought (Piaget, 1977). The stages of the personal phase are defined by the ubiquitous experience of self-reflective awareness—the sense of individual identity commonly known as the ego (Wilber, 1986).

During the personal phase, the achievement of formal operations (Piaget, 1977) brings the ability to apply logical reasoning within purely abstract and hypothetical settings. As Susanne Cook-Greuter and Melvin Miller (1994) observed, this level of cognitive sophistication gives rise to the skills and attitudes of the mature personality in modern Western cultures:

To be considered members, [young adults] are expected to be able to anticipate and plan for the future, to understand cause and effect, to base their judgments on evidence and facts, to be capable of considering another's point of view, and to be objective. They must also believe that problems can be solved through the proper scientific approaches and methods. Having these abilities and views promises one entry into the full range of adult roles, responsibilities, and rights. (p. xvi)

Though the achievement of this rationalistic mentality is necessary to human evolution, consciousness in the personal phase has yet to discover its universal nature, beyond the individual mind and body. John Engler (1993) explained why consciousness cannot accurately be equated with the personal sense of self:

The “self” is literally constructed out of our object experience. What we take to be our “self” and feel to be so present and real is actually an internalized image, a composite representation, constructed by a selective and imaginative “remembering” of past encounters with the object worlds. (p. 118)

Through increasingly refined attention, consciousness eventually distinguishes itself from the composite representation of personal identity, leading to postrepresentational awareness. Here, consciousness witnesses but does not identify itself with mental representations. Experience therefore becomes “fluid and open-ended” (Cook-Greuter, 1994, p. 119). At this stage, it becomes clear that experience belongs ontologically to awareness alone rather than to a conceptualized self which “has” the experience.

Mystical traditions facilitate postrepresentational awareness through meditative practices, verbal teachings, and contemplative inquiry focusing on the question, “Who am I?” (Fenner, 2002; Ramana Maharshi, 2004). Eventually, the unity of subjective awareness and the objective world is realized.

The meditator is said to learn fundamental truths regarding the operation of the mind. His awareness is said to become so refined that he begins to explore the interaction of mind and universe. . . . In doing so, he learns that there is no real boundary between the mind-inside and the universe-outside. Eventually, a fundamental non-dual awareness will intuitively and experientially understand the operation of the mind/universe, leading to a radical transformation of experience called enlightenment. Moreover, there may be several such transformations, more than one such enlightenment. (Brown & Engler, 1980, p. 145)

Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield (1993) discussed the effect of this process on the personality:

As the solidity of the self breaks down, there is a vision of the true connection between all of us. From this arises a spontaneous kind of warmth and compassion. Greater understanding leads to all kinds of altruistic states and eventually the highest kinds of enlightenment, in which we can see our existence as a play in the energy field that is the whole world. (p. 59)

In nondual consciousness, awareness interacts with sensations, emotions, thoughts, opinions, images, and paradigms but does not identify any particular constellation of phenomena as a separate self (Wade, 1996). For this reason, personal identity is no longer the implicit, overarching construct for interpreting experience.

In nondual consciousness, distinctions between self and other are merely pragmatic: At the level of awareness, it is recognized that everything and everyone is a reflection of the same source (Wade, 1996). As Kornfield (1993) suggested, the egoic sense of estrangement gives way to the celebration of apparent diversity within fundamental unity. Egolessness is said to facilitate a deeper appreciation of uniqueness than when consciousness mistakes uniqueness as a valid indication of separation (Hixon, 1978).

It is important at this point to draw a distinction between psychological and mystical understandings of ego. Joel Funk (1994) suggested,

The two major components of the ego are the *functional*—concerned with reality testing, mediation between inner and outer, and synthesis or integration, and the *representational*—concerned with the formation of self and object representations, and also the source of the sense of “I” that is normally felt. (pp. 11-12)

In this study, the terms ego or egoic consciousness are used from the mystical perspective. Mystics tend to view ego as identification of consciousness with the representational self, rather than the array of functional capacities that define the ego in psychodynamic theory (Engler, 1993; Funk, 1994). Blackstone (1997) explained,

The word “ego” is often used to denote the false self. The teaching of selflessness is seen as the death of the ego. But the word ego is used in so many different ways that this teaching is also a source of confusion. . . . The word “ego” is also used to mean the ability to organize one’s environment, to navigate and discriminate, to make choices, to persevere towards specific goals, and so forth. Traditional psychologists point to these abilities as signs of what they call “ego strength.” . . .

Clear distinction must be made between the defensive activity of the wounded false self/ego and the self-confidence and volitional and cognitive abilities of the essential self. (p. 43)

Mark Epstein (1993) further clarified the mystical viewpoint, which holds that the ego does not exist as a thing in itself:

It is, rather, the self-concept, the *representational* component of the ego, the actual internal experience of one's self that is targeted [by nondual insight]. . . . It is not the case of something real being eliminated, but of the essential groundlessness being realized for what it has always been. (p. 123)

According to Epstein (as cited in Funk, 1994), proper transpersonal development actually *strengthens* the functional aspects of the psyche while deconstructing the bounded self-concept. The following discussion of developmental theory is meant to describe how consciousness identifies with the representational mind and later disidentifies without losing the functions of the mature psyche.

Egoic Consciousness

To understand the significance of nondual consciousness, it will be useful to explore the predominant structures of consciousness (Cook-Greuter, 1994; Wilber, 1995) by which most people understand themselves and their world. As Assagioli (1969) observed, human beings generally experience reality in terms of socially shared meanings that are assumed to be valid.

A discussion of what is transpersonal—and therefore, in a certain sense supernormal—should be prefaced by a clarification of what is meant by “normal.” The current criterion of normality is generally considered to be represented by the average man who observes the social conventions of the environment in which he lives—in other words, one who is a conformist. (p. 33)

Indeed, developmental psychologists identify an especially conformist stage of egoic consciousness (Kegan, 1982; Loevinger, 1976; Wade, 1996). However, this section

describes how egoic consciousness, in all of its stages, participates in the broader conformity of illusory perception to which Assagioli (1969) alluded.

From the transpersonal perspective, the sense of body-encapsulated, isolated selfhood can be seen as one of the most basic and least questioned social conventions of contemporary Western societies (Tart, 1975). The fundamental illusion of egoic consciousness is the perception of oneself as an object amid a world of separate objects (Adyashanti, 2004; Cook-Greuter, 1999; Nisargadatta, 1973; Ramana Maharshi, 2004; Sheng-yen, 2001; Wade, 1996; Welwood, 2000; Wilber, 1986). This experience stems from the way perception is structured during early development (Wade, 1996; Welwood, 2000).

The ego has been described as a “self-sense” (Wilber, 1986) and a system of meaning-making (Loevinger, 1976). Cook-Greuter (1994) observed,

Ego development theory describes a sequence of consecutive stages of how human beings make sense of themselves and their experience. It explains both the strengths and the limits of a given meaning-making system and shows the next “logic” of experience that a developing person will enter into. (p. 120)

As this summary suggests, the sense of personal identity shifts in accord with an evolving framework for creating meaning. According to Jane Loevinger’s (1976) theory of ego development, the ego evolves through invariant, hierarchical stages marked by increasingly refined ways of creating meaning and identity and in which consciousness differentiates itself from embedded cultural constructs. Higher complexity is expressed through cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of the personality, which are involved in processing sense perception, thought, emotion, dreams, motivation, and other aspects of experience (Cook-Greuter, 1999).

In constructive-developmental psychology (Kegan, 1982; Loevinger, 1976), ego maturity is defined as accurate self-knowledge achieved through the differentiation of awareness from contexts in which it was previously embedded. This process implies that the meaning of selfhood keeps shifting as contexts—such as family norms, cultural mores, and gender roles—are discovered to be extrinsic circumstances rather than the self. In short, what was once subject becomes object (Kegan, 1982), and the subject changes its identity.

Logic implies that the subjective sense of selfhood moves toward complete independence, so that no objective representation—descriptor, image, concept—can be conclusively and accurately equated with the conscious subject (Kegan, 1982). Thus, constructive-developmental models propose a fluid, interrelational self as the final stage of ego maturity (Kegan, 1982; Loevinger, 1976). This stage includes the awareness of how self-systems interpenetrate each other: Meaning and therefore selfhood becomes relative and dynamic (Kegan, 1982). According to this formulation, the perception of separate selfhood remains but is softened by the appreciation of how meaning is mutually constructed. In other words, the fluid self continues to exist as a separate identity, though it is cognized that interaction with others helps define one's self-representation from moment to moment.

In Loevinger's model, the ego progresses through *preconventional*, *conventional*, and *postconventional* stages (Hy & Loevinger, 1996). Throughout the conventional stages—*Conformist*, *Self-aware*, and *Conscientious*—generation of meaning, and therefore identity, are heavily conditioned by internalized cultural constructs. Wade's (1996) model describes midrange stages similar to Loevinger's conventional levels. Here,

consciousness moves from the insularity of *Egocentric consciousness*—“it’s me against the world”—to the focus on group belonging and identity in *Conformist consciousness* (Wade, 1996). Wade then described a transition to an individualistic structure marked either by an acquisitive or cooperative style of social relatedness. Loevinger (1976) also described a transition to individualistic, differentiated stages in which personal achievement or interdependence become core values.

Across models, the conventional egoic stages are highly conditioned by biological and social factors that encourage attitudes, behaviors, and skills conducive to survival, social belonging, and rational, executive functioning (Loevinger, 1976; Wade, 1996). As Wade (1996) noted, a central feature of the maturing ego is the channeling of consciousness into processes of mentation. As cognitive sophistication proceeds, symbolic mapping of experience limits the capacity for nonconceptual participation in the moment. The increasingly concept-laden mind confines awareness to an abstract focus on the remembered past and projected future. Consciousness therefore begins to know itself as identical to the thought stream, which, being intensely involved in memory and projection, becomes less related to the immediacy and fullness of the present.

The ongoing specialization of awareness creates a cohesive, skin-encapsulated sense of self, continuous in linear time. This achievement comes with a price. Speaking from the nondual perspective, which holds that objectified identity is inherently artificial, Engler (1993) wrote,

The very attempt to constellate a self and objects that will have some constancy and continuity [eventually] emerges as a therapeutic problem. The two great achievements in the all-important line of object relations development—identity and object constancy—still represent a point of fixation or arrest. “Normality” appears in this perspective to be a state of arrested development. (p. 120)

Similarly, Wade (1996) stated “As the ego’s strength increases, it becomes even more alienated from the numinous and involved in the mental world of its own ideas as a necessary part of human evolution” (p. 129). The term numinous signifies the experience of the dynamic wholeness of reality, which exists prior to mental compartmentalization. Meanwhile, Wade’s phrase, “involved in the mental world of its own ideas,” points out the defining quality of egoic consciousness.

As the numinous goes further underground, reality is equated with everyday appearances, and God, or spirituality, tends to be conceived as an entity or realm completely separate from this world (Wilber, 1986). Unquestioned premises and paradigmatic assumptions prevail throughout the conventional range: Even the individualist’s striving for personal advancement is determined by culturally sanctioned values (Wade, 1996). Consciousness identifies almost completely with the persona or social identity.

As Tart (1975) observed, a common assumption of orthodox Western psychology is that “a normal adult has a fairly good degree of understanding of his own personality” (p. 87). This assumption may stem from the prior, broader assumption that conventional ego development offers a solid apprehension of reality. Without denying the necessity of conventional development, Tart summarized its limitations from the point of view that mystics, speaking from nondual consciousness, have consistently offered:

The spiritual psychologies would generally regard an ordinary person’s understanding of his personality, or even a psychologist’s for that matter, as a relatively trivial and often very distorted understanding of a not too important level of human functioning. Many of the spiritual psychologies emphasize over and over that the ordinary human being and his society live in and mutually reinforce a world of illusion, and their “understanding” of themselves and others within this world of illusion is itself mainly illusory. Since various reinforcement systems are set up for appropriate behavior within this world of illusion, and since

most of us are attached to seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, there is a strong force not to question the illusionary world and our understanding of it, so few do question it. (p. 87)

Despite the stubbornness of socially shared illusions, symptoms emerge to indicate that the ego is in a rather tenuous position.

Tart (1987) noted that psychologists in the early 20th century were often concerned with helping people develop the cohesive identity and normal social functions of egoic consciousness but began in the 1950s to recognize people whom Tart described as “successful malcontents” (p. 174). These individuals, whose consciousness reached perhaps the conformist or individualist stage, had often achieved the highest goals defined by these levels. Despite material well-being, community belonging, normal family life, intellectual sophistication, cultural enrichment, and career achievement, life often seemed empty. Such achievements, apparently, did not protect against chronic states of anxiety, despair, anger, and interpersonal conflict.

The sanity, and ultimacy, of the conventional ego structure was increasingly questioned in the late 20th century, especially by psychologists who were concerned with cultural manifestations of the modern psyche (e.g., Cushman, 1995; Jung, 1957; Laing, 1967; May, 1983). From its beginnings, psychology has explored the ways in which social conditioning forces consciousness to compartmentalize, avoid, distort, and deny aspects of conscious experience that threaten familial and social norms (e.g., Freud, 1923/1961; Horney, 1950; Laing, 1959; Miller, 1986). In this process, consciousness erects boundaries not only against painful, repressed experiences but also against the capacity to enjoy the numinous wholeness of existence (Assagioli, 1991; Firman & Gila, 1997). Due to psychological trauma, the enacted personality is in large part a “survival

personality” (Firman & Gila, 1997, p. 20). The survival personality is a strategic configuration of defensive postures designed to protect the psyche—especially from the abrasive effects of other, similarly reactive egos.

As John Firman and Ann Gila (1997) noted, a cultural historical analysis of childhood reveals a legacy of tremendous ignorance about children’s needs and psychological vulnerability, leading to cruel parenting practices that have only begun to change in recent centuries. Thus, the traumatized and well-defended survival personality remains ubiquitous to normal development and perpetuates itself through intergenerational wounding (Firman & Gila, 1997). R. D. Laing (1967) observed,

What we call “normal” is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience. It is radically estranged from the structure of being. . . . The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one’s mind, is the condition of the normal man. (pp. 27-28)

In summary, the sense of duality—which is ultimately the splitting and compartmentalization of experience—is intensified by psychological trauma. Meanwhile, mystics report, as a result of their extraordinary breakthroughs, that the intrinsic “structure of being” to which Laing referred is nondual, inconceivably vibrant, and wholly of love (Hixon, 1978; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Nisargadatta, 1973; Meher Baba, 1967; Parker, 2000; Parsons, 1995; Ramana Maharshi, 2004; Thompson, 2002; Tolle, 1999; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001).

According to mystics, the widespread alienation from these positive qualities is due only to the collective force of habit over countless centuries (Chang, 1959; Nisargadatta, 1973; Tolle, 1999). Tart (1987) described the social nature of ego as “consensus trance” or “the sleep of everyday life” (p. 85). Tart defined consensus trance

as “a state of profound abstraction” (p. 85). The strength of egoic hypnosis is that it is socially shared: “From the point of view that I have outlined, normalcy would be rather the kind of sickness or crippling that we share with everybody else and therefore don’t notice” (Maslow, 1971, p. 25). Thus, conventional development can be seen as a necessary step in the evolution of consciousness, as well as a phase in which consciousness becomes lost, often quite painfully, in a collective form of dissociation: “There is little conjunction of truth and social ‘reality.’ Around us are pseudo-events, to which we adjust with a false consciousness adapted to see these events as true and real, and even as beautiful” (Laing, 1967, p. xi).

Results of the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT; Hy & Loevinger, 1996), the psychometric assessment most often used to gauge ego development, indicate that 75-80% of the adult population fall within the conventional stages of ego development (Cook-Greuter, 1994). In light of the foregoing analysis, these findings support mystics’ view that in average adult development, unexamined social conditioning creates a personal identity that constricts awareness within its artificial boundaries.

According to Buddhism, the typical adult fixates at the level of childhood precursors. As life-experience accumulates, we are lost in a fragmented and narrow world of socially defined roles, opinions, biases, specializations, and bits and pieces of knowledge. Often feeling like a victim of external forces, we are led compulsively about by our self-image which, in its narrowness, cuts us off from our liberating cognitive capacity. This self-image provides an ersatz sense of uniqueness and freedom, while simultaneously forcing us to function at a restricted, enslaved level. (Shultz, 1975, p. 18)

The Buddhist diagnosis traces the mature ego’s fragmentation to early development, when consciousness mistook an amalgamation of extrinsic phenomena for itself.

According to John Welwood (2000), the dynamic that constructs the provisional self is *prereflective identification*.

What makes our ordinary state of consciousness problematic, according to both psychological and spiritual traditions, is unconscious identification. . . . [We] develop an ego identity, a stable self-image composed of self-representations, which are part of larger object relations—self-other schemas formed in our early transactions with our parents. To form an identity means *taking ourselves to be something*, based on how others relate to us. Identification is like a glue by which consciousness attaches itself to contents of consciousness—thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs, memories—and assumes with each of them, “That’s me,” or, “That represents me.” Forming an identity is a way in which consciousness objectifies itself, makes itself an object. It is like looking in a mirror and taking ourselves to be the visual image reflected back to us, while ignoring our more immediate, lived experience of embodied being. Identification is a primitive form of self-knowledge—the best we could do as a child, given our limited cognitive capacities. (pp. 105-106)

Alienation is implicit in this process. To the extent that consciousness imagines itself as a partial reflection, it remains “unable to assimilate the full range and richness of inner and outer experience, [and] our minds become confused and dissatisfied” (Shultz, 1975, p. 18). Until consciousness attains to a purer experience of itself, unmediated by dualistic abstraction, it inhabits a trance of repetitive interpretations and feelings that center around the self-construct. As Roger Walsh and Deane Shapiro (1983) explained, mystics consider the experiential contents of egoic consciousness to be no less ephemeral than those of a night dream:

The “normal” person is seen as “asleep” or “dreaming.” When the dream is especially painful or disruptive, it becomes a nightmare and is recognized as pathology, but since the vast majority of the population dreams, the true state of affairs goes unrecognized. When the individual permanently disidentifies from or eradicates this dream he is said to have awakened and can now recognize both the true nature of his former state and that of the population. This awakening or enlightenment is the aim of the consciousness disciplines. (p. 43)

Blackstone (1997) wrote,

Our abstract perception of the world is to some degree a fantasy, and whether it is a romance or a horror story, it is not as satisfying as the direct experience of life. When we realize fundamental consciousness, we begin to truly see, truly touch, truly hear. We move from abstraction to substance, from imagination to actuality. (p. 14)

Noetic stage theory suggests that the egoic dream begins to fade as the accumulating logic of experience guides consciousness to analyze its presumed self (Cook-Greuter, 1994; Wade, 1996). Likewise, the 13th-century Zen master Dogen (Maezumi, 1978) explained that the mystical path consists in studying the self, “forgetting” this false self, and thereby awakening to—and becoming intimately immersed in—the wholeness of reality. In transpersonal theory, study of the self begins in postconventional ego stages, as awareness intuits the dynamic ground of being upon which the self ultimately depends (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Wade, 1996).

The postconventional ego integrates aspects of experience that were compartmentalized in earlier stages. Wilber’s (1986) term for the integrated self, the *Centaur*, connotes the harmonization of mental and physical experience within a more holistic witnessing awareness. Centauric consciousness is essentially equivalent to Abraham Maslow’s (1987) *self-actualizers* and Wade’s (1996) *Authentic consciousness*.

As Wade noted, the authentic, self-actualizing ego is the highest stage acknowledged in most conventional developmental theory. The authentic individual represents a fairly healthy human organism. For example, research reveals that self-actualizing individuals are largely free of neurotic thinking and feeling (Maslow, 1987). They therefore enjoy a more direct experience of reality than that afforded by earlier stages. According to Maslow (1987),

[Self-actualizers] live more in the real world of nature than in the human-made mass of concepts, abstractions, expectations, beliefs, and stereotypes that most

people confuse with the world. They are therefore far more apt to perceive what is there than their own wishes, hopes, fears, anxieties, their own theories and beliefs, or those of their cultural group. (p. 154)

Qualities of this stage that have been found by several researchers include acceptance of self, others, and the world; integration of masculine and feminine aspects of personality; transcendence of self in certain ways; transcendence of one's given culture; cognitive efficiency; high sensual enjoyment; appreciation of paradox and existential dilemmas; accurate empathy; cooperative interpersonal relationships; responsibility for choices; and openness to new information and experiences (Cook-Greuter, 1990; Labouvie-Vief, 1984; Loevinger, 1976; Loevinger & Wessler, 1970; Maslow, 1987). These qualities suggest a context of intrapsychic harmony:

In these [self-actualizing] people, the id, the ego, and the superego are collaborative and synergic; they do not war with each other nor are their interests in basic disagreement as they are in neurotic people. So also do the cognitive, the impulsive and the emotional coalesce into an organismic unity . . . the higher and the lower are not in opposition but in agreement. (Maslow, 1987, p. 141)

This degree of psychological integration corresponds with an advanced moral ethic of dedication to the welfare of humanity and the earth (Kohlberg, 1981).

Despite its refined qualities, Authentic consciousness remains limited by the separate sense of self (Wade, 1996). As Wilber (1996) observed, many existential thinkers emphasize the centrality of angst—created by facing death and meaninglessness at this stage—and regard the desire for transcendence as escapism. Existentialists tend to characterize the human condition as a matter of “self-determined choice in the face of an indifferent or hostile universe” (Funk, 1994, p. 4). However, in Wilber's view existential angst does not arise from a raw encounter with the facts of life. Rather, angst indicates that consciousness has begun to suffer more acutely due to egoic dissociation from life,

its mistaken identity as the finite body and mind. The liberating fact of nonduality remains to be discovered (Wilber, 1986).

With its greater sensitivity and perspective, Authentic consciousness begins to recognize the ego's limitation and insubstantiality (Wade, 1996). Cook-Greuter (1990) stated:

The rational self has become conscious of itself and experiences its own boundedness as a constructed object. . . . A mere continued refinement on the existing paradigm cannot fulfill the need for deeper psychological understanding or higher integration. . . . Postautonomous individuals begin to realize the egocentrism of previous development and to become aware of their relative individual insignificance in terms of the totality of human existence. They may yearn to transcend their own rational, ever-watchful, conscious egos. (p. 91)

Wilber (1996) described the experiential qualities of the crisis that faces the self-actualized yet ego-bound individual:

One of the characteristics of the actual self of this stage (the centaur) is precisely that it no longer buys all the conventional and numbing consolations—as Kierkegaard put it, the self can no longer tranquilize itself with the trivial. . . . The whole point of the existential level is that you are not yet in the transpersonal, but you are no longer totally anchored in the personal—the whole personal domain has started to lose its flavor, has started to become profoundly meaningless. . . . [The centaur] has tasted everything that the personal realm can offer, and it's not enough. . . . This is a soul for whom the personal has gone totally flat. This is, in other words, a soul on the brink of the transpersonal. (pp. 193-196)

The spiritual teacher Adyashanti (2006) addressed this crucial transition when he explained, “Boredom is a great spiritual aid! . . . When you get bored with yourself, that’s a good thing.” According to Wade (1996), “Self-actualization is ultimately comprehended as a paradox: it is simultaneously an end, as full realization of the self, and an invitation to transcend that self” (p. 175). Thus, an adaptive ego structure satisfies worldly aims but does not fulfill the telos of consciousness to know itself.

Following the Authentic stage, Wade's *Transcendent consciousness* is marked by the singular motivation to break through superficial perception in order to realize absolute reality. As James Shultz (1975) noted, the mature spiritual aspirant "is not seeking satisfying peak experiences but only the raw truth, be it pleasant or painful" (pp. 21-22). When meditative awareness deepens—with aid of meditation and other practices (Goleman, 1988)—altered states and psychic phenomena become more common (Wade, 1996). These states help deconstruct the solid world of Newtonian physics and formal operations, revealing that "Reality is holonomic—acausal, synchronous, interconnected, and relativistic" (Wade, 1996, p. 184). Ordinary awareness becomes increasingly destabilized. Wilber (1996) located this development in the first stage of his transpersonal domains, which he calls the *Psychic*:

As I use it, the psychic level simply means the great transition stage from ordinary, gross-oriented reality—sensorimotor and rational and existential—into the properly transpersonal domains. Paranormal events sometimes increase in frequency at the psychic level, but that is not what defines this level. The defining characteristic, the deep structure, of this psychic level is an awareness that is no longer confined exclusively to the individual ego or centaur. . . . At the psychic level, a person might temporarily dissolve the separate-self sense (the ego or centaur) and find an identity with the entire gross or sensorimotor world. (p. 202)

Along with greater access to nonordinary states, the trend of Wade's (1996) Transcendent stage is toward radical acceptance of all experiences, in place of attachment and resistance.

Transcendent consciousness is equivalent to the advanced stages of meditation. As constriction of awareness relaxes, spontaneous experiences of joy or grief may emerge, along with unconscious material from the individual or collective psyche (Goleman, 1988). According to many mystical traditions, experiencing negative emotional states with full awareness allows them to transform into corresponding positive

qualities (Trungpa, 1999; Wilber, 1996). For example, anger transforms to mirror-like clarity, and sadness transforms to compassion.

On the basis of deep equanimity, the unfolding of insight takes on its own momentum (Shultz, 1975), and neurotic suffering decreases markedly (Goleman, 1985). The remaining, and defining, form of suffering in Transcendent consciousness is the very desire for unity with Absolute Reality, which presumes separation from it (Wade, 1996). Wilber (1985) described the fundamental impasse of the Transcendent stage:

Strictly speaking, there is no path to unity consciousness. Unity consciousness is not a particular experience among other experiences, not a big experience opposed to small experiences. . . . Rather, it is every wave of present experience just as it is. And how can you contact present experience? There is nothing but present experience, and there is definitely no path to that which already is. . . . It is for all these reasons that the true sages proclaim there is no path to the Absolute, no way to gain unity consciousness. . . . We won't hold still long enough to understand our present condition. And in always looking elsewhere, we are actually moving away from the answer, in the sense that if we are always looking beyond, the essential understanding of the present condition will not unfold. . . . We are not really searching for the answer—we are fleeing it. (p. 143)

Thus, only a kind of psychological “emptying” will resolve the illusory gap between the individual and reality. For this reason, nondual realization frequently occurs when egoic striving has exhausted itself (Adyashanti, 2004; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Thompson, 2002). As the following section shows, the various aspects of nondual realization amount to a thorough refutation of all duality, including the core presumption of separate selfhood.

Nondual Realization

Nondual realization can be seen as an event as well as a process. It typically involves a gradual opening of awareness punctuated by sudden, dramatic breakthroughs (Chang, 1957; Kapleau, 1965; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000;

Thompson, 2002). As Garma C. C. Chang (1957) observed, “[Awakening] experiences are one and also many—one because they are identical in essence; many because they differ in depth, clearness, and proficiency” (p. 162). Ultimately, such experiences illuminate the inseparability of immanence and transcendence, manifest and unmanifest orders of being (Hixon, 1978; Wade, 1996).

Realization often begins with the transcendent discovery of formlessness, which is otherwise known as *emptiness* (Chang, 1959), *pure consciousness* (Forman, 1998, 1999), or the *causal* realm (Wilber, 1986). Emptiness indicates that nothing in the phenomenal world has solid, independent existence, and it is equivalent to the “Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being” (Huxley as cited in Walsh & Vaughan, 1993, p. 213). Distinct subjects and objects do not appear at the causal level; there is only radiant, self-illuminated awareness without a separate “I” who is aware (Blackstone, 2006; Greenwell, 2005; Wilber, 1986, 1996). Wilber (1996) explained:

When, as a specific type of meditation, you pursue the observing Self, the Witness, to its very source in Emptiness, then no objects arise in consciousness at all. This is a discrete, identifiable state of awareness—namely, *unmanifest absorption* or *cessation*, variously known as nirvikalpa samadhi, jnana samadhi, ayin, vergezzen, nirodh, classical nirvana. This is the causal state, a discrete state, which is often likened to the state of deep dreamless sleep, except that this state is not a mere blank but rather an utter fullness, and it is experienced as such—as infinitely drenched in the fullness of Being, so full that no manifestation can even begin to contain it. Because it can never be seen as an object, this pure Self is pure Emptiness. (p. 220)

Realization of the causal Ground spontaneously dissolves objective self-identity and its attachments (Goleman, 1988). In Hindu terms, it would be said that *karma*, or mental conditioning, is *burned up* (Caplan, 1999). Wade (1996) noted,

Even a single, fleeting experience reduces ego, including greed for sensory objects, personal gain, possessions or praise; resentment; inability to share with others; failure to perceive the relative and illusory nature of whatever may seem

attractive; mistaking impermanence for permanence; and seeing a self in what is devoid of self. (p. 216)

The following example illustrates this experience. Francis Lucille (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003), a French teacher of Advaita Vedanta, recounted,

And what occurred . . . could not be expressed in words. Even if I say it was beauty, immortality, absolute love, absolute understanding, I am ashamed to use these words. Putting things in perspective, what this event accomplished, almost instantaneously, were two things: First, because it gave me the certainty of my immortality, it permanently “cured” me from fear. Second, it gave me a bliss that was absolute. . . . The experience of this bliss cured me from desire. So I was cured from both fear and desire. It does not mean, by the way, that fear and desire instantaneously stopped, because for a while the old habits kept reoccurring. But that which was fueling them was no longer alive, and so there was nothing to fuel them any longer. (pp. 33-34)

Likewise, the popular mystic Eckhart Tolle (1999) stated that the sudden realization that he was not his tormented mind—but has always been formless Being—propelled him into several years of blissful loitering on park benches.

No longer identified with his persona, history, body, or circumstances, Tolle was free to delight in the everyday world around him, which became a miracle of indescribable beauty (Tolle, 1999). Tolle knew himself merely as *presence*, the intelligent sentience that animates the universe. Similarly, when asked, “Who are you?” Francis Lucille responded, “I am awareness. I am the same as you are, the same awareness” (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003, p. 30). This is the decisive shift of identity that comes through nondual realization.

As these accounts suggest, awakening is usually accompanied by extraordinary feelings of peace, love, and bliss (Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Hixon, 1978). A Zen aphorism states, “When the realization is deep, your whole being is dancing” (Adyashanti, 2004, p. 102). However, the significance of realization lies in the clarification of awareness

rather than its cathartic byproducts. The ease and joy of nondual consciousness reflects the absence of disturbance rather than the presence of emotional fireworks (Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Nisargadatta, 1973). As Hixon (1978) explained,

In the process of Enlightenment there is indeed a point when we become ecstatic over rediscovering the One, but this excitement eventually disappears as we understand more clearly that the One is fully present through every state of consciousness, transcendental and mundane. (p. 104)

Hixon pointed to the immanence phase of nondual realization, in which consciousness not only enjoys its freedom as formless awareness but more clearly realizes itself as identical to the entire world of form.

In an instructional meeting with a student, Zen teacher Yasutani Roshi described transcendence and immanence in turn:

Our True-nature is beyond all categories. Whatever you can conceive or imagine is but a fragment of yourself. . . . Strictly speaking, this body and mind are also you but only a fraction. The essence of your True-nature is no different from that of this stick in front of me or this table or that clock—in fact every single object in the universe. When you directly experience the truth of this, it will be so convincing that you will exclaim, “How true!” (Kapleau, 1965, p. 155)

Yasutani Roshi’s words hardly indicate the extraordinary impact of this realization, in which the mystery of life is felt to be completely resolved and the psyche released from the cumulative suffering of a lifetime (Hixon, 1978). For example, spiritual teacher Richard Moss (1986) described the astounding realization of nonduality that followed several months of ego destabilization and paranormal experiences:

I reached a point of utter emptiness in which there was neither hope nor hopelessness. It was in this state that I was sitting quietly in the morning sunshine. I observed two butterflies dancing in the air. One was predominantly black and the other white. They alighted on a branch, and to my amazement and delight, I saw them mate. I watched their wings opening and closing in unison. After some minutes, they once again resumed their dance in the air. Suddenly, the black one flew to me and landed right between my eyebrows. At that moment life changed forever. The descriptive words that came in the following days all involve the

imagery of Marriage and Union. I am at once the Lover and the Beloved. All of Existence confirms me and is none other than Myself. The personal, physical, existential me is nothing except the Grace of God. It is only through this Grace that "I" (the individual me) exist at all. Every thought, sensation, perception unites me with the Divine and *is* the Divine. In that moment, all of creation became a single consciousness, a state of indescribable glory and unspeakable peace. The fear that existed when I stood rooted in egoic consciousness was now the most exquisite nectar. . . . I was suffused with a current of aliveness so transcendently blissful that there is no analogy within ordinary experience that even approximates it. It was a living bliss, but it was also the most profound intelligence. There was a flood of knowing, of understanding as though all of existence stood before me in its totality with its secrets uncovered and revealed. . . . I had wondered if there could be any meaning in all the suffering, the genocide, the pollution, and the mindless way in which most people plod through their days. All of that vanished forever at the moment the black butterfly landed on my forehead. Life now appeared to me as having a fundamental and immutable meaning and value. This value did not have to be attained; it already and always is. I perceived and knew with the force of complete identity, and not mere ideological conviction, that we are already whole. That wholeness reconciled for me all the questions as to life's meaning. . . . Those first months after the opening were absolutely without precedent in my life. . . . I devoured esoteric and scriptural literature and read of the saints with a sense of complete understanding and brotherhood. (pp. 25-26)

In the absence of such a poetic and personal statement, it may be difficult to fathom the degree of intrinsic authority, sacredness, and higher insight that authentic mystical experience carries (Assagioli, 1991; Goleman, 1988; Huxley, 1944; Underhill, 1955).

While Moss's account indicates the essential nature and implications of nonduality, the following report from an advanced practitioner of Transcendental Meditation describes the emergence of nondual consciousness as a stable stage of awareness:

In this state I experience my Self as observer, observed, and the process of observation at the same time; there is only my Self relating to Itself. I see my Self in every object. The whole universe is experienced as just a vibration or fluctuation of my own consciousness. There is nowhere to go, nothing to look for, everything is inside. In activity, instead of being a channel of nature, I am nature itself, flowing within my Self, doing what is appropriate at each moment to maintain the balance of the universe. (Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994, p. 51)

Here, the capitalized term Self indicates that the immediate, direct experience of unity now governs meaning-making and therefore identity.

In summary, when meaning is informed by the fact of nonduality rather than dualistic interpretation, identification includes everything and acknowledges partiality only on the level of appearance. Stabilization in the simultaneous awareness of phenomenal diversity and formless unity is called *sahaja samadhi* in Advaita Vedanta (Ramana Maharshi, 2004), *baqa-billah* in Sufism (Meher Baba, 1967), and *kenchuto* in Zen (Kapleau, 1965). These terms refer to the state of living in selfless flow with reality.

Nondual Consciousness

This section examines the qualities that mature mystics experience and express in the stage of nondual consciousness. The interconnected themes discussed in this section—distilled from current theory, research, and mystical literature—form an evolving portrait of *living* enlightenment, which can be strengthened by further research.

Purgation. For awareness to move from a momentary glimpse of nonduality to the stage of nondual consciousness, transformation of character must be thorough. As Washburn (1995) noted, Christian, Tantric, and alchemical mystical traditions largely concur about the process by which opening to the Ground leads to the stage of *Integration*, Washburn's term for enlightened consciousness. Purification demands a shakedown of the entire mental-egoic system—removing the illusion of sovereign self-encapsulation, freeing energy from primal repression, and purging the mental, “Cartesian” ego's resistance to the Ground. Review of mystical literature finds support for Washburn's analysis.

Truth is an energy for good. It is a working energy. Once it enters, or becomes known in a body, it never ceases transforming the old dark and past emotional energies that previously were dictating the life. These emotions and the habitual thought associated with them are deep and hard. They form stratas of ignorance in the psyche. (Long, 1994, p. 13)

Further insights into the process of mind lead to seeing more deeply that everything we are is in constant change. There can arise a clear vision of the dissolution of self from moment to moment, and this often leads to a realm of fear and terror, and a kind of inner death. Later there arises from this awareness a spontaneous process of letting go of personal motivation, and with this grows an awareness of loving or “Bodhisattva” consciousness. (Kornfield, 1993, p. 59)

It takes a long time, before perfection is reached, to remove the dualistic thoughts arising from the passions. This is very clearly shown . . . in the following Zen proverb . . . “The truth should be understood through sudden Enlightenment, but the fact (the complete realization) must be cultivated step by step.” (Chang, 1957, p. 163)

As Washburn (1995) sees it, purification allows the soul at last to become “saturated with the ‘juice of life’” (p. 225) and to take “serene delight” in a “beatified world” (p. 229). The body becomes a true “temple of spirit” (p. 232) and the personality a vehicle for its expression.

Stable perception of unity. An interview with ShantiMayi, a lineage holder in a Hindu tradition, sheds further light on purification and enlightenment as a culminating stage. ShantiMayi recounted changes that occurred over many years of simple living and spiritual training:

I stayed with my Master and it was by his grace that my eyes were cleared and my heart was opened. . . . Many insights came with great wisdom and compassion. Heavy delusions were lifted off my shoulders. Encrustations of ignorance were broken away from my heart. (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003, p. 260)

ShantiMayi emphasized that, “You gain the Truth which you always are. You cannot really become: you realize the ever present reality” (p. 260). It could be said that her consciousness had ripened toward the radical shift of fully recognizing that reality:

There, alone, in an isolated area at the back of the cannery, a sensation ever so slight, ever so delicate, consumed me. It was like a needle piercing a soap bubble. The entire universe, as I knew it, disappeared with a very subtle pop of that delicate tiny bubble. I stood very still for about an hour. I could only look into the emptiness. There was no I or not I. Emptiness in emptiness. Impossible to describe. Nothing had changed but, oh, what a relief. . . . Identity had awakened to the immutable perfection unruffled by perception. Since that day, change has no grip in the same way that a day never passes in a dream. (p. 261)

According to ShantiMayi, enlightenment is stable when “the wisdom of insight remains without dwindling, when it stays with you forever, when you no longer can see double, no matter what the senses report” (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003, pp. 257-258). “Seeing double” is an apt phrase for perceiving duality where there is only oneness. Thus, ShantiMayi stressed that the hallmark of nondual consciousness is unshakeable awareness of the singular divine Ground: “You realize that all that is experienced is the total and undivided essence” (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003, p. 258). These comments help distinguish the stage of nondual consciousness from the transitional phase of awakening.

ShantiMayi acknowledged different levels of awakening but states that nondual consciousness cannot, strictly speaking, be divided into levels. She described enlightened awareness as “unending, empty radiance [in which] maturity blossoms and blossoms and blossoms” (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003, p. 262), while claiming that the shift out of egoic consciousness is unambiguous: “Either you are enlightened or you are not. . . . Enlightenment itself is when you come to realize existence for what it is and that is it” (p. 258). Enlightened perception is not a matter of seeing light shining through things or losing sensory discernment:

Rather than an undifferentiated mush, Nondual consciousness does not vitiate multiplicities or form, but recognizes them as mutually dependent, interpenetrating emanant and transcendent realities. The nondual nature of the

manifest and Absolute world is simultaneously grasped at the Nondual level. (Wade, 1996, p. 211)

In nondual consciousness, the “bigger picture” of life is consistently clear. Within that broadened perspective, sensory and cognitive acuity are heightened (Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994).

Resting in awareness. As a stage of embodied wisdom, enlightenment, or sahaja samadhi, brings relief from the pain of misunderstanding. The Sanskrit word sahaja connotes a state of ease that unfolds in the absence of egoic struggle (Caplan, 1999). Sahaja is a traditional Hindu term and ideal synonym for nondual consciousness. Marianna Caplan (1999) wrote, “Sahaja is living liberation: where all realities meet in human form, on the earth, living the Absolute, natural state, which is also the most uncommon experience known to human beings” (p. 516). D. T. Suzuki (1962) offered a rich description of this condition:

Your very existence has been delivered from all limitations; you have become open, light, and transparent. You gain an illuminating insight into the very nature of things which now appear to you as so many fairy-like flowers having no graspable realities. Here is manifested the unsophisticated self which is the original face of your being; here is shown all bare the most beautiful landscape of your birthplace. There is but one straight passage open and unobstructed through and through. This is so when you surrender all—your body, your life, and all that belongs to your inmost self. This is where you gain peace, ease, non-doing, and inexpressible delight. All the sutras and sastras are no more than communications of this fact; all the sages, ancient as well as modern, have exhausted their ingenuity and imagination to no other purpose than to point the way to this. (p. 17)

Sahaja is the ordinary, yet transparent living of the sage, who may appear in a variety of life roles from the ordinary to the extraordinary (Washburn, 1995).

Caplan (1999) noted that from the egoic point of view, sahaja appears to be an altered state of mind. Caplan pointed out that from the awakened perspective, the

unnatural state is not enlightenment but egoic consciousness, which is marked by varying degrees of dissociation and mental perturbation. The 14th century Dutch mystic John of Ruysbroeck explained,

Whereas the enlightened man, by virtue of the divine light, is simple and stable and free from curious considerations, these others are manifold and restless and full of subtle reasonings and reflections; and they do not taste inward unity, nor the satisfaction which is without images. And by this they may know themselves. (Cohen & Phipps, 1979, p. 100)

The sage no longer derives meaning from the multifarious concepts and images that attend the ego's identity project, which is the ego's futile attempt to gain ultimate value and being through its constructed image (Washburn, 1995). Though nondual consciousness is the culminating stage of development, its sophistication lies in lucid simplicity rather than elaboration of mental constructs. Stability of mind, as John of Ruysbroeck suggested, depends upon coming fully to rest as the divine light that sees itself in all things instead of being confused by all things.

Mind-body integration. Nondual consciousness does not, however, dispense with practical action and rational thought processes. According to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's (1972) Vedic psychology, these processes now function within the context of maximum relaxation rather than chronic excitation of the nervous system. As Wade (1996) explained, profound well-being emerges from unobstructed, integrated perception. Integrated perception amounts to the *conscious* experience of seamless immersion in reality.

Pure Unity consciousness is total psychic integration. There is no repression, no distance or conflict between feeling and perception; all is *immediate*. . . . Yet, the here-and-now in its Suchness cannot be fully realized or directly experienced except by highly evolved people who have deconstructed all dualism. (p. 206)

The immediacy, or “Suchness,” of experience depends upon freedom from habitual identification with thoughts of past and future, which ordinarily keep awareness locked in the linear sense of time. Thus, the sense of timelessness is an aspect of the wholeness and fluidity that mystics experience. Nondual consciousness does not limit the mind’s capacity to understand and utilize the useful concept of linear time as needed, but it renders this concept transparent to the reality of the eternal Now (Tolle, 1999). When consciousness knows itself as identical to the reality of the present, thought loses its power to continually generate anxiety about the future and regret about past events. Though everyone at all times lives within the present moment, which is the presence of awareness, its spaciousness is generally filled by the mental overlay of time, which depends upon thought. In being free to use time without being hypnotized by memory and projection, the sage is lucidly present to the events of the present moment, and therefore at ease.

According to Maharishi (as cited in Druker, 1994), when attention is not mediated and dissipated by cognitive perplexity, abundant energy flows into the sage’s mostly unpremeditated response to life. Maharishi (1972) claimed that the sage’s capacity for “spontaneous right action” constitutes the height of ethical development. Maharishi’s view, shared widely by mystics throughout the ages (Cheney, 1945; Huxley, 1944), is that one’s level of consciousness determines the ethical quality of action (Druker, 1994).

In nondual consciousness, clarified awareness apprehends existence at the level of unity:

The cosmos is a highly integrated system, and the laws of nature as a whole function to sustain and promote integration, orderliness, and growth. The total potential of natural law is fully available at the level of pure consciousness (the unified field)—the level at which the entire cosmos exists in a state of perfect balance, harmony, and infinite correlation. When a person’s awareness is fully established at this level of harmony and infinite correlation, these values become

automatically and completely expressed in thought and action. . . . Such a person is spontaneously in harmony with everybody and everything. (p. 216)

Maharishi (1972) stated that when the gap between the knower and the object of knowing is closed—that is, recognized as nonexistent—then perceptions, objects, and actions are cognized in terms of infinite value. What this means is that all of creation is known to be the Self interacting with itself (Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994). For this reason, spiritual teacher Meher Baba (1967) explained that nondual consciousness puts all phenomena into proper perspective:

There is nothing irrational in true mysticism when it is, as it should be, a vision of Reality. It is a form of perception that is absolutely unclouded, and it is so practical that it can be lived every moment of life and expressed in everyday duties. Its connection with experience is so deep that, in one sense, it is the final understanding of all experience. (p. 6)

Thus, the equanimity of sahaja stems from transcendent insight rather than mere stoicism. Poise of body and mind results from successful confrontation with all the dualistic illusions that generate the physiological response of anxiety and the cognitive trend toward fear and hostility (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1972). To summarize the foregoing points, nondual consciousness expresses itself as spontaneous attunement to the relative world of meaning and appearance.

Wisdom and love. Mystical traditions generally define attunement to reality in terms of the two complementary qualities of wisdom and love, which express the transcendent and immanent aspects of Being (Huxley, 1944; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001). Wisdom is associated with clearly perceiving all phenomena as transient, interdependent manifestations of the Ground (Caplan, 1999). In its freedom from dualistic struggle with life, wisdom translates as equanimity and nonattachment (Caplan, 1999; Conway, 1988). At the same time, being the transcendence of all separateness,

wisdom gives rise to spiritual love, which is expressed through compassionate action (Caplan, 1999; S. Suzuki, 1970; Wade, 1996).

For the mystic, love is akin to benevolence rather than possessive fixation on an object (Adyashanti, 2004). However, benevolence also takes the form of wholehearted devotion to the well-being of others. The Christian mystic Bernadette Roberts explained the mystic's consecration to service:

This love finds no outlet for its energies in the mere enjoyment of transient beatific experiences. In fact, so great is this love, it would sacrifice heaven in order to prove and test its love for the divine in the world. (Caplan, 1999, p. 514)

This quality of love thrives in the total absence of divisive and hateful thoughts, which become virtually impossible at this stage of refinement (Goleman, 1985; Hixon, 1978).

Again, open-heartedness cannot be separated from clear-mindedness. Adyashanti (2003) wrote, "Truth is a holy thing that liberates thought from itself and illumines the human heart from the inside out" (p. 89). Likewise, the Indian sage Nisargadatta Maharaj was known to have stated, "When I see I am nothing, that is wisdom. And when I see I am everything, that is love. And between those two, my life moves" (Greenblatt & Greenblatt, 1995). Nisargadatta Maharaj's (1973) responses to a student further indicate that wisdom and love depend upon each other for their fullest actualization.

Questioner: You seem to be so very indifferent to everything!

I am not indifferent. I am impartial. I give no preference to the me and the mine. A basket of earth and a basket of jewels are both unwanted. Life and death are all the same to me.

Questioner: Impartiality makes you indifferent.

On the contrary, compassion and love are my very core. Void of all predilections, I am free to love. (p. 185)

Similarly, Adyashanti (2000) claimed that the mystic's consciousness is utterly free of attachment to any particular experience:

Those who are free don't want anything. They don't want anything from their mind, they don't want anything from their emotions, they don't want anything from anyone, and they don't want anything from life. They don't want anything. If you don't want, all that's left is an incredible sense of being free. (p. 94)

The mystic's everyday mind is therefore infused with the attitude of appreciation.

This mind no longer holds beliefs—some other power moves it. I call it love. It is not so much the joy of being loved as it is the joy of loving and being love itself. (Adyashanti, 2003, p. 71)

To meet everything and everyone through stillness instead of mental noise is the greatest gift you can offer to the universe. I call it stillness, but it is a jewel with many facets: that stillness is also joy, and it is love. (Tolle, 1999, p. 39)

Thus, when the mind does not burden the present moment with concepts and conditions, emotional negativity subsides, and love becomes genuinely unconditional.

Selfless motivation. As outlined above, mystical literature suggests that transcendent wisdom and universal compassion are qualities intrinsic to the realization of unity, which hinges upon egolessness. Indeed, nondual consciousness removes egoic motives for existing and becoming (Goleman, 1988; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Nisargadatta, 1973; D. T. Suzuki, 1962). The following excerpts from Wade's (1996) "Characteristics of Unity Consciousness" table summarize this shift:

Primary motivation	None—merely living in the Ground of All Being
Ultimate value	None
Attitude toward life	Non-attachment
Correct option	Only correct options exist (p. 218)

Nondual consciousness obviates motivations derived from the perspective of incompleteness and futurity. Nisargadatta Maharaj (1973) stated, "In the realm of nonduality everything is complete, its own proof, meaning and purpose. Where all is one,

no supports are needed” (p. 369). This sense of completion is associated with freedom from self-centered aims and negative emotional states (Goleman, 1975, 1988; Wade, 1996).

The mystic’s participation in life is informed by contentment, or joyful appreciation, which precludes the desire for personal power and gain (Washburn, 1995). For example, when asked by an interviewer whether he possesses extraordinary psychic abilities, the British mystic Tony Parsons (1995) responded,

Why should I wish to? Once awakening happens, there is simply and absolutely nothing one needs to possess anymore—it is the end of all need. It is total fulfillment, but it is an ever-changing and alive fulfillment, not a fixed, perfect bliss as some would have us believe. There is something very dead about this concept. There is no longer any need to know anything, because there is no longer any need to get anywhere. (p. 119)

Here, fulfillment transcends the fluctuation of emotion, yet does not depend on rejection of emotion. Mystics claim that mental, egoic resistance creates emotional anguish, which is extraneous to organic forms of grief or physical pain (Klein, 1990; Nisargadatta, 1973; Tolle, 1999).

Transcendence/transformation of suffering. Mystical traditions typically state that the sage does not suffer the way that others do, or that the sage’s surrender to the totality of life is so complete that difficulties are welcomed, understood, and transformed (Caplan, 1999; Hixon, 1978). For example, the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi was dying of cancer when he remarked, “They take this body for Ramana and attribute suffering to him. What a pity! Where is pain if there is no mind?” (Hixon, p. 57). Ramana Maharshi also explained that when a sage’s hand is cut by a knife, for example, “because his mind is in bliss, he does not feel the pain as acutely as others do” (p. 57). These examples suggest that the sage’s ability to rest in pure consciousness—indeed, the sage claims that

all things are consciousness and nothing else—eliminates neurotic forms of suffering and ameliorates others.

The following, additional examples demonstrate what David Butlein (2005) called “metaresilience” (p. 15), the underlying presence of equanimity and subtle joy amid the enlightened person’s experiences. When asked whether the enlightened person would suffer and feel sorrow if his own child were to die, Nisargadatta Maharaj (1973) replied,

He suffers with those who suffer. The event itself is of little importance, but he is full of compassion for the suffering being, whether alive or dead, in the body or out of it. . . . After all, love and compassion are his very nature. He is one with all that lives and love is that oneness in action. (p. 183)

When asked whether his own death would not constitute a significant event, Nisargadatta Maharaj said, “The *gnani* [sage] is dead already. Do you expect him to die again? . . . The entire universe is his body, all life is his life” (p. 184). Here, Nisargadatta Maharaj indicated that the awakening of pure consciousness constitutes the death of the mental ego and its identification with the body as a bounded self. For the mystic, then, the body and mind are cognized as waves upon the ocean of consciousness. If a wave becomes aware of its ground identity as the eternal ocean, the concept of death loses its former meaning.

The sage’s radical equanimity does not depend, therefore, on faith in a positive future but on direct knowledge of a constant *good* that has never been threatened by temporal changes (Moss, 1986; Nisargadatta, 1973; Ramana Maharshi, 2004). Only on this basis does the enlightened *tzaddik* of the Judaic Kabbalistic tradition realize “holy ecstasy” and “holy laughter,” so that difficult situations are endured in a way that helps liberate others (Hixon, 1978). From the standpoint of transcendent humor, Christian mystic Julian of Norwich proclaimed that, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all

manner of thing shall be well” (Cohen & Phipps, 1979, p. 55). Likewise, a Japanese businessman who discovers the Ground of pure consciousness spends a whole day laughing and weeping, and declares himself “totally at peace at peace at peace . . . supremely free free free free free” (Kapleau, 1965, p. 218).

The mystical literature indicates that individuals at nondual consciousness do register painful and pleasurable experiences as well as participate sympathetically in the suffering of others (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Ramana Maharshi, 2004; Washburn, 1995). Washburn pointed out that sensitivity to the unhappiness of others may elicit feelings of sadness and mourning, yet it does not make an integrated person “unhappy” (p. 234). In Washburn’s view,

We should not forget that the feelings of blessedness and bliss are inherent to integrated existence. These feelings make up the affective ground of integrated existence, over which pass the pangs and pleasures, sufferings and joys of conscience. . . . [Integrated people] feel both an exquisite joy in being alive and an inexpressible gratitude for a world that, despite its serious flaws, is “perfect.” (p. 234)

Thus, the equanimity of a sage certainly does not consist in constant, undifferentiated bliss, though this state of meditative absorption may be readily accessible (Wade, 1996; Wilber, 1996). It is, rather, the personal, existential, and anxiety-based suffering—so ubiquitous to egoic consciousness—that the sage has transcended (Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995). For Christopher Titmuss (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003), a Buddhist teacher, the sense of life as a series of problems disappears in selfless unity awareness:

JLW: What do you mean by realization?

Christopher: Realization means the realization of the Truth, which is one, without a second. The essential realization is that one is a free and liberated human being and the clear indication of that is when the problems of life have gone out of existence.

JLW: This is your experience?

Christopher: Oh yes! (p. 59)

LML: So, you are free from identification with a personal self as “I.”

Christopher: Totally. Yes, without a doubt, without question. (p. 62)

Thus, the central factor in the absence of emotional suffering seems to be that enlightened individuals relate to life through pure consciousness rather than a conceptual center of identity, which they say consists mainly in the illusion of control (Adyashanti, 2004; Katie & Mitchell, 2002; Nisargadatta, 1973; Tolle, 1999). According to Adyashanti (2000), complete acceptance of life is tantamount to complete transcendence.

Positive traits observed by others. The mystic’s qualities of wisdom, compassion, equanimity, and joy often have a profound impact on others (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000; Thompson, 2002). For example, Jack Kornfield (in video recording produced by Greenblatt & Greenblatt, 1995) recalled,

Being with Nisargadatta Maharaj gave me the deepest experience that I have ever had of closeness to a human being who was truly free. And that freedom was filled with love and aliveness and spontaneity and fearlessness, and a place of absolute stillness beyond all of that. That touched the same energy in myself, and now I know it’s true.

Based on her extensive contact with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, a highly respected Zen teacher, student Trudy Dixon described nondual consciousness in action:

A roshi [Zen teacher] is a person who has actualized that perfect freedom which is the potentiality for all human beings. He exists freely in the fullness of his whole being. The flow of his consciousness is not the fixed repetitive patterns of our usual self-centered consciousness, but rather arises spontaneously and naturally from the actual circumstances of the present. The results of this in terms of the quality of his life are extraordinary—buoyancy, vigor, straightforwardness, simplicity, humility, serenity, joyousness, uncanny perspicacity and unfathomable compassion. His whole being testifies to what it means to live in the reality of the present. Without anything said or done, just the impact of meeting a personality so developed can be enough to change another’s whole way of life. (S. Suzuki, 1970, p. 18)

Available research on nondual consciousness suggests that this is a valid summary of traits at this stage.

Summary of related research. In a doctoral study, Timothy Conway (1988) endeavored to assess the criteria for spiritual realization by surveying two dozen spiritual teachers from diverse traditions on 20 possible aspects of enlightenment. Responding via Likert-scale ratings and open-ended commentary, participants emphasized the following qualities, listed in roughly decreasing order of relevance:

Equanimity, bliss, unattachment to extraordinary experiences, compassionate serving of sentient beings, freedom from exclusive sense of “me,” intuition of nonduality, love of God/Supreme Reality, realization that the phenomenal world is a projection in/by universal consciousness, spontaneity, eternal here/now awareness, spiritual insight, attentiveness, spontaneous positive influence on sentient beings, transcendence of egocentric “doer” sense. (abstract)

While these traits reflect what transpersonal scholars and diverse mystics would expect to see—or claim to experience—at the nondual stage of development, other studies confirm that these qualities are indeed present in purported exemplars.

A study on the relationship between meditation and enlightenment was performed by Daniel Brown and John Engler (1980), who described developmental stages through which Theravadin Buddhist meditators pass. The study included Western students of Buddhism with varying levels of experience, along with 10 enlightened South Asian students and teachers. Enlightenment was defined according to classical Theravadin Buddhist criteria, and exemplars were nominated by two teaching masters who also participated in the study.

The researchers attempted to determine whether contemporary and traditional descriptions of meditation stages have external validity or merely represent expectation effects produced by strong belief systems. The Rorschach test was used to measure

perceptual changes across groups. Results affirmed the traditional Buddhist stage model of progress toward nondual consciousness, suggesting that Buddhist training facilitates the profound perceptual changes described in traditional texts.

According to the tradition of mindfulness meditation, enlightenment is said to result in permanent and irreversible changes in perception and experience. The tradition distinguishes between what in Western psychology might be called state and trait changes. In the tradition, trait effects are said to be the result *only* of enlightenment and not of prior stages of practice. (Brown & Engler, 1980, pp. 151-152)

Rorschach results suggested unique traits among the enlightened group, including nonattachment, cognitive flexibility, acceptance, awareness that subject and object are not separate, and lack of self-interest (Brown & Engler, 1980). Based on striking differences in results across groups of beginning, intermediate, and advanced enlightened meditators, the authors concluded that classical and contemporary descriptions of meditation stages accurately describe perceptual changes undergone.

More recent attempts to study nondual consciousness have produced valuable results. Butlein's (2005) study explored the impact of psychotherapists' enlightenment on clinical efficacy. An expert rater was used to select therapists who function at the stage of nondual consciousness. Methods included qualitative content analysis of interviews, a variety of psychospiritual assessments related to developmental traits, and analysis of videotaped therapy sessions among 15 therapists: 5 "awakened" transpersonal therapists, 5 unawakened transpersonal therapists, and 5 unawakened nontranspersonal therapists. Results were that the purportedly awakened group scored highest on all of the assessments. Further, out of seven extraordinary qualities predicted to emerge from thematic analysis of interviews with higher frequency for the awakened group than the two unawakened groups, six themes were confirmed: "mental clarity, vibration

evocation, nonduality, spacious presence, heartfelt/mindful contact, and deep empathy” (Butlein, 2005, p. iv). These qualities appeared to positively impact therapy conducted by the awakened group.

Another significant inroad to this subject was made by Nagle (2004), who conducted a preliminary verification of whether *Self-realization*—a common Hindu term for nondual consciousness—as described in the *Upanishads*, an ancient Hindu text, would be consistent with the lived experience of contemporary human beings. The subjects of this multiple case study were three advanced yogis selected by expert opinion for having reached Self-realization. Subjects included Mata Amritanandamayi (the “hugging saint” known popularly as Amma), Swami Rameshwarashramji, and Makrand Dave (Nagle). Notably, each of these yogis is reputed to be not only enlightened but also an extraordinary “holy person” and spiritual teacher.

Nagle systematically examined the kind of biographical material which is often collected in popular compilations of interviews with mystics (e.g., Ardagh, 2005; Caplan, 1999; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Thompson, 2002). Methods used were five stage analysis of the long qualitative interview in combination with the case study method of analytic generalization. Nagle (2004) reported,

The themes of the Self revealed in the narratives and lives of the cases were found to correspond to the essential qualities of the unconditioned Self distilled from a content analysis of the *Upanishads*. Therefore, the Upanishadic descriptions of the essence of the Self as being universal; at one with the Absolute, beyond thought, mind, and senses; immortal and unchanging; free of suffering, fear, and desire; in supreme bliss and peace; and of paradoxical nature has been replicated in the lived experiences of contemporary human beings who have reached extraordinary levels of consciousness. . . . Furthermore, three additional qualities of the Self were found in the contemporary cases which were not mentioned in the *Upanishads*: universal love and compassion expressed as service to others, humility, and the quality of living in the present moment. (p. vii)

Nagle's diverse methods of gathering qualitative data yielded considerable evidence that nondual consciousness has been accurately described by traditional sources and transpersonal theorists. In terms that ring with authenticity and echo so many other mystics, Nagle's participants described their process of awakening, their profound inner freedom from worldly trappings, and the awareness of unity that motivates their loving service to others.

Conclusion

Thus, the core themes to be summarized from the foregoing analysis of theory and research on nondual consciousness are the following:

1. In nondual consciousness, consciousness has experientially accessed its veridical "ground" nature, and is aware of itself as pure sentience, transcendent of subject-object distinctions, and present in all apparent subjects and objects.
2. As a consequence of stably experiencing its ground nature, consciousness has shed the sheath of egoic identity, becoming free of motivations, fears, and anxieties related to the body-based, conceptual construct of a separate and bounded self.
3. Knowing itself as the unchanging substratum of the phenomenal world, consciousness imbues the personality with profound equanimity amid life events.
4. Free of the perplexing influence of dualistic mentality, the consciousness of the mystic engages the flow of life with intuitive spontaneity and cognitive clarity.

5. In the absence of emotional negativity, the intrinsically loving and joyful qualities of consciousness form an affective base that informs the sense of equanimity and instinctive morality.
6. The consciousness of the mystic experiences life with an abiding sense of blessedness and veridical identity with all that exists.

As Dogen Zenji indicated, transpersonal development does not consist in a true removal from the world (Maezumi, 1978). It is, rather, the attainment of utmost intimacy with the world, for it is recognized as oneself. D. T. Suzuki (1962) wrote, “This is mysticism, to be sure; it is the wish of the mystic to overcome his exteriority to life and to join in the life of things” (p. xxix). Thus, nondual consciousness transcends divisive, worldly categories of perception in order to fathom life as it actually is. For this reason, Cook-Greuter and Miller (1994) pointed out the limitations of using the figurative term “higher” to describe this advanced stage of consciousness, given that this stage might better be described as more deep, subtle, and inclusive.

Transpersonal scholars have been at pains to convey the nature of mystical transformation and to demonstrate its relationship to psychological development. As Metzner (1980) pointed out, it is difficult to translate mystics’ reports without sacrificing their meaning to a lesser mode of understanding. Models of nondual consciousness are now based largely on mystical testimony that theorists have interpreted (e.g., Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986). By examining qualities of nondual consciousness in the context of developmental theory, this research project will provide a more solid basis for the noetic paradigm of development.

In pointing to consciousness as the creative force rather than an epiphenomenon of development, noetic theories highlight experiences of awareness that transcend the possibilities acknowledged by materialist science (Forman, 1998, 1999; Wade, 1996; Wilber, 1986, 2000). Along with prenatal, perinatal, and after-death awareness, nondual consciousness marks a key addition to conventional stage theory and a long-neglected area for research. One of the critical gaps in the research on nondual consciousness lies in the phenomenology of spiritual awakening, or nondual realization, on which this study provides some data. Extensive qualitative data on how individuals first become aware of nonduality and shed egoic structures of personality and perception are essential for empirically constructing and defining the bridge by which transpersonal psychology links to conventional studies of development. Far from hiding behind traditional secrecy and esoteric jargon, a number of contemporary mystics have written books or given interviews (e.g., Adyashanti, 2004; Joel, 1985; Jourdain, 2001; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parsons, 1995; Thompson, 2002; Tolle, 1999; Valine, 2005) in which they described their experiences with the kind of nuanced detail that would be useful to psychological researchers.

From the foundation of understanding more precisely the experiences that herald entry to nondual consciousness, researchers will be better able to explain the stage traits of nondual consciousness and how they evolve. This study approached both of these research goals by questioning exemplars not only on the “entry” experience of awakening but also on current traits of perception and personality and how these differ from traits experienced in preawakened egoic consciousness. By using a broad line of inquiry, this

study elicited themes that can be connected with several key theoretical postulates related to stage entry and stable traits.

The aim of interviewing exemplars of nondual consciousness distinguishes this study from the bulk of transpersonal research. Several transpersonal studies have examined extraordinary, spiritually meaningful experiences that have a strong impact on awareness and character structure (Greenwell, 1988; Palmer, 1999; Palmer & Braud, 2002; Park, 1991; Rich, 2005). These studies often use mystical literature to explain nonduality, and data from these studies frequently suggest aspects of nondual consciousness. However, the question of whether the stable traits of nondual consciousness have emerged in these instances remains unexplored.

Though finding authentic exemplars of nondual consciousness may seem to be a challenging endeavor, interviewing spiritual teachers provided the opportunity to explore clear cases of nondual realization, and their long-term impact, in far greater depth than studies that examine a variety of exceptional events. Chapter 3 describes the strategy that was used for (a) recruiting a diverse sample of mystics, (b) discovering what they claim to experience as a result of their advanced spiritual development, and (c) creating an integral analysis of salient themes.

Chapter 3: Methods

This qualitative study on the lived experiences of individuals who exemplify nondual consciousness employed in-depth semistructured interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The following research question was explored:

1. What is the lived experience of nondual consciousness?

Subquestions included the following:

1. What are the key features that distinguish nondual consciousness from egoic consciousness?
2. How does development proceed from the event of nondual realization to the stage of nondual consciousness?
3. What are the implications of nondual consciousness for human development?

The following hypotheses were formulated at the outset of the study:

1. Exemplars will describe having experienced a momentous event or process of nondual realization whereby dualistic views were recognized as false and the qualities of nondual consciousness gradually replaced those of egoic consciousness.
2. Exemplars will report an absence of identification with a personal self subsequent to nondual realization. Qualities of the personality, including preferences, talents, and habits, will be regarded by exemplars as aspects of conditioning and experienced without attachment or aversion.
3. Exemplars will describe their everyday awareness as marked by nonattachment to pleasurable experiences and nonresistance to painful experiences. In addition, awareness will be relatively free of compulsive

mental chatter and will be attuned to the immediacy of present moment experience.

4. Exemplars will demonstrate cognitive freedom from fixed viewpoints and recognition that reality cannot be contained or divided by concepts.
5. Exemplars will report having little to no experience of negative states associated with negative emotional states—such as melancholy, anger, fear, or anxiety—and will report experiencing an underlying sense of joyful contentment even amid difficult circumstances. Fear of death will be absent.
6. Exemplars will claim to experience love and benevolence as fundamental qualities of existence, as well as certainty that human development consists essentially in the movement of consciousness toward full self-recognition.
7. Exemplars will report complete identification with others as reflections of the same source, while recognizing and respecting the role of differences in manifestation.
8. Relationships, work, and daily activities will be marked by a sense of ease, humor, and simplicity rather than resistance, conflict, or a need for control.

A qualitative study was determined to be appropriate for this subject, in order to provide the descriptive data necessary for further theorizing. Qualitative research is

an approach to the subject matter of human experience [that] focuses on narrative accounts, descriptions, interpretation, context, and meaning. The goal is to describe, interpret, and understand the phenomena of interest. Through description and interpretation, our understanding of the phenomena can be deepened. The process of achieving this goal is to study in depth the experience of the participants---that is, those who are studied---and to convey how the experience is felt and perceived, and the meaning it has for those whose experience is being presented. (Kazdin, 2003, p. 332)

Researchers in human sciences attest to the value of qualitative research for examining unknown realms of experience such as nondual consciousness. David Goode stated, “It has become my firm belief after participating in case-study research for more than twenty years that what is lacking in our current knowledge of human behavior is the most basic descriptive understandings” (Mertens, 1998, p. 170). The dearth of research on nondual consciousness indicated that an exploratory, descriptive study of exemplars would be ideal.

In-depth interviews enabled the researcher to gather a broad range of data. As Seidman (1998) indicated, in-depth interviewing focuses on understanding people’s experiences and the meanings they draw from them. The research question of how people experience nondual consciousness demanded direct engagement with exemplars. It was reasoned that semistructured, rather than highly structured, interviews would allow participants to describe their experiences without being overly constrained by the researcher’s preconceived categories of relevant content.

Participants

This study included 16 participants. Participants were chosen who best represented the criteria for the stage of nondual consciousness. The central requirement was that participants must be active spiritual teachers who guide others toward the realization of nondual consciousness and who claim to have achieved this stage of development. Given that many highly respected teachers of nondual mysticism eschew traditional formats (Caplan, 1999; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Thompson, 2002), and that lineage membership is a notoriously flawed gauge of authenticity (Besserman & Steger, 1991; Caplan, 1999; Fenner, 2002),

participants did not have to be formally affiliated with a mystical tradition in order to be eligible.

The rationale for requiring participants to be spiritual teachers was that, in the culture of contemporary nondual mysticism, spiritual teachers are expected to be authentic, refined exemplars of nondual consciousness (Caplan, 1999). Meanwhile, there exist no objective means for assessing whether an individual has reached the stage of nondual consciousness. It was therefore reasoned that spiritual teachers are the most identifiable group in which authentically enlightened persons would be likely to be found. Authors of popular mystical literature commonly adopt this strategy when they consult and interview well known spiritual teachers in order to obtain the best available information about nondual consciousness (e.g., Ardagh, 2005; Caplan, 1999; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Thompson, 2002).

A secondary rationale posited that spiritual teachers would be better equipped to articulate experiences related to nondual consciousness than individuals who may be enlightened but who do not have extensive experience communicating their understanding to others. To this end, participants were required to be articulate speakers of English. Lastly, participants included women and men of at least 21 years of age, residing in the United States or other countries.

Recruiting Methods

Participants were found by conducting an online search for teachers of nondual mysticism, who commonly use websites to provide information about themselves and their teaching activities. References from popular mystical literature were also used to identify potential participants. Attention was focused on soliciting teachers who,

according to the researcher's knowledge of contemporary nondual mysticism, clearly claim to have undergone deep spiritual awakening and who are well respected in the spiritual community. Teachers who had any signs of controversy surrounding them were excluded from the solicitation process.

The search for participants included tradition-based and nontraditional teachers. In nondual mysticism, many spiritual teachers function within a traditional context, while many others eschew traditional structures and affiliations, regarding them as unnecessary or even counterproductive (Adyashanti, 2004; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parsons, 1995; Tolle, 1999). Traditions in which potential participants were sought out included Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, contemplative Christianity, Judaic Kabbalah, Kashmiri Shaivism, and Taoism. These traditions sometimes differ widely in how they discuss and teach nonduality. However, contemporary mystical literature indicates that many spiritual teachers strongly agree that nondual consciousness is universal, and they are often quite familiar with the perspectives and approaches offered by various traditions (Ardagh, 2005; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2001). For example, both Eckhart Tolle, a nontraditional teacher, and Rabbi Rami Shapiro clearly claim to experience nonduality and regard this realization as the source of the major spiritual traditions (Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003). Thus, it was reasoned that it would be worthwhile to search for participants operating in both traditional and nontraditional contexts but to solicit only those individuals who represent themselves as having authoritative realization of nonduality.

To help ensure authenticity, the solicitation letter (Appendix A) asked potential participants to join the study only if they are active spiritual teachers who feel confident

that they can speak from their direct experience of nonduality. Further, the letter asked potential participants to affirm that they were willing to discuss their spiritual development and how it relates to other aspects of their lives.

Procedure

When a potential participant was identified, the solicitation letter was sent by regular or electronic mail. Participants were asked to participate in a confidential interview. The informed consent form (Appendix B) was mailed along with the solicitation letter and a self-addressed stamped envelope, or, if electronic mail was used for initial contact, was completed in person prior to the interview. In addition, participants completed the demographic questionnaire (Appendix C), which was given to them in person upon interview or was sent via electronic or regular mail.

Interviews were conducted at a neutral location chosen by the participant to ensure comfort and convenience, as well as by telephone when necessary. Interview questions (Appendix D) were asked in a semistructured format that allowed for probing and clarifying questions when necessary. Each interview lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. Interviews were audio taped and notes were taken by the researcher during the interview to keep track of topics to cover. If follow-up clarification questions needed to be asked after the interview had been completed, participants were contacted to schedule a brief discussion in person or by telephone.

Treatment of Data

To ensure confidentiality, fictitious names for participants were used on all tape labels and notes. All tapes and notes were kept in a locked, secure location. After the

interview, participants were asked if they would like to receive the results of the research, and contact information was documented.

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Thus, the Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement (Appendix E) was not used at any point. Data were sorted into themes using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. It is widely used in psychological research and accommodates a variety of theoretical frameworks and research needs (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Given the flexibility with which thematic analysis can be applied, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasized the importance of making the theoretical stance of the researcher clear. In this study, thematic analysis was used as a realist, or essentialist, method—which reports the experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants—rather than a constructionist or contextualist method that interprets data through the lens of sociocultural theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Based on review of the major theories of transpersonal development, which stem largely from extensive cross-cultural examinations of ancient and contemporary spiritual traditions (Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1977, 2000), the researcher assumed that nondual consciousness is a developmental stage rather than an experience derivative to the interaction of social influences and subjective interpretation. The realist approach enabled the researcher to theorize motivation, experience, and meaning in a straightforward manner, given that “a simple, largely unidirectional relationship is assumed between meaning and experience and language” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85).

Selection of themes from the data set aimed toward a rich, thematic description of the data set rather than a focus on one particular aspect, as this approach is most appropriate for an underresearched topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified using an approach that integrated data-driven, inductive analysis with a theory-driven, deductive analysis. The process was inductive in that the themes were strongly linked to the data themselves, without trying to fit data into a preexisting coding frame (Braun & Clarke). However, thematic analysis was deductive to the extent that theoretical premises provided significant framework through which to label and organize the themes. In summary, the process of theorizing about nondual consciousness, selecting likely exemplars, interviewing the participants, and sorting the data into themes involved the complementary use of deductive and inductive processes, toggling between general-theoretical and specific-experiential modes of describing experience.

Delimitations and Limitations

Deliberate limitations of this study included several choices made by the researcher. First, spiritual teachers were selected as ideal exemplars and participants in the study, while exemplars who did not teach were excluded. This choice was based on the premise that spiritual teachers are likely to be mature, ideal exemplars of nondual consciousness, and they are easy to identify and locate. This delimitation necessarily excluded individuals who, while not necessarily functioning as formal teachers, may have been authentic exemplars of nondual consciousness. It is possible that the accounts given by teachers regarding the ways in which nondual realization unfolded may not be wholly generalizable to those individuals who are not functioning in the role of teacher. Though there is no theoretical basis to suggest that there would be substantial differences between

spiritual teachers and nonteachers, a study that uses a more diverse sample of exemplars would help confirm or disconfirm the premise.

The choice to select highly articulate, English-speaking participants, all of whom happened to be Caucasian, is a delimitation that reduced the cultural diversity of the sample and thereby limited generalizability. Again, theoretical premises hold that cultural background would not affect the core themes of transpersonal development, but a more diverse sample would help confirm or disconfirm the theory. Likewise, the relatively small sample of 16 participants is a delimitation that may limit the reliability of the study.

Limitations, which are defined as factors beyond the researcher's control, were several. The ability to select genuine exemplars of nondual consciousness was a limitation, given that standardized assessments for this stage of development do not exist. In any case, the purported validity of any assessment tools would rely upon the assumption that its developers understand nondual consciousness. As described in the *Recruitment* section of this chapter, selection of the sample necessarily depended upon the researcher's understanding of nondual mysticism, which guided the solicitation process. This limitation may have yielded a sample that failed, either partially or fully, to yield data on nondual consciousness. This possibility is discussed in Chapter 5.

Describing experiences accurately through language was another limitation in this study, given that nondual consciousness is known to transcend normative, dualistic categories of perception. This limitation may have produced data that do not help clarify the difference between aspects of dualistic and nondual consciousness. To compensate for this limitation, the researcher encouraged participants to clarify esoteric concepts raised in the interviews. Nevertheless, the participants' willingness or ability to fully

express their meanings, understandings, and experiences is a limitation that may have produced data that are not sufficiently clear or detailed to answer the research questions.

As the sole researcher, distortion of the data analysis and results due to my bias was inevitable. Specifically, my realization or nonrealization of nonduality may have affected my ability to analyze the data. I am a student of nondual mysticism who, prior to the beginning of this study, began to experience processes of nondual realization. My level of spiritual development gave me an experiential understanding of some aspects of nondual consciousness, while in many aspects I remained limited to conceptual understanding.

An additional source of bias was that I understand my experience of spiritual development mainly through the teaching of Adyashanti (2004) and similar, nontraditional teachers of nondual mysticism (e.g., Nisargadatta, 1973; Parsons, 1995; Tolle, 1999). The main ramification of my personal background is that I may have perceived participants' statements according to my limited understanding and thereby misconstrued the data. To minimize this risk, I attempted to maintain a flexible cognitive lens when evaluating the data. There are several other factors that may have served to ameliorate my biases. My ongoing practice of relaxing awareness into receptive witnessing—especially the witnessing of cognitive-affective processes—is particularly useful for alleviating cognitive rigidity (Tart, 1987). In addition, while completing this study, the gradual process of nondual realization may have refined my experiential understanding of nonduality. Lastly, my study of mystical and developmental literature throughout this project may have increased my cognitive flexibility by exposing me to a variety of perspectives.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter includes a description of the sample and demographic data, followed by a presentation of major themes derived from the interview data. Participants have been assigned fictional names to ensure confidentiality. A fictional name has also been used for any individual mentioned by a participant in a context that would compromise the privacy of the participant or the individual mentioned, if that individual is not already a known public figure.

Description of Sample

This section offers a brief exploration of who the participants in the study were. Except for one participant who is a Roman Catholic priest, the sample was composed of spiritual teachers who were not affiliated with a formally organized mystical tradition, though many were part of an unorthodox lineage of mystics. Several of the participants had studied with various teachers over the course of their spiritual development and had been invited to teach by one of those teachers. This informal process by which a student sometimes becomes a teacher is what the phrase “unorthodox lineage of mystics” is meant to describe. In other cases, there was no indication that the participant had been invited to teach by a particular mentor.

The reason that the majority of teachers who were solicited did not belong to a formal tradition is that the researcher found these teachers easier to locate and contact, perhaps due to the researcher’s familiarity with the network of unaffiliated mystics in California and across North America. It may be that these mystics make themselves more available for contact. For example, it was more difficult to locate and contact Christian

mystics than to contact an unaffiliated mystic who gives regular public talks in southern California.

Nevertheless, several teachers belonging to Judaic, Christian, Sufi, and Buddhist mystical traditions were contacted, but the majority of these were either unavailable or uninterested in participating in the study. A highly regarded master teacher of A Course in Miracles was also contacted but was unavailable for participation. Meanwhile, several participants, despite their lack of formal affiliation, indicated that their teaching was strongly influenced by Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism.

Including the participant who serves as a Roman Catholic priest, it seemed that the participants shared a very similar language and sensibility. Participants' spiritual biographies often evinced a wide-ranging and cross-cultural exploration of mysticism. Future studies could collect a more diverse sample of traditional and nontraditional mystics to see whether commonalities remain strong. In this study, time limitations were a factor that limited the effort to gain a large and diverse sample.

The demographic questionnaires provided useful information about the sample. Through their unique responses, the participants often described their spirituality as nothing other than life itself. For example, a few participants clearly balked at the idea of quantifying the amount of time they have been involved in spirituality. One participant noted that "she" may have engaged in spiritual practices for innumerable life "dreams," indicating that she regards her present lifetime as being one of many transitory journeys in consciousness. Judging from the interview data, such responses were not based in mere mystical musing. For example, this participant claimed to have seen her spiritual teacher's many former identities as her teacher in several past lives, or life dreams, as she

would say. Despite having gained similar perspectives about reality, other participants sometimes chose to respond to the questionnaire from a more conventional frame of reference.

Based on many of the questionnaire responses, it can be said that the participants generally demonstrated a distinctive reluctance to describe spirituality in terms of categories. There were similar notes in the results of Nagle's (2004) study on exemplars of nondual consciousness, in that nondual realization had apparently engendered an iconoclastic view of spirituality that looks beyond concepts in order to know *reality-as-such*. Being familiar with mystical literature, the researcher had been aware that asking spiritual teachers to name their spiritual practice implies a separate identity who "has" a practice, and also assumes a separation between spiritual practice and life itself. It is for this reason that the items on the demographic questionnaire were a useful complement to the data. Participants' tendency to reject dualistic categories and to use figurative, mystical gestures to express themselves was interpreted by the researcher as a factor that at least points toward the authenticity of the participants as exemplars of nondual consciousness. However, the lack of an explicitly nondualistic response cannot be considered a certain sign of inauthenticity. Nondual consciousness does not negate the pragmatic use of dualistic concepts for communication, though it does negate identification with them.

Participants' Demographic Data

The sample of 16 participants included 7 women and 9 men, ranging in age from 38 to 65 with a mean age of 54. All of the participants reported their ethnicity as Caucasian. Two of the participants were citizens of Canada. A slight majority of the

participants were located in California, with several participants residing in other states. Most participants reported their years of education completed as being at the college level.

Due to several unusual responses to the demographic questionnaire (Appendix C), the ability to report on the demographic data in conventional terms is somewhat limited. For example, one participant, “Sarah,” indicated that she considered her whole life to be education. The average number of years acting as a spiritual teacher was 11.5, with a range of 1 year to 36 years. However, “Sarah” also rejected this category altogether and claimed to have been both a teacher *and* a student for “Eternity.” No attempt was made to clarify such responses, as it was assumed by the researcher that further elaboration by participants would trigger a discussion of esoteric topics that were to be discussed in the interview.

The demographic questionnaire also elicited information on participants’ former and current religious/spiritual traditions, along with descriptions of current religious/spiritual practices. Participants’ responses in these areas provided additional biographical information, while also offering clues about their mode of awareness and understanding. For example, when asked how many years they had been involved in spirituality, many participants simply listed their age, or, as noted above, wrote “Eternity.” The following brief biographic sketches of each participant include these questionnaire responses. The sketches also include some biographic data from the interviews that did not lend themselves to thematic categorization but which further describe the sample and contextualize the thematic data presented later in this chapter.

Participant #1. “Grace” is a 55-year-old woman who teaches through telephone mentoring, public talks, and books. She indicated that she is not sure how many years she has been a spiritual teacher. Grace responded to the “Current religious/spiritual tradition, if any” item by writing, “Not really, don’t like labels.” Though Grace indicated that she has never belonged to any religious/spiritual tradition, she has been involved in spirituality for 40 years. Grace described her current religious/spiritual practice as “Everyday Living as Spiritual Practice” and noted that she meditated for years. In addition, she practiced kundalini yoga in her 20s and lived at the Findhorn Foundation, a spiritual community, in her 30s. During those years, Grace found that she had a strong ability to access wisdom from her “Higher Self,” which she noted is a concept that was especially popular in the 1970s. At one point, Grace’s Higher Self informed her that it was time to realize that the seeming separation between her and her Higher Self is false. This idea presented a great challenge to Grace’s sense of identity. Having also realized that she needed to learn how to live in the present moment, Grace discovered *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle (1999), and soon afterward experienced a life-changing spiritual awakening while attending a spiritual retreat led by Tolle. Grace later found helpful guidance for postawakening adjustment in the spiritual teachings of Adyashanti.

Participant #2. “Dana,” age 64, is married and is a mother of two grown children. Dana has been a spiritual teacher for 4 years and teaches through *satsang* (a gathering in which a spiritual teacher often gives a talk, invites questions, and may include meditation, singing, and sharing of food), *dokusan* (traditionally a private meeting between a Zen teacher and student to discuss spiritual concerns), intensives, and retreats. When asked to indicate the number of years she has been involved in spirituality, Dana wrote, “What is

or is not spiritual?” Dana listed her former religious/spiritual practices as Christianity, Buddhism, and Advaita. Current religious/spiritual practices were described as “being with what is.” Dana also indicated that she has practiced “Meditation, mantra, prayer,” and indicated the number of years practicing by writing “Years—Who knows how many life ‘dreams’?” Dana was led to nondual mysticism when she saw the face of Ramana Maharshi (2004) in meditation, though she did not know who he was. She later discovered his books and his method of self-inquiry, which aided her journey to nondual realization.

Participant #3. “Heather” is a 52-year-old woman who has been involved in spirituality for 29 years and has been a spiritual teacher for 11 years. Heather teaches through private sessions, public sittings, and workshops, and described her current religious/spiritual tradition as simply, “Whole Being Awakening.” Heather indicated her former religious/spiritual traditions by saying that she “was with Rajneesh, Poonja, Gangaji, Ramana Maharshi, Jean Klein, Buddhism.” To list her current religious/spiritual practices, Heather wrote, “all of it.” Heather described her practices as “Meditation, Being with what is, softening, feeling.” Heather underwent a series of deepening realizations over many years, some of which occurred with the guidance or presence of a teacher.

Participant #4. “Sal” is a 65-year-old married man who has been a spiritual teacher for 22 years. Sal teaches through public talks, private consultation, and retreats. To describe his current religious/spiritual tradition, Sal wrote that he “draws on teachings of all mystics.” He reported having no former religious/spiritual tradition. For 26 years, his spiritual practices have been meditation and “keeping precepts.” In early adulthood,

Sal was a devoted Marxist-Leninist who was disillusioned during a trip to China, at which time a deeper source of wisdom and guidance began to emerge in his dreams. Sal's spiritual journey was sparked by some especially painful events in his life. With the insight that his lucrative career in film did not bring fulfillment, Sal began to study and practice the essential elements of Western and Eastern mysticism. During his early exploration of the psyche through dreamwork, ritual, and meditation, Sal began to spontaneously receive inner guidance from the archetypal, Greek goddess Athena, a presence that regularly communicated to him about things he should be aware of or act upon. After a spiritual pilgrimage ended in utter disillusionment for the ego, Sal checked into a shabby hotel room and found that it and all things are actually the "the kingdom of heaven."

Participant #5. "Simon" is a 65-year-old married man who has been involved in spirituality for 15 years. Simon has been a spiritual teacher for 10 years, holding public talks, online meetings, and private consultation. Simon left no response on the questionnaire to describe former and current religious/spiritual traditions and left no response for current practices. Simon described his former practice as "Self-inquiry, 15 years." Being at that time a strident Marxist-Leninist, Simon had regarded all forms of spirituality as naïve wish-fulfillment, until he attended a Tibetan Buddhist talk during his time spent in prison. At this meeting, Simon was amazed to find that he somehow had intimate, complete understanding of everything that was being said at the meeting, despite having never studied Buddhism. Having been welcomed by the Buddhist community as an advanced practitioner, Simon became an ardent critic of an unorthodox spiritual teacher who was also visiting the prison to teach. Simon regarded the Buddhists

as veterans of the spiritual path and could not accept her claim that there is no need for a long-term course of meditation and cultivation in order to realize one's true nature.

According to her, all that was needed was to stop all seeking and to deeply inquire into oneself, as Ramana Maharshi (2004) had taught. Despite his dismissive attitude, upon meeting this teacher Simon experienced a sudden emptiness of mind, followed by several months of "rapturous bliss," insight, and peace. After becoming a spiritual teacher within her community, Simon went through a fall from grace in which his peace was replaced by hellish emotional pain. After earnestly following Ramana Maharshi's guidance, Simon reached the condition of ease and clarity that is now the basis for his teaching.

Participant # 6. "Kim" is a 61-year-old married woman who has been a spiritual teacher for 10 years. Kim indicated that she has been involved in spirituality throughout her lifetime and that it has been 22 years since her awakening. She teaches through private consultation, public talks, retreats, and intensives. Kim reported her former spiritual/religious tradition as Presbyterian and indicated that she has no current tradition. Regarding her current spiritual/religious practice, Kim wrote, "Life is a constant meditation, no practice," though she indicated that she previously did some meditation. Kim's awakening was entirely spontaneous and occurred while she was teaching aerobics. She reported that the final integration of nondual consciousness brought an end to 12 years of diverse, extraordinary cognitive, physical, and energetic symptoms.

Participant #7. "Wes" is a 51-year-old married man who has been involved in spirituality for 38 years. Wes has been a spiritual teacher for 26 years and teaches through private consultation, public talks, retreats, and year-long classes. He described his current religious/spiritual tradition as "Post Zen," and listed his former traditions as "Catholic,

Theravadin Buddhism, Advaita, Dzogchen.” Wes’s current practice is “Inquiry,” which he described as “Local Awareness inquires into form & formlessness.” He reported that he has used inquiry for 15 years. As a teenager, Wes had a near-death experience (NDE) that gave him a profound glimpse into the nature of reality. Having also entered intriguing “flow states” while playing sports, Wes decided to make spiritual discovery his life’s focus, and he traveled to Asia to study meditation. Through his training with several spiritual teachers, Wes experienced nondual realization. After returning to the United States, his awareness continued to deepen and to bring psychological integration.

Participant #8. “Erin” is a 40-year-old married woman who stated her years involved in spirituality as “40.” Erin has been a spiritual teacher for 3 years and teaches through private consultation, public talks/dialogue, and silent retreats. Erin reported her current religious/spiritual tradition as “Open Gate Sangha (based in Zen Buddhism)” and her former traditions as “Catholic; Church of Self-Realization Fellowship.” Erin listed her current religious/spiritual practices as “prayer, meditation, hatha yoga (occasionally), qi-gong.” To describe her practices, Erin wrote,

When drawn to I pray for well-being of others, often nightly. Meditation: simply sitting, being, without agenda. Hatha yoga: I perform postures as needed. Often yin-yoga style (holding asanas for prolonged length of time). Qi-gong: 5 Element qi-gong for health, few x’s / week.

Through the influence of her family, Erin had been a student in the Church of Self-Realization Fellowship, an organization that emphasizes the universal truth behind diverse religions. Erin admitted that she had never aspired to enlightenment but had a natural desire to “love God” and to discover what is real. Erin’s spiritual development deepened when she began to seriously consider what her husband, a Zen teacher, was emphasizing to his students: the importance of finding out exactly who or what one is,

which he said could be discovered through self-inquiry and stillness. One evening during a spiritual retreat, Erin resolved to explore the question, “What is stillness?” through meditation. After some time, Erin went to bed, and woke up the next morning without any memory of having slept or dreamt in the usual manner. She also woke up into the realization of emptiness or pure consciousness, which then recognized itself as the fullness of all created forms.

Participant #9. “Sarah” is a 54-year-old woman who is married and has two children. As noted above, Sarah described her number of years involved in spirituality as “Eternity.” Sarah also said that her number of years as a spiritual teacher *and student* is “Eternity”—she added the word “student” to the questionnaire so that it read “spiritual teacher, student.” Sarah teaches through private consultation, public talks, and silent retreats, though she made it clear in her interview that she does not ascribe to the categories of teacher and student. Sarah described her former, as well as current, religious/spiritual tradition as “SELF, HERE, NOW.” Sarah described her current spiritual practice as “Life as Practice/Prayer” and said she has been doing this “My Whole Life.” After enduring a significant amount of trauma while growing up, Sarah realized with the help of a spiritual teacher that she had been born “awake.” This clarification helped her to understand much of her confusion about how human beings behave and why she had difficulty conforming to the conventional sense of self and reality.

Participant #10. “Jim” is a 50-year-old married man who has been involved in spirituality for 35 years. Jim has been a spiritual teacher for 10 years. He teaches through private consultation. Jim was involved in Christianity until the age of 15 and claimed no

current religious/spiritual tradition. Jim described his current spiritual practice as “meditation, open-ended inquiry into present-moment experience,” and stated that he has been doing this for 10 years. In the wake of a divorce, Jim began to learn the Sedona Method for processing emotions and developing inner peace. He soon realized that the Sedona Method can facilitate spiritual awakening and that this was what he wanted most. However, a moment of deep insight revealed to Jim that there was absolutely nothing he could do to “achieve” spiritual awakening, and he was plunged into extreme angst. With the help of his spiritual teacher, Jim came to understand that there was nothing he *needed* to do in order to awaken. After decades of trying various forms of psychological healing, Jim let go of all seeking and found himself becoming increasingly happy, content to travel with his teacher and help organize her gatherings. A clear revelation of oneness occurred one evening while Jim was sitting on the banks of the Ganges River in India.

Participant #11. “Paul” is a married man and father who reported that he has been involved in spirituality for his entire life of 57 years. Paul has been a spiritual teacher for 10 years, holding public talks and private consultation. He reported his current religious/spiritual tradition as “none” and his former traditions as “all.” Paul indicated that he has no current spiritual practices. To describe his practice and years practicing, Paul wrote, “Life/57.” As a teenager, Paul was disturbed to realize that despite the social pretenses of the 1950s, adults actually did not know what they were doing, or what life was about. He began to search for answers in many fields of knowledge. In his early 20s, Paul recognized that one of his mother’s friends possessed an entirely different kind of knowledge than he had ever encountered, and they became friends. At one point, Paul experienced an intense communion with this man, in which he saw what this man already

knew—that reality is a singular field of consciousness. This transmission blew Paul’s psyche open so that an incredible flux of previously unconscious and compartmentalized processes entered into awareness simultaneously. After two decades of innumerable spiritual practices and study to resolve a lingering sense of separate identity, an integration took place in which all duality disappeared and nonduality became crystal clear.

Participant #12. “Zack” is a 38-year-old man who has been involved in spirituality for 4 years. He has been a spiritual teacher for 1 year, during which time he has held private consultation and public talks. Zack reported that has no current religious/spiritual tradition or practices and that his former religious/spiritual traditions were “12-step fellowship, Christianity, Buddhism.” Zack explained on the questionnaire that his spiritual practice had been

1 and ½ [years] of presence “work” including watching thoughts and emotions, noticing the story of self whenever it arose, and bringing attention to the present moment when story was noticed.

For Zack, nondual realization began with experiences of pure consciousness, along with blissful energetic phenomena. Months later, a revelation of unity took place in his apartment.

Participant #13. “Hannah” is a 47-year-old woman who has been involved in spirituality for 20 years. Hannah has been teaching for 3 years through private consultation and small groups. She did not list any current or former religious/spiritual traditions but listed her current religious/spiritual practices as “Meditation, Awe, Beholding the Great Mystery.” She described her practice and years practicing as “8 years meditation love affair.” Hannah’s spiritual awakening occurred in association with

a form of therapeutic bodywork she was receiving. Hannah experienced an “incredible heart opening” that brought intense pain in her chest, followed by a deep emotional release. This event included the memory of being unwanted while in the womb and then psychologically experiencing a rebirth in which she felt completely wanted by the universe. In Hannah’s view, this experience paved the way for a kundalini emergence. After many nights of enduring uncomfortable torrents of energy throughout her body for hours, Hannah asked a friend to help her through it by placing hands on the heart and stomach centers. This facilitated another profound emotional release from the heart area, and in the next moments the nature of reality was revealed in consciousness.

Participant #14. “Theo” is a married 54-year-old man who has been involved in spirituality for 38 years. He has been a spiritual teacher for 20 years, giving public talks as well as meeting privately with people. Theo described his former religious/spiritual tradition in the following manner: “raised Catholic & became very drawn to Ramana Maharshi and Advaita, Zen & all other paths of Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, mystical Christianity & Judaism.” Theo listed his current religious/spiritual tradition as “THE ABSOLUTE” and his current religious/spiritual practice as “BEING OPEN (AS NOTHING!).” In addition, Theo described this practice as “‘What am I?’ & ‘What are you,’ self-inquiry & ‘other inquiry.’” As a teenager, Theo was suffering an extreme existential depression due to the ruin, through injury, of his once promising athletic career. Then, at the age of 16, without any apparent cause, Theo was graced with a life-changing revelation of the infinite love, peace, and seamless unity in which all things have their existence. Later, while spending time with sages in Asia, Theo experienced further, deeper realizations of Being as both absolute void and absolute energy.

Participant #15. “Ethan” is a 44-year-old man who has been involved in spirituality for 5 years. Ethan reported that he has been a spiritual teacher for 5 years, giving public talks, holding private meetings, and writing. Ethan reported that he had been raised Catholic but has no current religious/spiritual tradition. He described his current religious/spiritual practice as “24/7 Vigilance—not to succumb to unconsciousness.” Through the practice of yoga and meditation, Ethan escaped his former materialistic lifestyle and began to experience a new kind of peace and joy. Like many spiritual seekers, Ethan experienced a rapid deepening of awareness by reading *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle (1999), and *I Am That* by Nisargadatta Maharaj (1973). In Ethan’s view, the witnessing presence that Tolle pointed out, combined with the rigorous stripping-away of illusions offered by Nisargadatta, provided a powerful impetus to nondual realization.

Participant #16. “Steven” is a 62-year-old man who stated that he has been involved in spirituality for 62 years. Steven has been a spiritual teacher for 36 years. As a Roman Catholic priest, he teaches through homilies, public talks, and spiritual direction. Steven was raised in the Catholic tradition. Steven described his current religious/spiritual practices, and years practicing, in the following manner: “42 years of meditation, 62 years of prayer, 36 years of liturgy, 36 years of spiritual reading, 21 years of nature.” Influenced by his great grandmother who was both a mystic and member of the Catholic faith, Steven had the intuition in childhood that even the devil cannot be separated from the ineffable source and should be prayed for at family prayer time. Through living in places as divergent as Kenya and northern California, Steven discovered the essential nature of spiritual paths. Steven reported that several experiences

in meditation, along with an enlightening near-death experience, have clearly revealed his identity as transcendent-immanent spirit.

Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

The criterion for the identification of themes was their relevance to the central research question, “What is the lived experience of nondual consciousness?” and three subquestions:

1. What are the key features that distinguish nondual consciousness from egoic consciousness?
2. How does development proceed from the event of nondual realization to the stage of nondual consciousness?
3. What are the implications of nondual consciousness for human development?

The benchmark for reporting themes was conservatively set to those mentioned by 4 or more participants. This represents a high level of significance in a qualitative sample.

The data are presented in terms of the two major theme-groupings that were discerned within the results. The theme-groupings can be described as (a) events and processes associated with nondual realization, and (b) the long-term impact of nondual realization on various aspects of experience—that is, the stable traits of nondual consciousness. Within that framework, themes are presented in ways that make narrative sense, and otherwise, according to relative strength.

An effort was made to present data extracts that contain not only the thematic material but also a sufficient amount of contextual discussion. This was done to preserve the narrative integrity and richness of participants’ responses. In addition, themes were interrelated, so participants often seemed able to explain a key aspect of nondual

consciousness only in terms of its relationship to other aspects. Data extracts were created with the aim of focusing on a theme enough to highlight it, without focusing so narrowly that its relationship to other themes could not be understood. Further, italics are used within the data extracts to convey participants' emphasis, rather than that of the researcher.

It should also be noted that participants often responded to questions in rather didactic or abstract terms, instead of maintaining a first-person, experiential narrative. Data extracts were selected with a preference for the latter, while not excluding the former. The reasoning for this approach was that in some of the cases where participants used didactic and second-person language, contextual cues clearly indicated, or at least strongly suggested, that they were speaking from their experience, and that they were using a didactic adjunct to better explain their experience.

Processes of Nondual Realization

In order to establish the context for exploring the experiential aspects of nondual consciousness, the interview protocol first asked participants to describe the process of awakening and what it purportedly revealed about self and reality. This query elicited descriptions of life circumstances that participants considered relevant to their spiritual journey. More importantly, this line of inquiry elicited rich qualitative data on what the participants felt they had discovered about the nature of consciousness, existence, and nonduality.

Egoic disillusionment. Twelve participants reported that awakening was preceded by, or essentially began with, a marked disillusionment with their habitual sense of reality and conventional lifestyle. Several of these participants came to spiritual awakening after

having exhausted many approaches to finding happiness and meaning. Interestingly, two of the participants had once been ardent proponents of communist ideology. One of these participants became disillusioned during a visit to communist China and later discovered the mystical path. Another participant, who had dismissed spirituality as naïve wish-fulfillment, underwent sudden awakening while serving a prison sentence for politically motivated actions.

The more severe cases of disillusionment involved experiences of existential crisis and suicidality. The following account offers a dramatic example of how collapse of the ego-identity led to a powerful awakening. Though nondual realization is addressed as a separate theme in the next section of the chapter, part of the participant's awakening is included here to illustrate the intense crisis and sudden reversal:

There was a big sense of a “me”—it felt like a big thing or a lump, an entity. It felt very much like a target for life. It felt like an entity that had to push life around to make things happen. It felt like there was always, on some level, something wrong needing to be rectified. There was a deep sense of alienation, feeling like, “What is this body? It doesn't feel transparent for flow and vitality and wellness.” Sports was my bliss, it was my religion. Starting around age 13, I was having a lot of knee injuries that just wiped out any real future for me seriously in sports. There was a grieving of a loss and I didn't have enough psychological skills and neither did my parents. It seemed like it was taking away a future for me. At age 16 it got just intolerable. I was having a massive existentialist crisis, and I was even starting to wonder what would be the cleanest way out that would not be too psychologically burdensome to my parents. Mind you, I don't think I have any real family genetics for depression . . . things really became profoundly unwell. And then one day when I was well enough to go back to school, I was out in the backyard just breathing and trying to get my muscle tone back and doing some calisthenics, and everything just suddenly dropped and opened, and it felt like all the light and love and power and bliss and joy was just absolutely showering down and coming up from the ground and exploding from inside, and everything went from being completely all wrong to all right. And there was a literal, vivid, palpable, breathable, tastable, delectable reality that we are made of God's love, made of God's joy, made of God's peace and power. All sense of duality was just blown out. (P14)

In other cases of disillusionment, participants described emotional pain related to loss, chemical and spiritual forms of addiction, and long-term existential angst as precipitating factors for entering deep spiritual awareness.

I was leading a rather successful life materially in Hollywood as a film producer and executive but I was not happy in that position and so I began to realize at age 39 that getting more of the same wasn't going to make me happy. So I started looking for another way to live. And I happened to stumble on the writings of mystics of various traditions, the Bhagavad Gita, the Lankavatara Sutra, the Tao Te Ching, Meister Eckhart—some of the great classics—and I began to realize that even though these authors had been writing in very different times and places, they all seemed to me to be pointing to the same ultimate reality or ultimate truth. And their promise was that to realize this truth was the key to happiness. So that's what motivated me to go on a mystical path. . . . What prompted me to go on a spiritual path was some big crises, big-time suffering, I was breaking up with my wife, things like that. But really, when I look back on it, my whole life had been some kind of suffering. In fact that's what drove my whole life. My whole life has been a search for happiness, down to getting up in the morning and saying "Well what do I want for breakfast?" And the idea is that your choice of what to have for breakfast is either going to bring you happiness or detract from your happiness. (P4)

Without getting into the details of the past, basically, I suffered with addiction for years. So when I started in a recovery program I understood the basic idea of "You're going to get clean now, and be spiritual." That made sense to me, except that what I found myself doing was essentially substituting the search for drugs with what was essentially a search for self, and I didn't realize that at first. But there was this constant seeking that went on, as if "I'm not there yet. How can I be free?" But I didn't know what free was. . . . All the spiritual stuff that I was reading tended to talk about how tomorrow it's going to be all better and if I could just keep a positive attitude and maybe think positive thoughts or control my thinking, and it all seemed sort of always out of reach. And so I picked up some nonduality books—a host of different books—and my real seeking in terms of seeking enlightenment was a year-and-a-half period. (P12)

Two participants reported that disillusionment—and the consequent turning inward of awareness—occurred quite spontaneously, amid otherwise comfortable life circumstances.

Before awakening, I'd always been this really motivated ego, successful, all kinds of projects. There was something that preceded the awakening. It was sort of a natural dispassion, loss of interest in activities—not to be confused with what I

call malaise or depression. There was just this sense that something was missing. Of course, now I know that that something missing is the pain gap between the heart that we actually are and the mind-made self that thinks it's separate. There was a natural turning, again, that just happened naturally. And you know, there are spiritual practices that prescribe the practice of dispassion where the ego that's going to make itself be less interested in life activities, and that's not what happened. It was just a natural arising circumstance. There was just this sense that I'm really not interested in being with these same people, I'm really not even interested in this business which I absolutely adored. There was just this loss of interest in the world, and more of a contemplative inner turning naturally surfaced. I know now because of awakening that that's actually the beginning of the falling away of objectivity. By objectivity I mean not only world experience but that idea of the ego, that dreaming "I," is what I call it, the idea of "me." (P6)

I was programming computers and that sort of thing, making quite a lot of money doing that. At some point I guess I was really kind of wondering what on earth had happened. Maybe it's like what people call a midlife crisis. What happened to the ideals I used to have? Why am I chasing all this money and what's the point of it anyway? Once I get it, all I do is spend it on more expensive toys and this isn't really how I thought I wanted to be spending my life. I guess that was something beginning to push forward. What that revealed to me was a kind of a despair. It was a despair that had always really been there. The mundanity of life, the drudgery. That was the psychological atmosphere that I was probably in for many years. The career and spending lots of money were glossing over that, but suddenly it came flooding back. The job market was really going downhill so life put this big space with nothing to do in front of me. The two books I chose to read—one was *The Power of Now* [by Eckhart Tolle] and the other was *I Am That* [by Nisargadatta Maharaj]. From this point, things happened very quickly. (P15)

The literature review suggested that the predominance of egoic consciousness in society amounts to a "consensus trance" (Tart, 1987). Indeed, one participant became intensely disillusioned, at a young age, with the false, collective mode of consciousness he perceived around him.

At first I had faith. I grew up in the fifties. In that time society and the media was presenting this kind of unified image of life, and I sort of bought that and said "Okay great, humans know what they're doing, human society makes sense." And then at some point in my later childhood I discovered there were some cracks in that theory and I discovered people don't know what's going on and I became horrified. So I said, I'm going need to figure out what's going on here because these people don't know, they're wandering around doing a big pretense and it wasn't acceptable to me. I needed to know. I needed to have something solid, if at all possible, to base my life on. Beginning in my late childhood and certainly

through my teenage years and actually thereafter, I started investigating all sorts of philosophy and religion and history and human culture, psychology, metaphysics, anything that would provide a potential window or bigger picture into what was going on. And it was all kind of iffy. (P11)

In this case, the entry to mystical insight came through an adult mentor who happened to be enlightened.

And I had the great good fortune to meet a man who was a friend of my mother. I saw that there was something different about him. I could see he knew something in a whole different category of knowledge than 99% of the people wandering around me knew. (P11)

This participant's awakening, along with several other examples, is described further in the next section.

Sudden nondual realization. Fifteen participants described one or more events whereby the nature of self and all things was shown to be an ineffable consciousness or spirit. One participant, who did not experience such an awakening, reported that she could not relate to other spiritual teachers' accounts of nondual realization. However, when a fellow teacher explained to her that she had been born "awake," she felt that the truth of his statement cut through her "like a knife," and she realized why she had never understood the experience of awakening. This unique participant did, however, describe a process of harmonizing the body and mind to better express her sense of reality.

In each case of nondual realization, the revelation of oneness dispelled the sense that things and persons exist as discrete entities. The narratives describe a variety of circumstances in which awakening occurred and offer a glimpse at several aspects and effects of awakening, which constitute the remaining themes in this chapter. In the midst of his disillusionment with collective egoic consciousness, Paul (P11) experienced an incredible interaction with an enlightened elder:

There was one period time of about a month when I was 22. I had a series of very intense interactions with him, whereby I saw, and this is difficult to verbalize, I saw—I'll put it sort of poetically—I saw what he was, and seeing that, I saw what I was, and I saw that he knew what he was, and he knew what I was, and vice versa. So this was a very profound kind of communion experience. It was very much a mind-to-mind transmission or something. At any rate, this experience knocked my socks off, just rewrote the book for me. I knew quite clearly that he knew this full-field experience, this unified field of consciousness—and he knew he was that. And I could see that he could see that I was aware that I was that. There was an intense communion and communication that was beyond external channels. (P11)

This total opening of awareness provoked a psychological crisis for which Paul was sent to a psychiatric hospital. Twenty years later, a final and complete integration took place.

The next 20 years I spent trying to sort this out, trying to integrate it, trying to make sense of it. Finally, in about 1997, it all clicked. Over the space of about 3 days it integrated. It was like this one perfect fractal gem, and it's been like that ever since. . . . In a lot of ways I was in even more turmoil in those years than before. . . . The original experience I had with this man was an experience of—I can characterize it pretty specifically as, every aspect of my psyche was thrown open, so there were no compartmentalizations. . . . I was basically thrown into a whole new paradigm without an operating manual. So essentially the process that I went through for the next 20 something years was trying to find the formula, the principle of integration that would make it make sense. . . . I saw that notions of separation or difference or individuality just didn't apply in this continuity. In other words there was nothing other than this one metabeing. Metabeing of consciousness. And anything that existed was nothing other than this metabeing of consciousness. (P11)

In the final phase of this awakening, the lingering sense of duality around the personal sense of self was completely dispelled:

I saw quite clearly that all these aspects of my personality and my quirkiness and my desires and my motivations and my thoughts and the whole messy business of having a human personality was all actually like resonant harmonic frequencies of the oscillations of this one energy system. So it wasn't personal at all. Nothing is personal. Everything is totally integrated as an expression of this one system. And I saw that conclusively and with absolute clarity and it was just totally obvious to me. (P11)

The following data extracts depict a variety of circumstances in which nondual realization occurred. For Jim (P10), nondual realization came after he realized that there was truly no way, and no need, to fix his psychology, or to force a spiritual breakthrough:

But we did go on to India and I was basically spending all my time in *satsang*. And when I wasn't in *satsang* I would go sit by the Ganges river in Rishikesh. There was a huge set of rapids right by the ashram where we were staying. I would sit there for hours, especially at night after everyone had gone to bed. One night when I was sitting there, very suddenly and in the same way that those other knowings just came, there came this very simple, direct knowing that the rock I was leaning against on the side of the river, was me. It just seemed like the same thing as one of my legs. It was inside of me, it was part of me. All of these knowings just came and they were just knowing. And they had a huge visceral impact. So this rock was just suddenly part of my body, part of me. Something shifted and I realized that that meant this entire field of boulders I was sitting in were me, were inside of me. It was a deduction but the visceral sense came with it. There was a softening or relaxation, a recognition that the field of boulders was me. Then something recognized that it extended through the boulders on the other side of the river. A recognition like "Oh yeah, those boulders too, they're inside of me." With each recognition it was like the first time you notice a freckle on your arm. It was that simple but undeniable. And then it was the river. Each of these was like a *pop*, a sudden expansion of the recognition. And so once it was the river, it was obvious—just as obvious as the fact that I have ten fingers—that the entire river was inside of me. And if it was the entire river, that meant very simply, it was the entire continent of India. And then it quickly was like that means it's the whole planet. And then it just didn't stop. There was a place right around there when my mind really couldn't keep up, but the sense of me expanding to be everything. And then there was this very definite kind of pop where, sitting there as everything, suddenly it popped in terms of time. And there was this sense that "Well that's what I've always been." It suddenly include not just all space but also all time. And then also the sense that this very simple knowing that that's what I've always been. (P10)

Similarly, Sal (P4) reported that nondual realization came after his egoic, spiritual ambition was totally nullified:

I spent about three days in this state which I later came to call *kenosis*, which is a Greek word meaning self-emptying. I wasn't suicidal. I wasn't depressed. It was a very interesting state. I'd never been in such a state. It was total neutrality. I didn't care what happened one way or another. This deepened to the point where I realized my spiritual path is over. That failed. And I suddenly got the sense of a peculiar kind of freedom that I had never experienced before in my life because I had no destiny and nothing to live up to. . . . I started to fall asleep and I was still

in this state of neutrality, but it had this lightness about it now because it was almost like you're dead so the worst has happened, so what else can happen to you? But also, my mind really wasn't functioning. I really could not think of things, plans, anything like that. I picked up a book by Meister Eckhart and tried to read it, and literally the words would not gel into sentences and paragraphs. I put it down, I turned out the light and I closed my eyes. The waking world was falling away and there was just this nothingness. No dreams had arisen but there was no awareness of the waking world. And then from this book that I just described, Centering, this one verse popped into my mind, and it says something like, "When the waking world has vanished and before dreams have come, Being is revealed." Anyway, *that was that moment!* And it just came to me from memory, and then the world vanished from my mind, and then there was nothing. Literally *no thing*. And sure enough, [*laughing*] Being was revealed. I can try to describe it to you later, but all I can tell you, at that moment I recognized it absolutely. I opened my eyes, I looked around; I just couldn't believe it—it was there all along. The things, the phenomena that were in the world, were just nothing but an expression of this no-thing. And it was all perfect, it was seamless, it was beautiful. In my own terminology I had been looking for "the kingdom," like the kingdom of God, and here it was—I had never left it, it was all around me. It was everywhere, it just was amazing. And perhaps the most salient feature of this was that it was all there, but there was no self. There was nothing to be separate from anything. I was all this, and this was all me, and words just break down here—this is the trouble, of course, that all mystics have. (P4)

Having struggled with chemical addiction and misguided spiritual seeking, Zack (P12)

discovered the practice of witnessing the mind and thereby withdrawing consciousness

from egoic enthrallment. For Zack, nondual realization began with entry to a deep state of peace:

People would talk about oneness and I always thought that was a strange idea that I would almost never entertain, and in fact people were talking about *no-self* and I didn't understand that because all I knew was that there had been a shift into peace in my body, a deep well of peace. I didn't understand what they meant by no-self or oneness so there was still some seeking. I was at a campfire one night in July several months after that first shift. It was the middle of the night on my home, driving home on the highway, and all the sudden it was like little sparks going off all over my body, like sparklers, tingling. As that was happening I was becoming more and more alert in my whole body. It was total presence, absolute presence. I couldn't even leave this moment—there was nothing but this moment. I got home and laid on my bed and had my two dogs near me and I was petting each dog. And then there was just a realization that I wasn't separate from the dogs. Again, it wasn't a thought. It was something beyond thought. The thought comes later. Of course, I'm putting words to it now. I looked out the window and

saw myself in the streetlight. I just saw that that was me, which no words can describe. I remember also—I live in a second floor apartment—I remember saying “All this time I thought I was a person living in the second floor of this apartment.” Because it’s such a stunning realization, it changes everything. It’s like there’s no point of reference from the dualistic mental realm. So it’s really a realization beyond thought. No words can exactly describe it. So, what is this?—It just means that, fundamentally, you’re the chair. But you’re not just the chair. You’re absolutely everything you see. It’s literally one life happening now in this amazing array of forms, but it’s not as though any of those forms are fundamentally separate from you, or even that the space is any way separate. The space is part of it. There’s really no distinction. In that moment without thought you realize it’s all just one. Even the space is the chair, in a different form. Those are just words I’m trying to put into it later. It can’t be expressed because every sentence is a dualistic sentence. (P12)

For four participants, nondual realization occurred without any prior involvement in mysticism.

At about 36 years old when I first started doing the water work which I’m currently involved with, I had a rather intense kundalini awakening that was an experience of indescribable, absolute perfection, oneness, and interconnectedness with everything. And I really didn’t have a context for that. (P13)

I was actually teaching aerobics when this happened. I was quite accustomed to slipping into slow motion like athletes or maybe right before you have an auto accident where time starts going in slow motion. That was a usual occurrence but this time there was this mystical sacredness—a synergy that seemed far greater than the people who were jumping up and down within it, including me and myself. So I became intensely alert and mysteriously present within it and really without cause, and was suddenly so far within my body—I disappeared within my body and completely out of time and experience altogether. When I became consciously aware again, my body was way far above me still enthralled in its aerobics and there was the recognition that I’m not my body and I’m not my emotions. The idea of Kim had totally disintegrated, dissolved, and it actually took 12 years to reintegrate this pure awareness that I am with the body-mind. Of course I had no spiritual practice and no intellectual knowledge of enlightenment or awakening. I had no idea what had even happened so it was a journey of going first to physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, clergy, spiritual teachers—and really all I could share is that I am awake and people are dreaming and we’re not our body-minds and this idea of a separate self is not true. But it took 12 years of integration. That’s the initial awakening. (P6)

After suffering a severe existential crisis, Theo (P14) underwent a life-changing awakening at age 16. Again, this occurred without any prior involvement in mysticism.

Here, Theo describes the realization that took place in his backyard:

There was this realization that we, insofar as we—the gazillions of beings throughout the cosmos, including inanimate objects—insofar as we have any existence, we are *made* of the Divine. I was raised Catholic so I didn't have a Buddhist framework or a Hindu Vedanta or Taoist framework, et cetera. My parents thought I was on drugs thereafter. So did my sister. I had never touched any drugs in my life and have never done since then any social drugs whatsoever. But everyone thought I was on drugs. I became completely different. I went from being very shy in social situations to having absolute fearlessness about that. Everyone became so dear to me. Everyone was like a brother or sister—more than that—everyone was somehow, when I'd look in their eyes, it was like, “This is God, manifest! I've been *asleep* these previous sixteen years! Incredible!” I really had this distinct sense when everything opened up that afternoon out in the backyard that all the “old man,” as St. Paul called it, was just being washed out. I was being emptied— completely—like *that*, in an instant. And there was just no more of that old feeling tone, that old sense of “Things are wrong, something's lacking, there's a problem here. I'm a 'me' separate from other 'me's' in a world that seems absurdist and kind of dark.” We are this one awareness, this one being. This was clear to me beyond a shadow of a doubt. And we get to have the sense of multiplicity and *I-and-Thou*, the sacred duality within the context of nonduality. That's why there was this instant social fearlessness. And a lot of desirelessness instantly was operative because so much fueling of the whole process of satisfying the “me” and “mine” just dropped off. (P14)

For one participant, the gnosis of absolute reality occurred in a brush with death. Steven (P16) recalled,

I remember one day, I thought I was dying, and a voice went off someplace deep, deep inside of me, and it said, “Your body is doing what bodies are built to do, but you're not your body. And your emotions are doing what emotions are built to do, but you're not your emotions. And your mind is playing the kinds of game that minds are built to play, but you're not your mind. And at a deep, deep level I knew I wasn't my body, I wasn't my emotions, I wasn't my mind. I got as clear as a bell: “I'm not any of these things.” I got it so deeply that my relationship with death changed radically. I haven't the slightest fear of death whatsoever, absolutely zero. Clear as a bell. I got it at a level that was deeper than my mind's knowing it—at a deep, deep, deep soul level—that I am not any of these things. It was never born, it can never die.

The various effects of awakening, touched upon in these accounts, are presented separately, in further detail, throughout this chapter. One of the most remarkable aspects of awakening was its immediate impact on affective and energetic experience.

Extraordinary energetic-affective opening. Fourteen of the participants who experienced a rather sudden awakening reported that it was accompanied by an unprecedented sense of joy, aliveness, peace, and love.

When I was getting back to school, everything seemed so absolutely two-dimensional and hollow and flat. It was not just low affect, but it was a very dark and absurdist and vacuously empty affect. Whereas when everything opened up, it was the emptiness that is full. Full of what?—full of awareness, full of sensitivity, full of aliveness, is-ness, bliss, and a real, tremendous sense of solidarity with fellow beings. (P14)

The final integration brought joy, ease, a sense of relief—amazing relief and release because the struggle was over. There’s nothing to struggle about because it’s all a done deal, on an ongoing basis! [*laughing*]. (P11)

Immediately upon awakening, wild laughter was a common element, along with the sense that a tremendous burden had been let down.

In that moment when I realized what I’ve always been, I actually ended up for a long time, just laughing my head off, rolling around in the gravel on the side of the river laughing my head off because it was suddenly such a big joke, that I had ever believed that I had suffered. It just seemed like the biggest joke because that’s what I had always, always been. It seemed like a big joke that I even ever wanted to be that, because I had always been it. (P10)

It was just the experience of not being separate. I stood up from my bed and started to look around and it felt like the whole world was intimately close, in other words that the floor was me, that there was no difference between me and the floor. I was the wall. Somebody watching me would have thought I was nuts because I got on the floor and I was grabbing at the carpet realizing that I was not separate from that. I was grabbing—I was laughing hysterically. I mean I couldn’t stop laughing—hilarious laughter, really. This complete sense of release and realizing “Well no wonder that I was suffering!” It was just this realization that there’s nobody here—there’s only This. The main thing when the experience was happening was amazement and joy. It was love but it was such an overwhelmingly powerful release from that person, the person who thought that he was going to figure this out. That’s the thing that seemed to die. And when that

thing died there was just nothing but joy. That was where the laughter was coming from. It was like the whole idea of seeking was seen to be ridiculous. There's nothing to seek. Now, for two weeks after that, there was nothing but a very intense love, a love of everything. It was an overwhelming love that felt almost crushing. It was like there was no room for a self to even be there. It was like that love was just so overpowering. And of course little bits of laughter here and there about the silliest things. I was really out in that formless realm at that point. (P12)

For each participant, the laughter, love, and joy occurred within an atmosphere of unspeakable wonder and transcendental insight. The following extracts highlight these qualities:

And by the way, in the beginning, things would fly through my mind like Zen stories and stuff, and I didn't think "Oh, here I'm enlightened" or anything like that, but suddenly I understood *koans* [Zen riddles] that I had read, you know? I just understood them instantly and it was just amazing. I was laughing. Some of the stuff Meister Eckhart had written that I always had grappled with and puzzled about—it just was all absolutely transparent. And I was laughing, I was crying—a tremendous sense of release, like being released from some awful burden I'd been carrying around all my life. And then I fell back asleep and I actually didn't go completely asleep, in the sense that I never lost that continuity of consciousness from waking to sleep. The world all disappeared again and it was just like this radiance, and in the morning I woke up—and now I'm using "I," you see, but this is totally false, I have to use the English language. But it wasn't the sense that I woke up, it was just the sense that the world came back into this consciousness. And on the one hand it was so simple, it was so extraordinary. The simplest things that I had always done were now extraordinary. Tying my shoelaces, I thought "This is amazing!" I got up and I went out for breakfast, I had some pie a la mode and a cup of coffee. It was just all the most ordinary stuff in the world and yet it was completely different, it was all extraordinary. Not because it was something else about it. It was extraordinary in and of itself. This is important. It wasn't like some radiant light was glowing through everything or anything like that. It was like I had never noticed before how extraordinary everything is. And now I was noticing it—noticing wherever I looked. You couldn't *not* notice it. (P4)

I was deeply in love with absolutely everything. Not just emotionally, but visually even. I would look at everything and it was as if I were seeing everything for the first time. Everything was radiating energy and it was this love energy. It was like the presence of God, or what-have-you, was visible in things and people. So all I had to do was look around and I would just feel overwhelmed and embraced with this incredible energy of life. (P1)

In seven cases, the opening of bliss, love, and stillness impaired normal functioning in subtle or profound ways, sometimes for many weeks or months.

People talk about the bliss. There was a great euphoria. Suddenly I understood what everybody's been chasing after. There was immense joy. In fact, I don't know for how long, maybe a few weeks, I almost couldn't speak. I was so blown away by what happened. It seemed like a struggle to go to the place where speaking happens from. Gradually a normality came. (P15)

She [Gangaji] took my hand, she looked at me and she said, "You must be Simon." And everything stopped. All of the strategies, all of the beliefs, all of the practices, all of the ideas, all of the thoughts stopped, just for a moment. I then spent the next six months in a state of mostly rapturous bliss. I became quite a spectacle of the people who knew me. They were very bewildered and confused about the change in me. I had a good friend there [in prison] who took care of me. I was pretty much useless. I just wasn't so interested in what was happening in the world around me. I spent the year after the second meeting with Gangaji in alternating states of bliss and insight and peace, emptiness—all of that—alternating, coming and going. (P5)

At the time [of the first awakening at age 22] it was completely overwhelming. In fact I spent five weeks in a mental institution a few months after the major events hit. I wasn't keeping a very low profile. I was trying to share and communicate what I had experienced. My emotions were completely out of whack. I was crazy, I probably should have been institutionalized or being worked with, because something extreme had happened to me and I didn't know how to make sense of it, but I knew it was very important and I was trying to share it with people and I was ineffective in doing it in a way that they could relate to, so they thought I was nuts. I was enormously excited because I knew I'd found it, I'd found reality. But that begged the question of what do I do with that? There was no fear. There was joy, there was excitement. There was a lot of psychological confusion in the sense that a strong part of me still thought that I existed as separate entity even in the context of this vast unified being that I had been shown. And so there was a schizophrenia there—a sense of "I don't exist, and I exist." I was trying to take sides or figure it out or integrate it. Essentially I was still trying to operate within the context of the dualistic paradigm. And I was thrown an information packet that was nondual and it didn't compute. But I banged my head against it because I didn't have anyone to explain it to me. I didn't have any context, so I just had to duke it out myself and grapple with it. (P11)

One participant described a period of interpersonal difficulty caused by the conflation of his newfound, spiritual love and his romantic attraction to women.

There was this period after the awakening where, the only way to describe it is that I just fell in love with everyone. I would fall madly in love with everyone I'd meet. On a practical level it was kind of disorienting. Literally, it would be like everyone you'd meet, you'd think you were supposed to marry them. I'm talking about big burly guys in the supermarket, and I don't go both ways. I'm heterosexual, but there was that same sense of total openness. And specifically, when it comes to women, it actually did create a dilemma because my heart would open so wide and I would be so there, that I would innocently act very affectionate, and express it, hold their hand. Fortunately this opening doesn't limit or take away your capacity to discriminate, to see what's happening. So there quickly came this point where I realized, this isn't fair. I'm sending signals to women that aren't really appropriate. And I got to the point where I said, "I'm basically clueless. I no longer have any way of knowing whether I'm supposed to be with women romantically." And so I just went on sabbatical. I literally gave up relationships for a while. (P10)

The following theme further describes some of the transformative, potentially destabilizing phenomena that occurred through the radical opening of the psyche to nondual consciousness.

Deconstruction of egoic fixations. Fourteen participants reported undergoing intensive transformation after the event of nondual realization. This process was commonly described as a more complete undoing of egoic identity. Deconstruction often consisted in the spontaneous surfacing and resolution of psychological material.

[My spiritual teacher's] influence or invitation was really for this emptiness to begin to dance and to do that there was an awful lot that had to burn away. Identifications and ideas of one sort or another, beliefs, opinions, the whole mind thing, really just kind of began to get torched—all the self-images, the ideas of how life should be or shouldn't be. (P2)

I didn't really talk at all about the whole dissolution process—the structures that dissolve that have held a position-in-being together. Belief systems dissolving; that's a whole other piece of what's happened in deepening and being. All the structures of conditioning, of patterning, of "This is me, this is true, this is my position, this is what I believe"—it all just dies, it all just dissolves. (P3)

Four participants reported that due to the immediate, as well as ongoing, deconstructive force of awakening, there was a sudden disinterest in their former lifestyle and a gradual reconfiguration of life circumstances.

So the new life that started—there was the question how do you live from this place. I was very adrift. All my old ways of functioning seemed gone. They weren't forgotten but I was disconnected from them. I was a person who had a one-year and a five-year and a ten-year plan and was going for the things that I wanted. It wasn't an unhealthy situation but when this happened I couldn't relate to any of that anymore. And I had been working as a coach since my master's degree program. I had done a thesis on coaching and had been doing personal coaching with people. And Oh!—I couldn't do that at all! All that goal-setting and things—I never did it again. So a lot of big chunks fell away, but fortunately I could still function at my job. (P1)

Virtually my entire life circumstances were completely transformed. That Kim life was nothing like it is now. New people were drawn into my life that understood awakening, understood enlightenment. The country club set that I was totally identified with, I could see that they could probably see a sixteenth of an inch of who I was and I still enjoyed being with them, but they would say "What is wrong with you? Why are you so quiet?" Eventually those friends just pretty much went their way. New friends came in. I met Ralph who awoke in 1982 and is now my husband. There were a few years after the awakening, like the studio burning down, when the dream-body Kim still was going through—my daughter was almost killed in an auto car accident—there was just one huge ending after another, but I was totally free of it, yet aware of Kim's dream-body in the world. As I said, it took 12 years before all of that reintegrated, and that's the disappearance of the subject-witness that all the sudden brings the whole thing in. From the awakening of being-consciousness-bliss, of pure being, that prevailed and it has never been any other, but I'm just saying that the life story also clears. When the light shines through, it's able to shine clearly through without the veil of the ego and all its ideas. (P6)

Twelve participants reported that the stable and lucid awareness brought by awakening acts as a powerful solvent upon conditioned patterns, so that the personality was to some extent transformed by the release of identification with it.

Since [awakening], it's been a number of years, about 10, 11 years. In the course of that time, various ways—in which a sense of "me" that had established itself prior to [awakening]—those senses, some of them just dissolved and some of them returned for closer viewing. What was different, what I might call these conditioned patterns which create a sense of a separate someone or a "me," that

upon return of these, what was different was there was a sense that they weren't personal, and that even if there was like stuff firing in the whole human body-mind that could convince one that they were personal, there was this knowing that they weren't personal, that they were no evidence of a "me." So there was something that wasn't buying that constellation anymore. After [awakening], this seeing was much more efficient. It would look at these patterns of conditioning and, without any resistance to them or story about them, it was almost as though they were coming out of the woodwork to be experienced and met and seen by this light of consciousness. And so that coming out of the woodwork has continued for many years to the point where, now there's less activity within this body-mind and more turning outward toward others who may come into my life whose patterns seem to be drawn to be seen. (P8)

Now say if something were to happen that would give me access again to some deep childhood pain, now because I've welcomed it and embraced it, it's so amazing, now when it pops up it's as if I can internally give it a hug and a kiss. It doesn't carry any bite or intensity even. There's the beginnings of intensity but this approach, instead of pushing away, takes all the intensity out. It feels like something very foundational has been completed. I feel that the awakening gets credit for that. (P1)

My own experience is that there have been many, many, many re-identifications and many, many more disidentifications or awakenings. But if you actually manage to really just be present to your experience, to be curious about it, to actually shine some of that expansive, spacious awareness into the experience of having your conditioning triggered, then it does actually dissolve it. There is a kind of solvent. Awareness is like a solvent that does gradually dissolve it. And at some point that same circumstance happens again and there's no reaction. (P10)

The light of awareness sometimes revealed how much unconscious suffering there had been in egoic consciousness:

Before the full shift, there wasn't any recognition of painful emotions, although they were there. It was much more that they were under the surface and denied. So I recognized that there were a lot of them. There was quite a lot of suffering, but if you had come and asked me, "How is life? How are you? What is your experience of life?" I would have probably said, "Well I'm pretty happy, I'm quite content." The ego would have said "I've got most of it under control. I just need to adjust a few things and I'll be fine." What I realized is that there was a deep, deep discontent. There was a lot of suppressed anger. Since the shift this stuff has been seen a lot more clearly. It's almost like in moments when there's a reaction or the pain-body or some identification—because that still can happen—it can be felt very intensely so in a way it almost seems as though the suffering is more intense since the shift, when it happens, than what it was before because it was so denied then. What I noticed, though, is that it's quite temporal. It doesn't

last very long. It comes, it has its life, and it's gone. And even in the midst of it, it's not as though the ground of being is lost. It doesn't take over. It doesn't become you. (P15)

For 3 participants, involvement in intimate relationships elicited some of the deepest emotional wounds associated with egoic alienation. In recounting the interpersonal processes that, along with other life circumstances, triggered the release of egoic fixations, these participants said they experienced deconstruction as a natural process by which consciousness clarifies itself.

After the shift, there was a period of immense starkness. Like everything was so stark and like, in my face. It was like there was no buffer anymore. The buffer that had been there had just dissolved and so everything was stark and not soft. There was no separation anymore in the way that there had been before. So what started happening was my wounding about relationship started arising and my wounding around fear of other people. Of course I was also in relationship. That has been a huge part of my process too, in terms of deepening in being. So basically through this kind of deep acceptance of myself and what is and life and other, and whatever impact that was having, I fell into a deepening in myself where other was part of self, where mind, where just everything was part of self, where there is no separation there. (P3)

So, enter intimate relationships. In that context, intimate relationship becomes a very rich ground for getting access to the deepest emotional content. All that kid stuff, all our mommy-daddy projections, all that psychological content that is packed down there in the basement of our beings, the foundation pieces of the construct of the separate self that we built on top of it—intimate relationship goes right to those places, has been my experience. And I was shocked that I had a lot of suffering in intimate relationship. I had about 4 years of bliss and then thanks to intimate relationship I got access to some deep dark parts of myself that I had no idea were still around. You know, I thought I had broken through and I was in heaven forever. So the sense that I make of all this and that those pushed away parts want to be awake too. Nothing wants to be left out of this, so circumstances give us access to these things. And I was able to meet and welcome some intensely painful parts of myself that were from such young childhood, I'm convinced that it was from preverbal times. It was how I felt when I started. . . . The continuous access to that place of unmoving stability made it possible to go there. (P1)

The relationship that had a lot of suffering and a fair amount of drama in it sort of propelled me into this place of finally breaking through all my mythologies about how I'm going to be fed from the outside world and how I'm going to get love

from out there and all that. After I met Adya and went on my first ten-day retreat and was having dokusan with him, and was having some really deep and profound, visceral experiences again of oneness, everything was so harmonious until this ex [partner]' would knock on my door. There was a lot of painful extraction out of the Matrix. That was a good couple of years. It was this understanding that this recognition of love that we are and its bright awakens leaves no stone unturned. It took me a while to catch on that each visitation of where I had lived in illusion was going to show me itself and as that occurred, initially there was a "Oh my God, I should know better, I've already seen through this" kind of response. In the reactivity then, of course I suffered. As I started to understand this was indeed an incredible gift, that all these parts and pieces were coming home, and with each one there was a sense of more brightness of being, more capacity, more freedom. Each one was liberated in the light of awareness. Then there was a disposition of welcoming, but until that time it was challenging. It was actually such an incredible gift because it's something that I see a lot with people. Having walked through it myself, I have the sense of how existence provides us—so perfectly, tailor-made—exactly what is going to bring us into a tone of surrender. The reorientation to recognize that this is all part of the process. The process of embodiment as far as I know and have seen isn't an overnight sensation. (P13)

Two participants reported that deconstruction brought up emotional and energetic experiences that did not stem from their personal psyche but were more primal in nature:

So there's like a waking up and that stabilizes, and then there's a waking in and down where there's a detox process that started where different levels of old repressed content, story—but deeper than story. Story is the first level, then fear, anger, then terror, rage, then deeper than that, primal energies were tied in knots. Aggression, sexual energy, things were all tied up. Feelings of preverbal "I'm worthless, I'm unlovable, something's wrong with me"—all that started to come up without analysis to this awareness and there started to be this process of detoxing or burning or clearing, but I wasn't doing it. I was just not moving. And it could come up like when a friend is visiting and we're at coffee shop, and all of sudden—terror. And I'm just sitting there sweating, thinking "Is there anything to be terrified about right here? No. Is this some old terror in my particular history? No, this is bigger than that. This is the knot, this is the energy that I never wanted to feel." That kind of process has continued. There is continual unfolding of things like that. It was more dramatic earlier. (P7)

For 1 of these participants, latent trauma emerged from what she thought was a past incarnation as a victim of the Holocaust. The participant indicated that she is not certain whether it was an actual past life or she was somehow accessing the memories through

the relativity of time and space. However, she reported having accurate knowledge of the concentration camps, as well as having been seized with tremendous fear when she first learned about the Holocaust as a child.

I started having panic attacks and just terror. I starting finding myself living this past life like 24/7. Another past lifetime. Another incarnation. That's what it felt like at the time and it was all this Holocaust, Nazi concentration camp stuff. I worked with a trauma specialist, I worked with a Tibetan Buddhist lama who was a therapist and I just didn't feel any relief from any of it. That lasted a long time. I couldn't sleep. I just felt like I was going crazy. So it was a very, very, very hard time—the most hellish time I had ever experienced. So it was experiencing this sea of suffering, like I was living in a sea of suffering and people had their hands outstretched to me. Just went through a lot of stuff, had to face into a lot of really, really hard stuff. It cleared up over years. It took years and years and years, but it did. (P3)

Though the newfound, spacious, witnessing awareness facilitated the deconstruction process, many participants stated that transcendent witnessing was a point of fixation on the way to mature nondual consciousness.

Temporary causal fixation. Eight participants reported that the early stages of awakening involved a subtle form of dualistic identification known in the Zen Buddhist tradition as “clinging to emptiness” (Kapleau, 1965). It is a fixation in the emptiness of the causal, mirror-like ground of consciousness. According to participants, a temporary fixation in the witness perspective can be a natural phase of awakening, consisting in a subtle but false division between awareness and its contents. In other words, awakening tends first to emphasize the pure subjectivity of consciousness, which is “empty” and transcendent of all objects and experience, and later reveals that consciousness is also immanent *as* all objects and experience. This means that consciousness may still identify with a particular reference point—that of pure witnessing—instead of realizing that it contains and exists as all experiences, beyond all reference points.

Even though you're no longer identified or interested—you're totally detached from the subject "I"—I was unaware that the pure witness was still maintaining a subjective reference point and that's what disappears for the full embodiment. That pure witness was still investigating formlessness and discovering ever more subtle modifications within formlessness. I was still—that subject-witness needs to disappear before the whole thing really integrates. It's like you're aware of awareness, or you'll hear teachers say "watch the watcher," and that's duality. You've got two reference points tending to one another. What that points to is the presence of the subject witness. There's nothing to be done about it, it just spontaneously disappears like everything else. (P6)

At first it wasn't totally relaxed. It was clung to. As this experience became a little normal, there was a fear that it was going, it was going to go. There was a gripping in that. As a couple years went by, I realized that it wasn't really threatened. I began to see that it wasn't the experience of it. The experience of it was one thing, but there was still the thing itself. The awakesness was still there regardless of how it felt. That's when things really began to relax. (P15)

Each of the eight participants who reported this theme explained that identification as the witness constitutes a half-baked enlightenment and can limit insight about the aspects of life in which egoic processes of attachment and aversion are still functioning.

What happened then I would call in retrospect kind of a hanging out in emptiness. Everything was fine, life was fine, but as Adya would say, the emptiness wasn't dancing. There was a stance that my mind took. My mind took on a stance of the absolute, so there wasn't any movement that was as wise and compassionate as it might have been, because my mind had gotten involved in claiming some part of this. (P2)

Wes (P7) noted that causal fixation is a frequent source of downfall for many awakened individuals, who lose their moral compass in the dizzying atmosphere of partial transcendence. In his own experience, the sense of transcendence that followed initial awakening was convincing, but he was able to discern the lingering, subtle sense of duality inherent in causal fixation:

At first I thought, "Ok, I'm done. I'm beyond the mind." Then I realized, "Wait a minute. What's this stuff then? Why am I still agitated about this situation that's going on in my life?" So I said let's be honest here, let's look. And then I started

to see, it's not done, it's unfolding, it's developing. One of the things about the waking up and waking in and down is this clarity about integrity. I saw so many of my colleagues and teachers just fall by the wayside with the classic things: power, drugs, money, sex, abuse of something or other. I could see this point initially where everything is relative, it's all fine, it's all good. And this sense of landing in the heart and below the heart in what I call the new will, it just goes, "Oh, I get it. It's both. It's both everything's empty, and there's people here." That is a person that's me. I'm them, they're me: relatively real and real—and not ultimately real, but real. That seemed to be such an important unfolding of this awakening. That's one of my experiences, that it's not just a once-and-for-all thing. (P7)

Thus, through a deepening realization of nonduality, which he associated with the awakening of the heart and the release of egoic motivation, Wes was able to proceed beyond causal fixation. Kim (P6) summarized her experience of full integration in the following manner:

In a way it's like the void turning inside out and instead of being emptiness, it's total fulfillment and that which embraces both. And that there is only one reality—whether it's the ego state of consciousness—there's only this pure reality and everything is it, not only contained within it—it *is* it. And I am that, and you are that, as the essence. (P6)

Having undergone the gradual clarification of gross and subtle forms of dualistic identification, participants described a number of stable traits that are associated with nondual consciousness.

Traits of Nondual Consciousness

The themes presented in this section reflect participants' present experience and awareness rather than past, transformative processes associated with awakening. These themes ostensibly illustrate the long-term impact of nondual realization on psychological processes. The first theme in this section describes the abiding realization of unity, in which life experience is no longer filtered through the separate-self construct. Each of the

subsequent themes in this section amplify and elaborate upon the foundational theme of a nondual ontology.

Nondual ontology. Fifteen participants reported that the nondual nature of reality as absolute consciousness had clarified itself in their everyday being, where even subtle forms of duality had been seen through and resolved. Participants described nondual consciousness as an ontological fact known through direct identity, independent of any particular experience.

What is full embodiment of the Totality? “My body” is now the appearance of the universe and I am the Essence and without contradiction that appearance is also the Essence that I am. (P6)

I see very clearly. I really see clearly the way things are. This is so clear, it’s so obvious to me. It’s so beyond dispute. (P5)

I have absolute certainty—I mean “certainty” is a weak word—I have certain knowledge of the unity and harmony of all phenomena. (P11)

What I later came to call gnosis, the realization, the knowingness—that’s always there. (P4)

It’s so clear to me the world happens in awareness. The body and mind are part of the world but this whole world of experience—the dream states at night, the waking, big-“D” Dream-state of the so-called waking physical world—it all happens in awareness, and it’s vanishing moment by moment. I’ve found I can live in a hovel, I can wander through parts of *favelas* or *barrios*, and it’s all the same experience. It’s like a lucid dream. You realize whether it’s a monster trying to throw spikes at you or something, or it’s the loveliest angelic archangel, it’s all the *same* energy. Even the dirty wall there behind the person who’s squatting, urinating or something, it has the same *suchness*. Everything in the universe is vibrating as *shakti*, as energy. It’s just shot through with this one taste. It’s all the same vibrational quality of consciousness. (P14)

Each participant emphasized that nondual consciousness includes all human experiences. They recognize the personality as an experience within the totality of *consciousness-existence*.

The effects of [self-inquiry] are not immediate, since the snuffing out of that belief [in duality] happens over time. Before you really know what has happened, you realize that you're really in love with this life, that there is no distance between you and this life—*none*. The distancing of the life is what ends. The holding it at arm's length is what ends. In most spiritual practices and contexts we have come to see life as the problem, the mind as the problem, thoughts as the problem. It's not. None of it's the problem, none of it. It is—it is just as it is. It is the Self-realization that we seek. It's the realization of eternal awareness manifest in these forms and so forth. (P5)

I know myself as nothing and as everything. Know myself as person, personality, ego. Know myself as emptiness, fullness, eternity, infinity. As atomic molecules, as infinite experience in form, in formless—both, all, same time, now. (P9)

I dance between those two—the infinite being and the unique expression called Jim. Endless discoveries about this individual called Jim. It's hard to make a comparison, but there are endless discoveries of what is actually in this infinite potential, what it's actually capable of. Endless discoveries of whole dimensions of being, whole dimensions of reality. Probably the clearest description of my sense of self is more like a question mark—"I wonder what it's like now?" Always like, "Huh, that's what I am now!" (P10)

Somebody else might say there's a tremendous sense of safety. I say there's a non-threat. Because even the answer "Who am I?"—It's almost like "Who I'm *not*." Moving from an identity—I can't say I moved to another identity, but it's not like there's nothing. That wouldn't be very accurate. The closest thing is like: *Everything*, which is non-separate; *No-thing*, which is boundless flow—things come and go but there's a big sky sense of infinity—and then also; some kind of *particularity*, some kind of "here" quality that's distinct. It's like a point in the web, like Indra's web [a metaphorical net of jewels in which each jewel reflects the others and is a microcosm of the whole]. (P7)

While stating that nondual consciousness allows a deep acceptance for the particularities and limitations of the bodily persona, participants claimed to know that one's true being does not die.

Awareness of spiritual immortality. Fifteen participants claimed to be experientially aware that physical death has no impact upon the consciousness that they know themselves to be. The discovery of nonduality eradicated all fear of death as well as identification with the mortal, psychophysical structure. Participants often displayed total, unhesitating conviction in declaring that consciousness does not die.

Interviewer: “What you are does not die?”

No—because I don’t exist. It exists. Me, Paul Smith, doesn’t exist. Paul Smith is just a little flickering, and flickerings are always coming and going. They don’t matter because they don’t actually exist. They aren’t actually there—they’re apparent. (P11)

Yeah. Here’s the wild thing. There’s a nonthreatening quality to reality. It’s like the root sense that I’m going to die or I could get killed at any moment, or my reputation could be ruined. My life’s going to be worthless or I could lose all my money. It’s like there’s no threat—because there’s nobody to be hurt. Who I am is really unhurttable like the sky. (P7)

A lot of the filters that I previously listened through, or viewed life through, didn’t operate the same way, like let’s say listening from the defensive, or listening through the fear of illness or old age or death. That drastically changed without any—I didn’t even have to look through conditioning about that. It was self-evident that what we are does not die and fundamentally remains whole and is not lacking in any way, regardless if illness is present or aging or dying—that nothing is lost. (P8)

One thing that I haven’t totally been able to articulate is that most of the suffering was somehow wrapped into a fear of death. And enlightenment is essentially the death of the story, early. It’s not like I want to die. But it’s a feeling that the death is going to happen. It’s not even like psychologically preparing for it. It’s like I could die right now and that’s okay. I know I’m not this body. I’m life, so if this particular form dies—but to the person who, all they have is the story, it’s terrifying. In any event, once that fear of death essentially left, there’s a freedom to live for the first time. (P12)

One of the most thorough and conceptually lucid explanations of death, from the perspective of nondual consciousness, came from the following exchange with Kim (P6):

Interviewer: “What does death mean to you?”

There isn’t any. And that can be directly experienced. You can go into death—I was talking about going into this void of the collective, this I suppose existentialists call it nothingness. . . . And you can go directly into that dark image and directly realize that all the elements of the body dissolve, but this pure consciousness, this pure awareness that is consciousness and pure being and pure bliss is absolutely indestructible. So fearlessness is a pretty nice addition. If a lion jumps out in front of me my body would probably jump, but to not be scared anymore—Kim was scared of everything, apparently, even though she had this strong self-image, thought she was “all that” really. And underneath, she had all these insecurities and what-not. Well, all of that goes. Some people talk about an afterlife—I see life as a continuity. It’d be more like there’s life after form. There’s life before form and then it passes through appearance of form and then it passes on to life without form and that it’s all a continuity. I was with my father

when he died. It was the most beautiful release, just the final breath of letting go, such a relaxation of body, and this unbelievable peace. A lot of people might cry if their father died. To me it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

Interviewer: "By virtue of what you're in touch with?"

Yes. I mean there is no separate *anything*. You are absolutely indestructible.

Interviewer: "So the truth of death was revealed to you in realization?"

Yes. Death itself is a complete lie. The body may return to the elements, it's no longer held together. This pure being has always—is eternal, it always is. What freedom that is, to be free of that delusion. You could say that the pure being and the pure consciousness dissolves into the pure awareness that it is. Conscious-being-awareness—the root of consciousness itself—you're actually moving into the unconscious that is actually *pure* consciousness. (P6)

Thus, the discovery of spiritual immortality granted freedom from the fearful idea of mortal, limited selfhood. Participants described freedom from mental constructs as a core trait of their present experience.

Disidentification from mental constructs. All 16 participants reported that consciousness knows itself as distinct from the processes and contents of mentation. Participants described a dramatic reversal whereby consciousness, which had formerly been fused to the thought-stream, woke up as the background in which thought happens. This discovery contained the recognition that the intellect is necessarily dualistic and therefore limited as a tool for understanding reality.

A lot of times I have a lot of thought. I've been blessed with a fairly functional mind, so I have a fair amount of responsibilities in my life where that gets engaged a lot. So my mind's often thinking, and yet I don't have an argument with that or find that it precludes me from a sense of peace because peace is what we are. You can't get away from it, if you really check it out. Those activities of mind that we so identify with, that are so convincing, that create this illusion that peace isn't there, those tendencies have diminished or maybe disappeared, who knows. Peace is the *de facto* reality when the identification with thought isn't in the foreground. Looking back I see, "Oh yeah, that was always present," but I was so preoccupied with all the thoughts I was identified with that it was missed. (P8)

I saw that all these divisions between the religions and the belief systems and the countries were completely a dream of thought. Again, from the conceptual state you can say, "I can see that," but I mean it's like literally seeing that there's nothing there. There actually isn't any division there—nothing at all, except as a

dream of thought that if you believe it, it's there, and if you don't, it's not there. (P12)

The idea that I have awareness and that this awareness is based on the physical body—all these are mental constructs, they're all ideas. The body appears in consciousness. There's no real body there. (P4)

In the following account, Kim (P6) describes her past experience of being “used by thought,” as well as using the mind to manifest favorable outcomes in egoic consciousness. She reported that her present mode of being transcends both of these relationships to the mind.

In the old days Kim would have been constantly used by thought, and in fact I was teaching back in the '70s these concepts that came up in *The Secret* [popular film and book on the creative power of thought], that you can create your own reality. I took a gymnastics team that lost every meet they'd ever had and showed them how the way they thought could change the way life is. They won second, third, and fourth in state. And so that was different than being totally used by thought as a teenager. Thought had its use but it was always for the mind-made self in some way. Then it transitioned to really having no reality at all. And thought is a tremendous tool. It's never seen anything more powerful than itself, really. And yet when it dissolves into the heart, the pure awareness that it is, it's just toast. It's like it falls to its knees in prayer. It's always there to balance my checkbook or make plans for a speaking tour but there's no hang-on to it. There's no result to it. Once its job of thinking is done it just goes back into Self. (P6)

In the following extracts, 4 participants explained disidentification from the mind by contrasting their present experience to their experience prior to awakening.

Participants described an entirely detached relationship to the mind and mental processes.

There's a sort of settling back to the ground state, which is basically a thought-less state. But it doesn't mean that thoughts don't go through my mind much just like they do your mind—I just don't regard them as *my* thoughts.

Interviewer: “How is that different from before gnosis?”

Oh, I worried about my thoughts. I really believed that I had found the truth, so this is the way the world is, when it's nothing but a layer of thought laid over everything. So I've had some experience in my life of shifting of worldview. And now, I mean, it's laughable. My relationship to thought in that sense—there's no “my” here but we have to use language—is *totally* different. (P4)

The relationship to thought is completely different than it used to be, in that I see it as objective. It's not me, it's just something that's happening where it's

happening, like the clouds are happening where they're happening and the war in Iraq is happening where it's happening. It's just sort of there doing itself and it doesn't matter, it doesn't have much importance. Whereas previously my thought was like a game I was kibitzing with and invested in and trying to get something from. (P11)

It's like a different wiring, so my brain is not the center of knowing. It's a bigger kind of knowing, which is a whole thing. I guess it's what the traditions call *prajna* or *bodhicitta*, heart-knowing or awake-awareness knowing. For me that is the crucial step for stabilization, for functioning in the world. Not going back to the mind to know—not going to conceptual knowing as the primary center to know. The wiring is hooked up through the prajna. Then, if it needs to remember something, one of my images is that I'm hanging out at home in the heart, which is a spacious heart but also below the neck, and I can use Wi-Fi to the brain without leaving home. I never have to go up to the office even just to check the files—"Well let me go upstairs and just see what I need to think about to make sure I'm doing it right" which is the usual, "I better go back and reestablish the ego just to check and make sure I'm safe, or that I know, and make sure I can function." And so I don't need to do that. That's key. (P7)

What was taken to be real up until this point, what seemed to be the most real thing, was all the stories in the head, the egoic identification with the story. All that has been taken to be more real, all this world of thought, is seen to be wispy and transient. You have to be thinking it to make it real, and when you're not thinking it, it's gone. Life is something else, much bigger, much more subtle than this mind and this body. The identity comes with a thought and when you see that thought coming, it's like, who cares? Who's interested in that anyway? It's best left alone and in leaving it alone, there's no identity. There's just life, here. It's actually real. This is the real life right here now, not this very gray, uninteresting thing that was being conducted in thought before. That's actually recognized as being quite a boring place. It doesn't have the aliveness that life really is. (P15)

Disidentification from mental constructs created a vastly different sense of reality. In addition to being liberated from the representational self and the mental filtering of experience, participants were apparently freed from the sense of linear time.

Timeless awareness. Fifteen participants claimed to have realized that linear time is a mind-made construct within the timeless presence of consciousness. The participants claimed to know themselves as this timeless reality rather than as separate persons in time. Moreover, participants stated that the realization of nondual consciousness engenders a sense of freedom and stillness amid the movement of events in relative time.

I would say the general sense of time for me is that there's relative time and there's the Now. One of the things is that the Now is not the present moment. A lot of people say "Be in the present moment." The present moment is part of the flow of relative time. It keeps moving. The Now is the infinite, boundless time that's here, that's aware of the flow of present moments. That's what I experience. (P7)

Space and time are constructs so that the dream can happen. So there's a seeing of that. The mind that isn't the mind of thought has that construct in order to have the dream. You realize then that you are timeless, and you are unborn and you are undying, and in you there is no time at all. There's just this Now which isn't a little sandwiched time between past and future—it's just *no-time*. That's really all that's here, and the rest is an appearance in the dream. So step back in the dream knowing that this timelessness is actually the only thing that is, and yet it's expressing itself or dreaming itself as time. It's not actually separate from time. It's not moving against the movement and so there's a sense of being quiet when there isn't resistance. Even if you're moving, if there's no resistance to the movement, you feel very still. (P2)

Timelessness is there but we're totally unaware of it, running around thinking there's all this shortage of time. Well, as timelessness, once time is seen as a delusion, the eternal doesn't have any problem at all with the coming and going of time. It embraces it as its own self. Time comes and goes and there appears to be movement in between which is space. Time can't embrace timelessness, but timelessness does embrace time as itself. (P6)

Almost right off the bat there was just this realization that this moment is all there is and that past and future are nothing but presently arising thoughts. Even though that can be understood conceptually from the perspective of a person, when that experience happens and there's an opening there, you really see—like, *seriously!*—that when a thought of future arises, you're not at all touching future. It's the realization that you're dreaming. You're dreaming a thought that has nothing to do with the future. (P12)

In a very profound way there is no now and there is no here. And yet that doesn't contradict that now and here appear. And that also doesn't contradict that I can make an appointment to meet someone tomorrow. So all those different modes of seeing it—I see that they're not true and I don't live in them. More fundamentally, they don't exist because when you look into "now" and "here" really precisely, you can't find anything. You can't find a now. You certainly can't find a yesterday or tomorrow, but you can't even find now. Look into it. Again it opens up into infinity. Everything opens up into infinity and in infinity there's no space and time. (P11)

In summary, the "Now" was described as infinite, timeless expanse of consciousness itself, rather than a place between the past and future. Though participants continue to

experience relative time and normal mental functioning, the following theme suggests that the liberation of consciousness from constructs tends to considerably reduce mental noise.

Mental lucidity. For 15 participants, the disidentification of consciousness from thought seemed to remove the fuel for constant mental narrative. While emphasizing that equanimity depends upon disidentification from thought rather than the absence of thought, these participants explained that the mind had in fact become more quiet due to disidentification.

There isn't a lot of worry and there isn't a lot of mental chatter. I'm just brain-dead! [*laughing*] (P9)

The mind is way quieter than it ever was. (P3)

Yes, I do have a lot more stillness. I would say it's the ground state. In other words, if I don't have anything in particular to think about and I'm not exposed to stimulation, there's a sort of settling back to the ground state, which is basically a *thought-less* state. (P4)

It's pretty quiet mostly. Sometimes it's totally silent. Often there's a low intensity. It's very peaceful. (P15)

This that's still, this that's at peace, this that's quiet inside, it feels like all of life originates there and returns there. So that return happens on a much more consistent basis than having to wait till you're sitting on your meditation cushion to know that there's something quiet and still. It's just here all the time. There's a sense of verticality about it. It's like being connected to the infinite above and the infinite below. Experientially it feels very vertical, but it isn't really a thing. It's like you take a seat in yourself, in this mountain of silence, but it's yourself. (P2)

It's almost like the mind is a clear pool of water and a little ripple will appear that is guiding or showing. The mind gets used more as a guide. Before it was like that pool of water would have had constant chaos. I was given to indulgence and absorption with thoughts, defining those thoughts as something telling me something about myself or life—the typical interface of the mind with life, something to do with my image of myself or judgment and labels, and so forth. (P13)

Mental chatter has died down, but it hasn't died down completely. Brain functioning is part of life, obviously, and I'm an attorney so I have to think about

cases. Thinking just happens. Whereas before the thoughts were very noisy and prevalent, now the quietness is who I feel myself to be, and then the thoughts come and they're much smaller. There's no attachment to them. They arise and they seem very harmless. (P12)

The following theme explores the transformed sense of agency that accompanies this noetic atmosphere.

Nondual action. Fifteen participants reported that everyday actions, as well as what seem to be major life decisions, occur spontaneously and effortlessly, rather than depending upon a strictly personal exercise of choice and willpower. Two participants stated that “Life lives itself,” while the rest of the participants used similar terms to describe nondual action. This new mode of functioning reportedly began with awakening and often removed the habit of setting and pursuing goals for the future.

I know when I know. I know when I need to know, what to do. I know what to do when I need to know it. It becomes obvious. So it isn't like I have to decide what to do. The decision is already made. Even though I might be thinking what to do, I'm still just doing what's the most obvious thing to do. I have plans—goals, not really. I don't necessarily feel like there's any goal to accomplish. (P9)

There's not a real hard clenching or grasping and I think the bottom line of that is there's an incredibly deep trust, again that everything is moving in perfect flow, perfect divine harmony, and that this life is given in service. It gets revealed moment to moment what that looks like.

Interviewer: “Was it a relief, then, to discover the perfect divine harmony?”

Oh, it was an *incredible* relief, right down to the depths of my soul. It was almost beyond what I can really articulate. But it was just that, let's say I got married and had kids and went to the grocery store every Sunday and had a perfect routine life, that was perfect. It's like every person, every being, every event, every circumstance, every thought, every feeling, every, every, every everything, perfectly in its place. (P13)

My psychology became lighter, a lot simpler, a lot less complicated. My life didn't really become any less active, so in that sense it's not simpler; but simpler in the sense of seeing things more clearly, greater sense of clarity, obviousness to the movement of life and the way of things. The whole idea of goals and being motivated toward a goal—that all operated around the sense of a someone that got the rug pulled out from underneath. (P8)

The fundamental thing is I saw that there's no separate me that is a doer. So everything is just happening, you could say. That of course has implications across all aspects of life. I don't have ambition. I don't have a need to not have ambition either. In a certain sense there's an automatism of life doing itself and there's absolutely no sort of struggle with that or pushing and pulling on that, so there's an absolute effortlessness which sort of applies to anything. In general my functionality has gotten vastly more efficient. I have a lot more access to intelligence. I have a lot clearer communication. I have a lot more effortless certainty about what to do in certain situations and so on, behaviorally. I guess in a way I've sort of become the best version of myself I could be, functionally, in the sense that I have access to all my resources instantaneously and effortlessly. I don't need to overcome a bad mood or a bad disposition or a confusion or something like that. It's like I'm always in a neutral state and when something needs to be there, it's there to whatever extent it can be. (P11)

So there was this moment of letting the bliss go, and I think you could say that's the last thing I ever chose to do in my life. I still use words like choice and all this, and I'm married, I have a wife, we talk about what we want to do, but it's like a *game* of choice rather than true choice. In fact I even had to start sort of manufacturing preferences. I had to sort of relearn how to play this game, but fundamentally in my life the things that happened, I didn't choose. (P4)

It's all happening by itself, all of it. Goals come in but they're just as easy to disappear and it's inconsequential whether they're there or gone, really. There's just no striving. You might call it "enlightened doing," I guess. The only thing that is really of interest is this moment and what is appearing within it and there's no way that it can be used for anything else. It's just in constant movement. (P6)

In the following extract, a participant describes his transition from the ego's addictive seeking to the spontaneous fulfillment of nondual action.

I don't have much anxiety at all.

Interviewer: "How does that relate, if at all, to the pursuit of goals in life?"

I don't have any [*laughing*]. From the perspective of ego it's all about that. The mind seems to be only interested in chasing and seeking. It's not really interested in attaining. It's really just looking to see what new carrots it can pull out beyond your reach to keep you moving forward inside this dream. So goals are seen to be very illusory. All that's happening is that a mind which seems to be trying desperately to avoid this moment, yet that's the only place that life is. It's like a cosmic joke. The mind is always trying to avoid This, and yet This is all there is. It all feels like addiction to me. When I was using drugs it was like: "How can I get more? How I can get better? When's my next fix?" And when I was on the spiritual search it was the same thing: "How can I get more, a better teaching, a better teacher, a better book? How can I better myself?" To me it's no different, except drugs or heroin might kill the body fast. So goals are like a dream of self to

me. How do we know what's going to happen? And the funny thing about awakening—the wonderful thing—is that life lives itself. One thing I've seen is that when there's total presence you realize that we're not doing any action. We're not thinking. We're not feeling. Those things are happening to us. They're just arising. The conscious story “me” is not doing it. In this moment you realize that life just lives itself. It unfolds in its own way, which is a really amazing thing. And that's where the sense of liberation comes from. (P12)

Along with the liberation of seeing that life lives itself, participants claimed to enjoy the supreme peace of knowing that one's being is always utterly complete.

Beatific peace. All 16 participants reported experiencing an underlying constancy of peace amid the vicissitudes of life. According to participants, peace and wholeness are simply the nature of reality.

I think that in sort of the flavor of my expression, it's a real sense of okayness, contentedness—we could call it peace. In some people that lightness might appear more jovial or joyful, and it's not to say that I don't have those flavors sometimes, but in general my flavor tends to be a sense of contentedness. More than that, it's less personal, almost, than contentedness, in the sense of just this real “*Everything is so okay*” feeling, even when it's really challenging. [Before awakening] I suppose I had access to it occasionally, enough to keep me interested, but nothing like the unmoving nature of that sense of okayness that's known in my experience now. (P8)

The issue of my happiness is irrelevant. It's not that it's resolved—it's just irrelevant. Happiness as a harmonic flicker, it comes and goes. Some days I'm giggling and other days I'm sitting quietly, but all that's irrelevant. I would say in terms of expressions of my emotionality, it's definitely a lot more pacific than I used to be. I've calmed down a lot and have a much more inherently even keel. But there's no restrictions. Even though that's generally the case, it's not necessarily the case. I mean sometimes I act silly—well I always act silly. I make a point of always acting silly! (P11)

The quality of nonattachment to pleasurable experiences—and concomitantly, nonresistance to uncomfortable experiences—was mentioned by 12 participants as an aspect of beatific peace.

Well there's an ease in being that just has been deepening and deepening. There's highs, there's lows, but there's not an addiction to either of them or inability to be

with either of them or attachment to either of them. There's more of an evenness to how I act or respond. There's just an okayness in being. (P3)

There's a great enjoyment of nice things, simple things, also tasty food and that kind of thing—being in new places, the normal experiences of being. It's like the desire of the mind was trying to get those experiences because it knows that those are enjoyed. But here, without the desire, the experiences are still enjoyed, but there's no grasping after them. It's like, "Well, isn't it already enjoyable right here, now? Isn't this already perfect?" Even as I sit, I'm often drawn to just sitting and doing nothing, and I mean the true doing nothing. Just sitting and being here fully, not even with a thought—the true doing nothing—and that's enough. It's more than enough, really. (P15)

What has changed is that there's just a fluid sense of living and not a lot of attachment. There's a sense of everything, again, just being in perfect harmony. And I guess I could say that I had more of a predisposition to a victim mentality of "this happened to me" and I don't have that sense. Victimhood, blame—it just doesn't live in me anymore. (P13)

Spontaneous joy. For 14 participants, nondual consciousness not only brings the deep sense of "no problem" with life, but consists also in a positive sense of joy and aliveness.

There's immense gratitude for [awakening]. It's improved my life—I don't know how you measure that—10,000 percent maybe. It does feel like there's a gravity to it. It feels planted. There's a very subtle sense of joy that's there all the time. Even in speaking of it, it begins to wake up and becomes more euphoric a little bit. The quality can change at different times but the spacious awareness, the feeling of just really being in this moment, is the predominant feeling for me. (P15)

Now I'm in on the joy. I'm in the in-crowd now. I'm getting the joke [*laughs*]. I can't deny that it's really nice. It's totally nice. But what I say about it is absolutely true; that there really is no suffering, and even suffering is the joy of God. And seeing that fact is the solution to suffering. It's totally wild. Anything meaningful and profound ultimately takes the form of a paradox, which is partly why the only solution is to let go of searching for solutions. (P11)

So all day long we're searching for happiness and we're making decisions based on "Is this going to make me happy or not?" from big things to really little things. Well if you're already happy, there's no more searching for happiness. It just vanishes from your life. You no longer do anything with the idea that this is going to make me happy. And then people always say, "Well then why do you do anything?" And the best I can say it is that it is an expression of happiness, just the way sometimes you wake up happy, you get in the shower and you start

singing. You're not singing to become happy, you're singing because you *are* happy. So life is a movement of the expression of happiness that's already there. There's no grasping or trying to get happiness. Now that doesn't mean, by the way, that if I have a headache I don't take aspirin. But to me none of this has anything to do with being happy or not. The body is in pain, the body's ill, can't function, can't be teaching and stuff like that, is part of the drama, but it's not trying to get anywhere. One of the aspects of realization is you're perfect the way you are, you don't have to become anything, you don't have to change anything, you don't have to live up to anything. (P4)

It's funny. I just said the other day, I have no idea what boredom is. It's like I didn't learn anything—I *unlearned* something. Something tuned in or showed itself of the natural quality. It's more like a childlike quality. Everything's kind of alive and it's a summer day. It's like school's out, or that kind of feeling. (P7)

The following theme offers further data on the nature of well-being in nondual consciousness. Whereas the theme of peace defines positive qualities that are inherently present in awakened consciousness, peace can also be understood as the absence of suffering.

Absence of neurotic suffering. The inquiry into suffering produced a wealth of data on participants' past experience of suffering and present experience of emotional freedom. Fifteen participants reported that they either do not experience emotional pain or that nondual consciousness allows them to experience strong emotions without identifying with them and creating psychological pain. In those cases, participants explicitly stated that they do not consider such experiences suffering.

Twelve participants said that they welcome intense emotions, when they arise, with curiosity or wise indifference, knowing that they are not a problem.

No, I wouldn't say I suffer. That doesn't mean there aren't painful emotions, but I don't suffer. When my daughter had lymphoma and we didn't know whether she would survive, there was emotional pain, and there was also surrender which was very strange to my mind. This truth that we are, to my way of experiencing it, always moves in service of itself. It doesn't move in service to an individual. It moves in service to truth. So from that perspective I didn't know whether her life or her apparent death was in service to truth. I had so many years of prayer and devotional practice, and I couldn't pray for her healing and that made me feel like

a terrible mother. Because as a mother in that role of course I wanted my daughter to live and she was mother to a 2-year-old at the time. That was the closest to what I would call suffering, but it was a conscious suffering, so it didn't feel the same as the unconscious suffering. . . . That's the thing that I never suspected, that the freedom comes not from transcending everything but from being willing to simply be here for that, for that feeling, for that moment, whatever it is, if it's pain, if it's pleasure—it doesn't really matter. True nature shows up for the whole ride. It's here having a human experience. So I wouldn't say I suffer, but that doesn't mean there aren't emotions. There are the whole range of emotions that human beings have. (P2)

Not that the experience is any different, but there's a holding it really lightly because you know the next moment is going to shift again and you're just going to laugh at it. It's a strange thing. It's like I almost look forward to it. Something comes up and it's like, "Oh, look at that, I'm still reacting. It's really triggering me. Wow, it's so amazing. My God, my heart is beating fast, I'm sweating. What is this? This is amazing." So to call that suffering—you know, it's half-suffering. (P10)

I probably overplay it by saying that there are these intense episodes of emotional reaction. More often than not, it's quite minor. As the years go on since the shift, they seem to be less often, less intense. But who knows? As soon as I put the phone down there could be some huge intense explosion, for all I know. And it's kind of like taking the importance off of whether or not that happens. I think at first there was such an identification with the shift, and with enlightenment or whatever—the idea that these things shouldn't occur, that I should be so conscious, and so forth. And now it seems like such an unimportant thing. It's just part of the game, really. (P15)

In any event, once that fear of death essentially left, there's a freedom to live for the first time. You know there's no self there that's suffering. So if negative emotions arise, there's no grasping onto them, there's no trying to figure them out, there's no trying to see how I can get rid of them. They're just what's happening. It's hard to really get upset—the futility of it. I don't have much anxiety at all. Not much torments me. I might have a craving for something. When the craving happens, I realize it came from that unmanifest realm, so it doesn't have the kind of power it did before. (P12)

Eleven participants claimed that emotions in their neurotic form have disappeared, and that normal emotions still happen but do not cause suffering. The absence of worry and anxiety appears to be a key trait in their experience.

Yes, suffering is gone but I got to make clear that by suffering I don't mean physical pain, I don't mean emotions, although some emotions go, like what I call "echo emotions." The way I look at emotions, there are primary biological

emotions—fear, anger, sorrow, things like that. Then there’s a whole bunch of echo emotions that aren’t rooted in some reaction to what’s going on *now*—there’s guilt, anxiety, apprehension, loneliness, things like that. Those echo emotions no longer arise. Primary emotions arise, but the difference is, they don’t cause suffering. (P4)

I was a big worrier. A lot of that shifted hugely. Some of the worrying stuck around a little bit for a while—less and less and less as the years have gone by, over the last ten or so years. (P8)

Existential fear, angst, and despair, as daily moods or reactions to life events, are absent.

As the following narratives further indicate, these participants commonly claimed that anxiety either does not arise anymore or is now experienced as a very transient and insignificant phenomenon.

You never know what’s going to show up and there’s never any resistance to what shows up. We think we’re going to catch an airplane and we show up at an airport, and the airline has declared bankruptcy and so there’s no longer a plane to depart. There’s not even a thought that takes place in it. The body takes action and there just isn’t any emotional tag or stress with it. If I ran into something in the middle of the night, and hurt my shin, my body would hurt. That’s form. I would feel the pain of it, but no, there’s no suffering left. That’s the miracle of it, can you imagine?

Interviewer: “Do you experience anxiety of any kind, on any occasion?”

No. (P6)

Interviewer: “Do you suffer?”

No. It’s more like my being is like a satellite dish, and I’ll have a little bit of a disturbance pattern and it’s quite subtle. It’s not like it would show on the outside of my life. It’s a disturbance pattern on the inside and I’ll know. It’s like there’s a movement in life where if I feel at all like I’m having to push, that’s already a signal and I’ll let go.

Interviewer: “Was your experience of emotions more painful prior to awakening than now?”

Yes, because I think probably what I was experiencing more than just pure emotion was resistance to emotion. And now I have a sense of an open fluidity, almost watery, that just allows. It’s almost like emotions have become so refined and immediate that they arise quickly and they pass quickly. (P13)

A huge change in the context is the elimination of the fearfulness and anxiety that are the fruit of the belief that I am at stake and at danger here. So yes, my life has changed [*suddenly laughs with great abandon*] like night and day!—*over time*. Whatever it is, if it’s here, it doesn’t disturb me. Whatever arises here, truly I see as the *vichara*, as the endless capacity of reality to manifest as infinite form,

infinite shape. The neurotic part of these things is gone. By neurotic I mean the part that sees me as having some stake in what they mean and what they are and what they do and what they portend and all that. There's no neurotic anxiety. There's no neurotic fear of the future. There are experiences of anxiousness and fearfulness that are just natural to existence in the human body. If you didn't have that you'd probably run out in traffic and get run over. (P5)

That's a huge difference from how it used to be. Things move through really quickly. There's not the holding on and attachment in the same way. Suffering has really changed for me because I stopped resisting it. (P3)

There's not anything that can stick for very long anymore. So, yeah, once in a while these—quote—“anxieties” about money arise, but for me they're more like passing momentary concerns, because everything happens in this open wall-less container—this open, transparent vessel of awareness. (P14)

In the following segment of an interview, Paul (P11) explains why nondual consciousness for him means the absence of all worry.

I experience emotions, but I wouldn't say I suffer them, because it's like weather.
Interviewer: “Do you experience bad moods or bad days, in which you might be prone to getting angry at people, and so forth?”

That doesn't happen. Because there are no days and there are no people in the fundamental sense. All those things are names for aspects of this ongoing experience. I have absolute certainty—I mean “certainty” is a weak word—I have certain knowledge of the unity and harmony of all phenomena and so the expressions don't matter to me, they're not threatening. In terms of any kind of emotions or apparent occurrences or whatever, it's just irrelevant because the essential harmony cannot be threatened, it's inviolable. And yet anything can appear. Disharmony can appear. Strong emotions can appear but they aren't a cause for suffering because they are not a problem. They aren't threatening anything or damaging anything. It's just you can have a sunny day or you can have a hurricane.

Interviewer: “Are there any worries that pop up, like how am I going to pay the rent?”

No. It just doesn't compute. Because there aren't any separate circumstances. Semantically we can describe our life in terms of all these apparently separate circumstances—rent that has to be paid and money that happens to be made. All of these things seem to be separate things but they're actually like Kipling's elephant. It's this one phenomenon that we're throwing all these names and descriptions, and this one phenomenon is already taking care of itself. So I might not pay the rent and I might get evicted and I might become a street person and starve on the street. But that's not a problem because if that happens then it can't be otherwise. Because there's no separate pieces that can be changed or rearranged, simply because there are no separate pieces.

Interviewer: “You said that when you were diagnosed with cancer it created a psychological upheaval. If that or any similar kind of thing happened now, would it create the same psychological upheaval?”

Wouldn't matter. No, I don't care if I get cancer again. It doesn't matter in the least. Because I know that it wouldn't be a deviation from This. This is always complete, always full, always 100%, and it always will be and it always has been. And seeing that, I know it for a certainty so it's independent of circumstances. The unity of what I actually I am, what this actually is, the unity of God—I mean whatever, as I say, words fail—knowing that certainly, it's independent of circumstances. It's not like “You know everything will be okay as long as this doesn't happen.” Because what happens isn't actually happening. It's just a flickering apparition as a reflection of this one being which is adamantine. It's like a diamond. It's impregnable. It's invulnerable, it's eternal. It's beyond vulnerability.

Interviewer: “Is there not even a shred of this former dualistic identification with what you called the ‘harmonic’ called Paul that would even have a fearful thought such as ‘Oh no, I’m going to die’?”

Not a shred. This is subtle to talk about. Because looking at me from outside you might think there is. Because functionally and behaviorally the psychological mechanisms and all of that are essentially still there and they have expression and have function within their milieu. There's responsiveness and all of that. If someone cuts me off in traffic I can say “You asshole” and this kind of thing. But it's totally impersonal—transparent. (P11)

In summary, participants indicated that they recognize any emotion as a manifestation of consciousness rather than a sign that something is wrong. Yet, for many participants, this recognition did seem to eliminate much emotional reactivity and virtually all sense of psychological struggle. In connection with the removal of cause for personal suffering, participants also reported a changed perception and experience of interpersonal relationships.

Unitive relationships. According to 13 participants, the realization that there is no separate self allows for deep acceptance of what appear to be separate “others.”

Participants indicated that they experience others fundamentally as facets of the same absolute essence, manifesting as diverse human personalities. Narratives indicated that

this noetic context gives rise to a sense of sacred intimacy, as well as reverence for the diversity that appears within unity.

The intimacy is just extraordinary. You can imagine if you and I were here speaking without the idea of being separate from one another, how intimate that might be. Intimacy just walking on the beach with what appears to be others walking in the opposite direction, it's just such a rich intimacy. I recognize it as this extraordinary essence. And it remains a complete mystery. If there's only this essence that I am, everything is *really* intimate. (P6)

We are this one awareness, this one being. This was clear to me beyond a shadow of a doubt. And we get to have the sense of multiplicity and I-and-Thou, the sacred duality within the context of nonduality. (P14)

Two participants explained that in the intimacy of nondual consciousness, they no longer experience an interpersonal relationship as a *thing*. Instead, what appears to be a dyadic relationship is recognized as a spontaneously unfolding process within unity.

As a blanket statement I could say [nondual consciousness] transformed every area of my life, totally. In terms of relationships it transformed every aspect of relationship, because before when I was in a relationship there was always a certain amount of unease or of assessment of myself or assessment of the other person. There *was* relationship, and in a certain sense since then there hasn't been relationship—there's just being. And so relationship is something that happens but it's not any different than being alone. So if I'm sitting alone in a room or sitting with another person or sitting with a crowd of hundred people, it's the same experience to me. So it's effortless. Basically everything happens on its own, is my experience. So there's no effort, there's no stress or strain or concern or preparation or strategizing or anything like that because it's all being done. It's like this one ongoing, breaking wave and all events are just embedded in that. And that includes relationship—it's kind of a blanket statement but that includes all aspects of my life. (P11)

I used to think in the past that relationship was like a thing, that you had and then you could lose, and that you had to work on—like winning Sarah, that there was some place to get. We'd see each other on a date, and I'd be wooing her with plans for the future and a whole fantasy about what our life might be like together. And if she seemed to be fitting into that fantasy I was on top of the world. If she seemed to be not fitting in, I would be crushed. Now with my wife today I think we have a wonderful relationship, not that we don't ever have disagreements like any other couple. But the fundamental difference is this: I wake up in the morning and there's this wonderful woman in my bed—amazing! And we go through the day and she wants to do this and I want to do that and I don't understand why she

wants to do this, so it's a *mystery* here. So each one moment, it's not a relationship. This *is* the relationship. There's nothing beyond that, you know? At the end day, it's "*Wow, what an adventure!*" I don't want to be romantic about it. They're little things, but that's what life is made up of.

In the following three accounts, nonseparation is associated with more authentic, harmonious relating with others, instead of relating through fear, nonacceptance (of self or other), and mind-made conflict.

Through just this deep acceptance of all that, I fell into a deepening in myself where other was part of self; where mind, where just everything was part of self, where there is no separation there.

Interviewer: "Your partner was also you, also self?"

You read it in books and you think it's some huge experience like "Oh I could never have that," or "Wow, no separation between me and you?" but it doesn't feel like that. But I guess it's hard to write it in a way that people could really get it. It's not a big thing. So what was that like at the time? It's so hard to put into words, that experience of nonseparation. When that shift happened it was in some ways similar to the shift that had occurred a few years before but at a much deeper level. So there was just such an okayness in my being, which was missing in the consciousness shift.

Interviewer: "Prior to awakening, how did you experience others?"

I always was kind of withdrawn and fearful with others, with people, and felt like there was a definite separateness between me and other. (P3)

In other relationships too, I think there's been more and more acceptance of how everybody is, and also the acceptance of, if I do or don't want to be in the presence of someone. If I don't want to go on a hike or the movies or the camping trip, it's really easy to say no, whereas before there would be a fear about hurting someone's feelings or whatever. Now it's just the truth moving. It's not about a "me" and it's not about a "them." It's just, it's obvious or it's not. I have no idea why I say no and why I say yes. I just trust it. (P2)

There was this sense of really beginning to just really let people be who they are, let them have their own experience, to not want to change them in the ways I used to want to change them. Something was so okay with them as they are that it didn't need to make them any different. And that was hugely different, and people sensed that really readily. It's okay to be as they are, if they're having a crappy day, or great day, if they're in a mood or not in a mood, or they don't like you right now or they do like you right now, but just that it's all okay. That began to change relationships over time . . . they really started to change and deepen and soften and grow. (P8)

What was keeping true intimacy from happening was that self-concept in the head and that need for somebody to give me something. And the moment you don't give me what I need, whether you're a friend or a spouse, there's a turning away from you. Or, if there's a self-conscious aspect, there's that self-concept there. That thing dies and then there's just sort of emptiness relating to itself and that's what allows intimacy to happen I think. When the sense of a self dies, it's realized that there's nothing here, which sounds like an awful thing but it's the greatest thing. You see that the dream in the other is not real so you can't really blame them for that. Everything is just arising and that's just the conditioning. That's not who they are. If they understood that they were love—they don't see it and that's fine—but it's hard to make a problem out of that. (P12)

The following theme further defines the basis for interpersonal harmony and intimate communion with all things.

Unitive love. All 16 participants described a profound sense of love and appreciation that emerges from the gnosis of oneness. Love was described as an aspect of peace and harmony, and as being identical or intrinsic to consciousness.

Love is a really fundamental quality of this awakens, of this being-ness. The fact that it really is ultimately one being—it's in the nature of something to love, to be connected, to feel this bond with itself. (P10)

That's what the energy is that's pouring off of everything and it's what I'm made of now—not necessarily the personality that's still there, but the essential being is that love. It's what binds everything together, that vibrational energy of love. . . . The ground, that love, doesn't get *more*. But the interference that the personality creates, that makes it so that that love can't express through this person, relaxes, stops running, stops slamming the door, just breathes. (P1)

If there was one word that I would use to describe nonduality, it is *love*. To me it's not the sense of "all one." It's more the sense that there's no self, and when there's no self there's only love, and that's still a crude way to say it. The self is the thing that keeps love from realizing itself because the self is so interested in its own personal gain. (P12)

For Simon (P5), the spontaneous urge to share the possibility of spiritual liberation with others is a profound expression of unitive love:

The idea of personal liberation is literally nonsensical. Humanity is one creature. So long as misery and suffering and misunderstanding persist in any part of that one creature, they persist in me. Love without condition doesn't care. That's what it means to be without condition. It cares not upon what it shines its light. So the

effect of this is to have great interest in speaking to you in whatever form you appear and sharing with you this great, good news that it's really not necessary to keep on the way you've been. All you have to do is look at yourself. You don't have to go through a lengthy period of initiation, you don't need money, you don't need anything except to look at yourself. And since you're never absent, that's actually pretty easy. So that's the love. That's the love that has no partiality whatsoever. (P5)

Three participants distinguished between the dramatic effusion of bliss in nondual realization and the abiding unitive love that is intrinsic to mature nondual consciousness.

One of the other things that was happening in this awakening wasn't just this kind of voided-out sense of seamless homogenous bliss-awareness. There was also—spontaneously—incredible gratitude and appreciation and sense of empathy and solidarity with all the expressions of this one Divine, namely the gazillions of beings, and a real kind of *parabhakti*, the supreme *bhakti* [spiritual love], of being completely devoted to our source, which is not an object or a separate person or any kind of entity. I am Self—not a himself or a herself, or itself. And yet there is a spontaneous devotion to the Self, *atmabhakti* . . . And that keeps the heart open all the time. It's so delicious to me every moment that the One is manifesting as all of us, as the many. (P14)

Then there were a number of awakenings after that which were much quieter which I would just describe briefly as just awakening of the heart to love, this love that doesn't know any boundaries and doesn't know any distinctions. It's just the sense of warmth, like a nectar that runs through the body. There had been a lot of kundalini and all that jazz when I was doing self-inquiry with Ramana, and great devotion to *Shiva* and *Shakti*, but this was not so much that. It wasn't about the chakras—it was the truer heart. It was like it opened and there was a letting in of other people to what at that point I called the tabernacle of the heart, which up until that point was reserved in my mind for God alone. It was like whatever defenses I had had against that were obviously gone and there was just this incredible vulnerability. But then there was the recognition that it's all God so then it was all right. (P2)

Right after the big awakening experience the love was very intense, it was very overpowering. It was the love of what is. It was like, how can you not love everything?—because you are everything. But to me that very intense, overpowering love can be just a byproduct of that sense of self leaving. The actual nondual love *is that*, but it's not so overpowering. It's actually embodied. It becomes functional. The way that I experienced it at first was a crushing, overpowering love and it was even hard to do my job. It's so overwhelming that you just want to sit and bask in it. It's a very warm, intense, glowing feeling. It's a sense that this whole thing is me, and the whole idea that I was a separate person is so ridiculous. When you realize that the other that you've been struggling

against and comparing yourself to and judging, is not other than you, the only thing that could be there is love. You're seeing yourself in the other. It was a feeling but it was a whole-body experience of love. It wasn't attached to a particular object. This is a love that just is. It's not waiting for an object. It's not looking for anything in return. It's not looking to gain anything, so therefore it's total love without an object, although it's in love with every object because all objects are itself. (P12)

The following narratives distinguish between the “fantasy” or “surrogate” nature of conditional love and the unconditional nature of unitive love.

The pure awareness that I am—energetically it becomes so amazingly heartfelt. Upon the awakening that was one of the first words that were completely redefined, was this unconditional love and peace that I am. Now there's no difference really, other than it just allows this incredible true compassion—well let's just call it true love, unconditional love and peace—to flow, *to be the world*. We all know what relative love is and you're looking for it in the world of form and you need something to satisfy it or complete itself, looking for love outside itself. That's the great enigma. You are unconditional love, which is why you can't find it. (P6)

My previous experience of love and these kinds of things was centered on fantasy, centered on romantic notions. I have come to see now that everything is always in a continual state of harmony and a continual state of essentially love, essentially unity. . . . And likewise, the personal notion of love, the personal notion of security, the personal notion of all of these things as emotional stances or as psychological positions is a complete fantasy which is generated by and predicated upon the idea of a separate self. When the separate self is seen not to actually exist as a discrete entity, all those notions just become meaningless, they dissolve because they're just not the case. So then there's an even emotionality which could be called love, it could be called harmony, it could be called peace. It's an effortlessness. (P11)

I think prior to awakening to the love which is almost an invisible love, I would say most of what I experienced prior to that had been like a surrogate love, something that comes and goes. It probably had a lot more to do with need and desires and fleeting moments of having them met, but was very temporal. It almost felt like a true love affair, my primary relationship, began in the willingness to turn the cheek from outside to be kissed, into the inner invisible kiss. And I had times where it was almost like I was moving from a place of the wonderful, blissful, ecstatic qualities that arise in the recognition of oneness—but at the same time it's still a state that comes and goes—I was moving from that kind of love into a more empty love, if that makes any sense. (P13)

The foregoing themes describe a number of positive qualities that arose for the participants in the years that followed nondual realization. Interviews inquired as to how awakening, and the emergence of these qualities, has affected their cosmological outlook and view of human development, if at all.

Awareness of positive cosmology. Ten participants claimed to have an experiential understanding that reality is defined by fundamental benevolence. Their comments portrayed this benevolence as being equivalent to love or joy, and as an intrinsically self-illuminating, self-remembering, and creative force.

My perspective is that all there is, is goodness. All there is, is truth. All there is, is beingness. All there is, is love. The only question is, how much of it are you experiencing right now? (P10)

Scholars will tell you that the body-mind, the world of form, is only within the body-mind and it's true at one level, but who is this body-mind? It is the heart of all being. And so in your willingness to be totally transparent, this new world appears that has always been right here in plain sight. And everyone's suffering and it's needlessly so. When the light shines through it's able to shine clearly through without the veil of the ego and all its ideas. If we're willing to investigate it, we see that this darkness, this negativity, can't prevail in the light of consciousness. There is only light, and in fact that's all that's ever been. (P6)

This *is* a divine comedy, not a tragedy. It has a happy ending. All forms or points of view of awareness will awaken back to awareness, because *there is only awareness*.

Interviewer: "You speak about this with a conviction that is not intellectual—" Absolute. It's clear to me that this whole cosmos is shot through with absolute goodness. It's a positive reality, not just a negative reality. I've called it the *absence* but that's the most positive way I can speak of it. (P14)

In my opinion the drama of human life is simply a game of hide and seek. Consciousness hides itself from itself and then goes out looking for itself and finds itself. It's fun. Let's remember the whole mystical path is about joy, it's about fun, it's about bliss, it's about discovering that inherent joy that is the joy of an artist creating. Why does the artist do it? I don't have an answer to that. It's not a joy like "Ha, ha," always being like Hare Krishna people hopping around. It's a deep *appreciation*. Like coming out of a movie that's been a tearjerker, that made you cry, that moved you, and you've experienced all this, and you have a deep

appreciation. You say, “Wow, what an artist.” That’s the cosmos. That’s God. (P4)

Interviewer: “Do you find life more enjoyable because of this spontaneous intelligence?”

Well, it’s very amusing! It’s fun. Reality has this *incredible* creativity and intelligence and multivalence. It’s the ultimate toy store. And it’s its own kid in its toy store. That’s one way of describing what’s happening here. God is just having a blast being God. And it’s just totally fun. And when you see that, you share in the fun. It’s totally fun. It literally is all a play. It’s all an entertainment, it’s all a diversion. And when you see the truth of that from its actual perspective, it’s absolute enjoyment—because there’s nothing but enjoyment. Enjoyment is literally what this is made of. Consciousness is enjoying itself and that’s what any situation or experience consists of. There’s nothing other than that. (P11)

The beingness within it loves this whole experience of identification and form and everything from making love to breaking your leg. It loves it. (P10)

The whole of creation arises from the urge in awareness, the urge within reality to see itself. The only urge that appears within reality is the urge to see itself, to experience itself. The whole of creation is a metaphor for you. There’s only you. (P5)

While acknowledging that the universal consciousness has the tendency to forget itself within its manifestation and then remember itself, 5 participants pointed out that because consciousness is already whole and perfect, its purposes cannot be reduced to relative ideals such as collective human awakening or world peace.

I don’t think I had a clue what life’s purpose was and to this day I don’t, but I think it’s a moot point at this stage. Enjoy it, you’re here. Awakening doesn’t give you meaning. It just makes meaningfulness and meaninglessness irrelevant. It’s all so illusory. Even the return is an illusion. Just as much as the idea of being separate is an illusion. The return to God is inevitable in the sense that it already is. No one returns to God. That’s the whole point. There isn’t a someone. There isn’t a separate God. (P8)

It’s easy to turn [nonduality] into a philosophy and kill the love. The love is only here and present now. It’s what is—right here, right now. One thing that I see is that I don’t know. If there’s one thing that goes along with this love, it’s the sense of not having any idea where this is going. We never knew to begin with. We were just telling stories about that. But it’s a realization that this is the natural, effortless way of being. I don’t see past this moment so I don’t say, “Wouldn’t it be nice for humanity to awaken,” because dreaming in that way almost wants to

obscure the love. It feels as if you enter back into a dream, as if you know. If anything, this is like a not-knowing. (P12)

What I hear afoot in the world is that there is this awakening happening within the world and we're coming into full consciousness and that this is the natural process of development of humanity. And I would say that's just one of humanity's arrogant views that it's somehow important. Love has a way of simply being, and being is actually very simple. And I don't think it has any goal. Form just is, and the formless—why not create? Love does seem to have this natural urge to create. (P9)

Everything in this universe is spontaneously conscious, perhaps for no reason, and it's just that there's this opportunity for it to know itself and for this thing called waking up to happen, and so it's happening. It's like there's this spontaneous joy of experiencing that and so it happens. I don't really see that there's any divine plan for that or that it's necessarily going any particular way. (P15)

Interviewer: "Does reality ultimately want to completely remember itself?"

Who can know? I think that from its perspective it doesn't bother to differentiate. It doesn't care. It is itself and it knows it is itself so it can forget itself for all time forever and it would still not have lost anything. And it knows this. It's all fun for it because there's nothing being ventured. There's no real threat. There's nothing to lose, in the most profound sense, and it knows this. It's whole, it's absolutely whole. It's inconceivable. And when you see it, it throws you for a loop! (P11)

In conclusion, the data presented in this chapter describe the ontological shift to nondual consciousness, followed by the expression of nondual consciousness in stable traits of perception, valuation, and other aspects of experience. To briefly summarize, the themes associated with nondual realization and stage transition were as follows:

- Disillusionment with egoic consciousness
- Sudden realization of nonduality
- Extraordinary energetic-affective opening
- Deconstruction of egoic structures
- Temporary causal fixation

The themes of lived experience, reflecting the stage of nondual consciousness, were defined as the following:

- Nondual ontology
- Awareness of spiritual immortality
- Disidentification from mental constructs

- Timeless awareness
- Nondual action
- Beatific peace
- Spontaneous joy
- Absence of neurotic suffering
- Unitive relationships
- Unitive love
- Awareness of positive cosmology

The following chapter offers interpretations of the data.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In light of thematic analysis, the experiential qualities disclosed by the participants suggest a clear distinction between egoic consciousness and nondual consciousness. With great consistency, participants' narratives described egoic consciousness as the stage that is defined by identification with an objectified self-construct. Participants at various times referred to the self-construct as "ego," "the me," "mind," "mind-made self," "dream," or "the story." With the mental construction of self as an object, all creatures and things were also perceived as discrete objects, separated and defined by their material qualities. In short, the typical participant had understood him- or her-self as a psychophysical persona; physically concerned with health and survival in the face of impending illness and death, and psychologically concerned with finding lasting relief from more or less constant emotional discord and mental perplexity.

The results of this study suggest that the transition from egoic consciousness to nondual consciousness is marked by one or more overtures in which a new noetic theme is stated with the force of stark contrast to the old. The overarching theme of these revelatory overtures is psychological rebirth in nondual consciousness. During the systematic upheaval that ensues, residual tensions between incompatible modes of ontology are resolved in the stabilization of nondual consciousness as a stage. A predictable pattern of deconstruction in the process of awakening was also found by Brown (1986) in his study of diverse meditative traditions, as well as by Nagle (2004) in her multiple case study.

Findings indicate that stabilization can be more accurately likened to a process of subtraction rather than addition. Consciousness as such does not adapt, expand, or fixate

itself into a higher or wider modulation of awareness. Rather, as consciousness spontaneously disentangles itself from identification with all modulations of experience, it recognizes its nature as the formless permanence in which all forms of experience happen. In the atmosphere of this self-recognition, psychological structures and processes are transformed.

The sharp qualitative difference between the egoic and nondual modes of being was highlighted by transitional phenomena—processes of nondual realization—that were overwhelming in their immediate impact. Moreover, these processes proved to be consistent in their long-term effects, which suggests a change at the stage level. Experiential qualities defined a new, stable stage of development in which consciousness knows itself as the source and substance of all phenomena in the manifest world, from subtle, psychoenergetic processes to gross, physical forms.

Most importantly, the long-term effects of nondual realization strongly indicated a progressive, rather than regressive, trend of development. The trend is not marked by neutral, negative, or merely novel changes, but by a thoroughly positive expansion in noetic capacities. Central among these capacities is an ontological apprehension of reality that is not only more accurate than past modes, but which constitutes a decisive exchange of illusion for actuality.

Among the many reasonable indications, to be discussed later in this chapter, that a veridical and fundamental shift to nondual self-knowing took place is the uncontrived and unparalleled drama of the breakthrough. Participants' narratives revealed that the initial drama of transpersonal self-discovery did not lapse into a mere variation on past structures. Rather, it heralded the formation of stage traits that do not appear in egoic

consciousness, except as transient peak experiences (Palmer, 1999; Palmer & Braud, 2002; Wade, 1996). These stage traits reflect the quintessence of psychological well-being and maturity. Considered together, the experience of nondual realization and its long-term effects strongly support the premise that development reflects the movement of consciousness toward self-recognition and expression of its intrinsic qualities.

The results of this study suggest a portrait of stage development and stage traits that is essentially consistent with the researcher's hypotheses and the key premises of the transpersonal literature. There are also significant resonances in the data with the results of similar research. Interviews asked the participants for a historical narrative of their spiritual development and also for comments on their present experience. Thus, a broad range of data was elicited on aspects of transpersonal development that could be treated separately in future studies. However, inquiring into participants' past experiences of egoic consciousness and nondual realization allowed the researcher to put their present experience of nondual consciousness into developmental context. Without this context, the ontological basis for participants' current traits of experience would be less clear.

Other transpersonal studies (e.g., Rich, 2005; Palmer, 1999; Palmer & Braud, 2002; Park, 1991) have described the benefits of exploring the range of states and processes that may appear on the horizon of egoic consciousness as experiential glimpses of a new ontology. By adopting a developmental focus, this study has identified features of a developmental stage that is rooted in the nondual ontology described in classical mysticism. It has also provided data on the role that certain experiential breakthroughs play in stage transition.

As described in the literature review, noetic theories of development put forth the premise that something we have been calling “consciousness,” for lack of a better term, is the causal ground of manifest reality and the driver of development throughout all states and stages of awareness. Again, consciousness is not defined in this study as a principle that is separate from that which is understood as matter. Using the metaphor of time, the formless, causal ground of consciousness can be understood as existing *prior* to all material appearances. However, in the nondual view, formlessness is not *other* than form, and it cannot actually be separated in time from form. Therefore, the premise is not that mind precedes matter; it is that mind and matter are simply different aspects of consciousness. As Wade (1996) noted,

Whether the nature of reality is mind or matter has been debated for centuries. The important point here is that the presumed mutual exclusivity of these two positions is dualist. Nothing is mutually exclusive in a nondualistic epistemology. (p. 293)

The noetic view carries the logic that if consciousness is the substance of reality and the driver of development, then stage unfoldment would be marked by key, qualitative shifts in awareness, moving not only toward more complex structures but toward full self-consciousness, which must be unity consciousness. Alternatively, if awareness were merely an epiphenomenon of physical development—which presumes a dualism whereby matter precedes “mind”—then it would not be possible to imagine that the ultimate qualitative change in identity lies in the nonlocal self-awakening of *reality-as-consciousness*, locally arising through the human form.

The results of this study describe the long-term impact of this primal awakening, cascading down through the structures of the psyche. The noetic premise is that this cascade effect occurs because all aspects of the psyche and soma are manifestations of

consciousness. The study theorized that a teleological urge toward self-awareness gradually pushes consciousness out of the confining structure of dualistic perception.

If the noetic paradigm is accurate, then constriction of consciousness would be *meaningfully* registered in human experience as estrangement from meaning, being, and value; fundamental dissatisfaction; and various psychological pains associated with transpersonal birth. As Washburn (1995) described in detail, the process of existential suffering reflects the movement of consciousness toward experiencing its ground nature, whereby the psyche is situated in the wider field of disidentified sentience. Instead of being driven by the blind force of consciousness's prereflective identification, psychological functions become imbued with the power and depth of self-illuminated consciousness.

In support of these premises, the results suggest that the transition from egoic consciousness to nondual consciousness can be considered to have begun when consciousness becomes irreversibly and gravely disenchanted with the illusory egoic framework of identity and value. This theme was described in Chapter 4 as *egoic disillusionment*. Disillusionment implies a newfound recognition of illusion or a loss of naïve faith and trust, sometimes through painful confrontation with reality. Though disillusionment can be accompanied by intense suffering, suffering in itself does not constitute disillusionment.

Whereas suffering is generally defined by a deficiency of awareness, the psychic pain that may accompany disillusionment pays off in the intensification of awareness. In that sense, disillusionment is the pain of a death process leading to the birth of awareness, rather than the pain of a chronic ache, the cause of which has not yet been understood.

Participants' accounts presented a pattern of disillusionment that manifested as the spontaneous withdrawal of libidinal investment and implicit faith in the identity project (Washburn, 1995). According to Washburn, disillusionment is a feature of "regression in service of transcendence" (p. 171) that may precede or follow spiritual awakening. The results of this study offered valuable data on this process. Whereas egoic disillusionment can be considered an early feature of regression in service of transcendence that happened *prior* to the participants' awakenings, the results suggest that deeper *egoic deconstruction*—a theme that will be discussed further ahead in this chapter—was a feature that occurred after awakening. Nevertheless, both of these processes can be understood as aspects of regression in service of transcendence.

The data suggest that disillusionment may or may not be recognized, initially, for what it is. Whether participants underwent an inexplicable decentering from the persona and the lifestyle it dictates, or engaged in explicit questioning of self and culture, disillusionment implied a quickening of consciousness that undermined the structures of egoic value. Washburn explained,

During this period, the world loses its meaning, life loses its purpose, and the mental ego loses its presumed substance and justification. The period is one of disillusionment and alienation from the world. Worldly engagements are suspended, and worldly being and value are lost. (p. 172)

Participants experienced disillusionment in a variety of ways. For Paul (P11), the urge toward consciousness expressed itself very early in the life cycle as a recognition of the illusions of 1950s conformist consciousness, and concomitantly, as an urgent need to grasp the essence of life. This urge was essentially fulfilled at age 22, when Paul's interactions with a mystic resulted in a deep awakening. However, another 20 years

would pass before Paul could fully rest in what he described as the utter ease, clarity, and delight of nondual consciousness.

Similarly, but often much later in life, other participants followed their drive for spiritual growth until the urge to discover the nature of existence became all-consuming and fulfilled itself in nondual realization. The theme of egoic disillusionment therefore offers some support for Wade's (1996) description of transcendent consciousness, defined as the stage at which ego-identified consciousness recognizes its entrapment, strongly intuits the fact of nonduality, and yearns for liberation through gnosis. Many participants had reached this point of "no return."

However, disillusionment did not always translate into a stage of focused spiritual seeking. In Kim's (P6) case, disillusionment did not give rise to spiritual longing, or even to the intuition that a profoundly different and deeper awareness was available and would soon emerge. Kim's sudden awakening, during an aerobics class, was simply preceded by the spontaneous onset of inner dispassion—decathexis of self-image and world-image—that contrasted with her lifelong outward involvement.

One of the research subquestions asked how stage transition unfolds. The theme of egoic disillusionment suggests that a powerful awakening is often presaged by the initiatory crumbling of the egoic identity project. This shift is a preparation for an infinitely broader ontology to reveal itself. The results confirm that disillusionment can express itself through a variety of experiential phenomena. Indeed, the diversity of life circumstances in which disillusionment occurred leaves open the question of why it happens to a particular person at a given point in time.

The results indicate that disillusionment and awakening can happen at a young age, well before egoic consciousness has ripened into the late egoic stages of authentic consciousness and transcendent consciousness (Wade, 1996)—though many cases did reflect that basic trend. For example, due to a sports injury, Theo (P14) was beset with a classic, severe case of existential ennui during his early teen years, rather than in adult maturity as some theoretical narratives (e.g., Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986) suggest is the norm. Both of the participants who awakened at a young age—Paul (P11) and Theo (P14)—reported undergoing a full, life-changing experience of nondual realization. However, they reported that considerable psychospiritual maturation took place in the following decades, allowing the traits of nondual consciousness to stabilize over a longer period of time than that reported by other participants. Given the existence of these early cases of disillusionment and awakening, it seems that a fixed chronological timeline should not be read into theoretical narratives that describe the typical trend of awakening in the latter stages of ego maturity. Stage models could instead be understood as presenting an archetypal structure or mythos of development that can manifest in a variety of forms.

In summary, though the results suggest that egoic disillusionment often precedes nondual realization, it is not clear why the movement of disillusionment and awakening begins when it does. Meanwhile, whether awakening occurs earlier or later in the life process, the thematic data clearly outline a gradual, subsequent process of maturation into the stable traits of nondual consciousness, regardless of how clear and complete the initial revelation was. Thus, the onset of nondual consciousness does not depend on the prior, full elaboration of the late egoic stages described in the literature, but the data indicate

that it does initiate a significant period of transitional processes, in any case. It is possible that the period of transition lasts longer if the awakening happens at an early stage of ego development, but the results of this study are not sufficient to confirm this hypothesis.

The themes of *sudden nondual realization*, *extraordinary energetic-affective opening*, *egoic deconstruction*, and *temporary causal fixation* shed further light on how stage transition unfolds. In addition, these themes help to define the ontological underpinnings of nondual consciousness. One of the hypotheses of this study was that participants would describe having experienced a momentous event or process of nondual realization whereby dualistic identification dissolved and the qualities of nondual consciousness began to gradually replace those of egoic consciousness. This hypothesis was strongly supported by the data.

Only one participant did not report having experienced one or more enlightening revelations of transcendent-immanent consciousness. In Sarah's (P9) understanding, she was born with the fundamental awareness of unity. Sarah was therefore challenged to adjust to the fact that people were apparently pretending to be separate from each other. For the rest of the participants, nondual realization was a stunning revolution in identity and perception.

Realization exploded the notion that any person or object exists as a separate entity. This discovery was radical. The sense that one's identity is accurately defined by the individual body and mind was completely overturned in the gnosis of absolute, singular spirit, Godhead, or Brahman. Meanwhile, the realization of nondual, transpersonal identity does not diminish the value of relative experience; it only changes the perceived basis for value. Specifically, the thematic data on nondual realization

suggest that awakening elevates and illuminates relative experience by confirming its nature as the absolute itself.

Through nondual realization, participants discovered that relative appearances do not exist separately and are constantly changing. Paradoxically, to discover that the world reflects the dream-like play of consciousness is to redeem the dream of life in the deepest way possible. Meanwhile, from the standpoint of duality, life can be a pleasant dream or a nightmare. In either case, the ultimate significance of the dream is only discovered when the dreamer awakens. According to the participants, even a pleasant dream in duality—a comfortable life or positive turn of events—does not begin to fathom the beauty of the unitive life. Upon awakening to the nature of reality, the confused dream of the ego becomes the lucid dream of God, an exquisite drama experienced through the perspective of a unique human character. The joy, depth, and wholeness of consciousness, which is the world itself, is no longer blocked by the mental screen of separate identity.

Findings revealed that the apparent discord of life is resolved in the awareness of nonseparation. It is significant that participants acknowledged that though the “death” of the representational self may seem like an awful prospect, in their experience it opened the gateway to real aliveness, expression, and intimacy with others—traits of experience are explored further ahead in this chapter. As mystics have testified throughout the mystical literature, participants experienced “emptiness” as “infinitely drenched in the fullness of Being, so full that no manifestation can even begin to contain it” (Wilber, 1986, p. 220). These findings are consistent with Nagle’s (2004) results, which confirmed the contemporary experience of Self-realization—nondual consciousness—as

described in the Upanishads. Here, unity was described as “a fullness which is in everything” (p. 306) and in which the multiplicity of individuals is comparable to many instruments playing the same music. Nagle’s participants reported “seeing the outer world as constantly moving pictures against the ‘one’ universal screen” (p. 306).

The paradoxical, nondual identity found in both studies is consistent with the description of identity in Wade’s (1996) table of characteristics for the Unity stage:

Self boundaries:	None; the self is the same as Cosmic Consciousness
	Recognition of the body-limited self that exists in historical time, but it and the Absolute Self interpenetrate in this material plane (p. 218)

In summary, the data on nondual realization confirmed the hypothesis that participants would not define themselves according to the qualities of the bodily persona and that these qualities would be experienced without attachment or aversion. As a function of multiplicity within unity, the psyche and body continue to embody their uniqueness in the world. As a function of the singularity that includes all diverse forms but transcends their apparent boundaries, consciousness simultaneously recognizes itself as the substance of all things.

Moreover, these findings pinpoint the definitive ontological difference between egoic consciousness and nondual consciousness, as described in the literature review. During the egoic stage, consciousness experiences itself as a discrete, psychophysical “subject-in-here” that is existentially alien to a seemingly objective “reality-out-there.” Through nondual realization, participants discovered newfound freedom in the vastness of consciousness-existence, which was suddenly known as their actual self. Awakening brought about a total sense of release from the burden of imagining oneself as a mortal

creature. This essential ontological shift formed the basis for each of the themes of lived experience to be discussed below.

Nondual realization resulted in the opening of unfathomed energetic and affective potentials. The extraordinary energetic-affective experiences accompanying nondual realization included well known kundalini phenomena, especially bliss (Greenwell, 1988, 2005; Park, 1991). However, the participants also described experiences that stem from nondual realization rather than kundalini. Whereas the kundalini phenomena reflected the energetic impact of awakening—and these have affective qualities—some of the extraordinary affective states reflected the numinous atmosphere and revelatory content of awakening.

Washburn (1995) explained that the formation of the mental ego, which constitutes the ontological illusion of primal alienation, depends upon primal repression of the vast energy of consciousness. For the participants who experienced a very sudden awakening, resolving primal alienation, the consequent lifting of primal repression released a veritable flood of energy. In the egoic stage, consciousness had been held in the thrall of cognitive-emotional activity that was driven by the paradigm of duality. Though it is false, the deeply felt, embodied sense of duality effectively constricts the bioenergetic system. As described by Greenwell (2005) and Washburn (1995), the results of this study suggest that this basic posture of constriction is greatly relaxed upon awakening, though some constrictions may take longer to open. According to Washburn,

Spiritual power ascends into the body, charging it with a vital current. . . .
Spiritual power . . . travels through innumerable subsidiary arteries, called *nadis* in Indian yoga. During the mental-egoic stage of life, most of these arteries are closed off by the many constrictions and occlusions that make up the overall posture of primal repression-primal alienation. These blockages, however, are broken open during regression in service of transcendence and finally dissolved

during regeneration in spirit. By the time integration is achieved, the power of the Ground is able to move freely throughout the body. (p. 232)

Here, the power—kundalini, energy—and the subtle “body” of channels through which it runs should be understood as manifestations of consciousness and expressions of that Ground, rather than as being separate from it.

Moreover, the theme of energetic-affective opening described the deep, numinous joy and relief of spiritual liberation, that is not merely energetic. The resolution of primal alienation through gnosis brought a sense of amazement, lucidity, and numinosity that cannot be equated with kundalini. The data defined gnosis as a supersensory illumination of consciousness that is infinitely brighter than bliss alone, in that it transcends all relative experience. It is an unmatched condition of peace because it is the realization of peace as the essential nature of reality. While awakening at first brought extreme states of bliss, the lifting of primal alienation and repression served, in the long term, to establish a new affective ground in which intoxicating bliss mellows into the steadiness of “serene delight” (Washburn, 1995, p. 228). Likewise, the wild wonder, cosmic laughter, overwhelming love, and spontaneous weeping largely subsided, leaving “grateful joy” (p. 228), deep compassion, and sublime peace as abiding traits of nondual consciousness.

The opening of the psychic system not only introduced the positive qualities of consciousness but also initiated a deep healing of the psyche, bringing residual holding patterns to the fore. The process of *egoic deconstruction* resolved the remnants of egoic consciousness and thereby allowed the traits of nondual consciousness to stabilize. Egoic deconstruction was one of the strongest and most detailed themes to emerge in the data. Nondual realization triggered a thorough purgation of the unconscious mind, healing the many fractures of experience caused by the first, illusory splitting of wholeness into

duality. This process did not erase the personality structure but instead facilitated the release of identification with the mental-emotional patterning of that structure.

The theme of deconstruction supports the premise, put forth in the literature review, that in prereflective identification (Welwood, 2000), consciousness experientially narrows and splits itself and thereby falsely mistakes a fragment of its manifestation to be the whole and essence. The data illustrate how consciousness moves to disidentify itself from the assortment of fragments that were previously understood as “myself.” Further, the data suggested that while the process of egoic deconstruction may begin *prior* to nondual realization, and might then be better understood as a preliminary disillusionment with ego, it certainly intensifies after awakening.

Awakening allowed previously unconscious complexes to rise into awareness and be transformed. From this new vantage point, participants could see how pervasive their suffering had been in egoic consciousness, and therefore how difficult it had been to recognize it as such. This aspect of deconstruction lends support to the argument, made in the literature review, that egoic consciousness inherently contains many normalized forms of pathology, and that the metaphysical implications of these are at last fully discerned in nondual consciousness. Most important, in this respect, is the insight that the egoic illusion of separation is the meta-pathology or spiritual wound upon which the whole structure of personal suffering is elaborated.

Through deconstruction, participants were able to experience formerly repressed feelings in their full intensity. The suffering that emerged ranged from deep-seated discontent with egoic life to emotional pain from early childhood, and sometimes included phenomena that were not related to the participant’s personal history.

Commonly, participants became intimate with their unique psychological conditioning—without regarding it as “me” or “mine”—and also came face to face with the archaic, archetypal energies of human embodiment. Primal “knots” of repressed energy in the forms of rage, terror, and sexual desire erupted into experience and were likewise resolved in the receptive ground of witnessing consciousness.

In addition to energetic and emotional clearing, participants described the “torching” and “dismantling” of the subtle self-images and conceptual constructs that were still supporting the last mental fortresses of separate selfhood. In this process, the postures implied by various beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, imbued with the insular emotionality of separative identity, had become habitual. The familiarity of habit, developing over a lifetime, was then felt as identical to one’s being, rather than recognized as a rut in the experiential ground of awareness.

For the participants who experienced egoic deconstruction, some mental-emotional structures were spontaneously dissolved by nondual realization, while other, perhaps more subtle or entrenched structures faded gradually. Nevertheless, awakening often afforded participants the ability to consistently discern that egoic habits of thought and feeling do not in fact constitute a separate self. The data characterized such habits as arbitrary “positions” that consciousness can take within the vastness of relative experience.

Thus as an effect of consciousness realizing its transcendent expanse, participants reported having access to far greater insight and stability of witnessing. Awakened consciousness provided a clear light of discernment and a wellspring of compassion in which deconstruction, however painful at times, could proceed. Again and again,

participants reported that the unmovable ground of pure consciousness spontaneously called forth and resolved the deepest emotional pains. For several participants, relationships played a primary role in eliciting these pains, but it was clear that awakening, and not life circumstances, was responsible for the unprecedented access to the depths of the psyche.

In some cases, a steady and thorough reorganization of life circumstances followed immediately upon awakening, externally reflecting the inner experience of deconstruction. As the data show, one of the more dramatic examples of reorganization was described by Kim (P6), who reported undergoing a series of very significant “endings.” Yet, from her new vantage point, it was only the “dream-body” that was going through this process. In other words, awakened consciousness was deeply grounded in its own blissful constancy and invulnerability to the temporal movement of events. Despite this marker of genuine transcendence, the data point out that the pure witness was maintaining a subjective reference point. This referencing constitutes an advanced form of dualistic identity, whereby consciousness knows itself only through its unmoving, empty nature—the causal ground. The resolution of causal fixation was aptly described by Kim as a spontaneous movement, happening in its own time, whereby the void turns inside out, so that what used to be the emptiness of the subjective witness is now the very fullness of all that is witnessed.

In classical Advaita Vedanta, the process of coming to mature nondual consciousness is summarized as moving through the following being-realizations: (a) The world does not exist, (b) Brahman alone exists, and (c) the world is Brahman (Ramana Maharshi, 2004). While Kim explained this process in a more technical fashion, other

participants described how causal fixation expressed itself through the personality. For example, Dana (P2) recalled that causal fixation prevented consciousness from moving fluidly in the world—as “Dana”—with its intrinsic wisdom and compassion. She noted that her teacher, Adyashanti (2004), describes the mature expression of enlightenment as “emptiness dancing,” wherein consciousness flows into action, unimpeded by dualistic fixations. Causal fixation was also associated with the fear of losing the newfound freedom of enlightenment. This fear eventually relaxed with the clear recognition that awakeness is not threatened by any experience.

In summary, the data on the awakening process help clarify how nondual consciousness differs from egoic consciousness and how the transitional period is marked by partial transcendence of duality. Of primary importance, the theme of nondual realization supports the premise that egoic consciousness entirely lacks the recognition of consciousness as such. The theme of energetic-affective opening highlighted the psychosomatic impact of awakening and introduced certain essential qualities of consciousness that, it will be seen, inform or become the traits of the nondual stage. These qualities included unconditional love, arising from the unconditioned, unified nature of existence; joy, as a recognition of eternal well-being; and peace, as the security of knowing that existence is an infinite expanse in which nothing is actually imprisoned, exiled, or destroyed by apparent duality.

The themes of egoic disillusionment and the subsequent, deeper phase of egoic deconstruction offer support for Washburn’s (1995) discussion of regression in service of transcendence. Washburn distinguishes between two stages of regression. In the first stage, the mental ego suffers disillusionment, alienation, and withdrawal from the world.

In the second stage, the contents of the prepersonal unconscious surface into conscious experience. Whereas Washburn claimed that these stages may precede or follow spiritual awakening, the results of this study suggest that awakening often occurs after a preliminary disillusionment.

Findings show that awakening creates an extraordinarily transformative vortex that dismantles residual egoic identification. The spontaneous nature of this process is well documented in mystical literature. Thomas Merton's (1961) description touches on several themes voiced by the participants in this study:

For already a supernatural instinct teaches us that the function of this abyss of freedom that has opened out within our own midst, is to draw us utterly out of our own selfhood and into its own immensity of liberty and joy. You seem to be the same person and you are the same person that you have always been: in fact you are more yourself than you have ever been before. You have only just begun to exist. You feel as if you were at last fully born. (p. 227)

Nevertheless, it seems that consciousness tends to get stuck for a time in the abyss of its purely transcendent, formless aspect, before it realizes its more complete and vital freedom as the substance of all forms and experiences. Though the essential shift in ontology was permanent, participants' accounts suggest that remnants of dualistic perception create confusion and prevent the personality from fully expressing the spontaneous wisdom of undivided awareness. In figurative terms, it could be said that consciousness can be decisively awakened from egoic sleep yet remain groggy with the lingering haze of that dualistic dream-state.

In the transitional period after awakening, the whole of the personality comes under the influence of nondual ontology. Participants described the outcome of this subtle process as a condition of complete intimacy with life. In the intimacy of conscious

oneness, the former distinction between spirituality and mundanity has no meaning. All phenomena are recognized and appreciated as the movement of consciousness.

For the premises of this study, the most significant theme derived from participants' present, lived experience was described in Chapter 4 as *nondual ontology*. It should be noted that one participant's comments did not clearly indicate the presence of stable nondual ontology, though this participant had certainly experienced some aspects of nondual realization. This case illustrates some of the difficulties of identifying nondual consciousness and may help reveal this study's provisional means of assessing this stage.

To begin with: In response to questions about their sense of identity, 15 participants expressed a lucid and stable knowing of reality and self as nondual, absolute spirit. Recall that many participants used emphatic terms to convey the authoritative and obvious nature of gnosis. Though some participants were less emphatic in their expression, their statements nevertheless indicated that the essential ontological shift had occurred: There had been a thorough emptying-out of the former, separative self, followed by many signs of deepening into the classic nondual traits.

In contrast, the report made by Steven (P16) was interpreted by the researcher as indicating the absence of nondual ontology—not because it describes the presence of a “functional ego” but because the subjective witness seems to be intact as the factor that divides awareness from the objects of experience. This division creates the struggle between the self as witnessing subject and what the participant calls aspects of the ego or identity:

When I'm having an incarnational experience, I need to know how to engage ego meaningfully, but not identify with ego. So there's a difference between a functional identity and a real, core, essential identity. And so there needs to be some kind of nonduality—what the Buddhists will call *turiyatita*—that I have to

be both witness to the fact of what's happening to me as an incarnated being and I have to participate in the incarnated being as well while holding my identity separate from both of these states. That's part of the struggle. I have an ego which is appropriate and I sometimes have an inappropriate ego where I get invested in ideas I have or a reputation I have, so I am still battling with the appropriate level of ego. It's not like I've transcended ego so totally that I don't experience anger occasionally or jealousy occasionally. Of course I experience those, but I know the difference between dysfunctional ego and a functional ego, having tasted other states of consciousness. (P16)

I differentiate between a great spiritual insight that I have and then the ability to embody that fully in my actions. I know that without a shadow of a doubt to be my deepest truth, that that's exactly the truth. But acting that out in some instances is different. (P16)

Recall, in contrast, how another participant described her sense of self:

What is full embodiment of the Totality? “My body” is now the appearance of the universe and I am the Essence and without contradiction that appearance is also the Essence that I am. (P6)

In other words, here there is no split between essence and appearance, insight and action, witness and ego. Similarly, other participants simply stated that no matter what arises, it is recognized as the Self and causes no internal difficulty or challenge. In nondual consciousness, full transcendence is expressed as absolute immanence; the functional sense that awareness is utterly free amid and as all experiences.

What was clear from Steven’s interview is that he has had powerful realizations of absolute consciousness that confirmed for him his eternal nature as awareness and that he functions with a deep capacity for witnessing and insight. However, the breakthrough from being ontologically centered as the causal witness—and sometimes thrown off center—to the permanently *de-centered* seamlessness of nonduality did not appear to have happened.

Nondual ontology was further assessed and confirmed by the way participants described other traits of their experience, in that each of these traits clearly depended on

nondual ontology. Though the traits described by some participants may not have been as pronounced or detailed as those described by others, there was enough evidence to indicate the presence of these traits in at least their basic form. It is difficult to judge the comparative depth of traits across participants because there are natural differences in participants' style of speech and desire to elaborate on certain topics. For example, whereas one participant described in considerable detail the experience of effortless nondual action in all circumstances, another participant more briefly stated that there is simply no longer the sense of a personal self that is making decisions or that has to control life. Both accounts defined the crucial shift from egoic agency to the nondual action of "life living itself."

With the one exception noted above, each of the participants described *most* of the traits, using very similar language, and clearly gave voice to the feeling that these traits together amounted to a radically different way of seeing and being than they had known prior to awakening. This trend supports the assessments made by the researcher as to the presence or lack of nondual ontology, which is the basis for all the traits. Among the 15 participants who seemed to function at the level of nondual ontology, the researcher intuited differing degrees of clarity, but such intuitions would require further data to substantiate. Perhaps because of the gradual refinement that is implied by the subtractive, integrative process of deconstruction, it is difficult to judge the point at which nondual consciousness has reached its most mature expression, whereas it is relatively easy, in the typical case, to discern the point at which an awakening begins. Blackstone (1997) explained,

A Zen master once told me, "Enlightenment is easy to achieve. But to realize it completely can take many lifetimes." In this way it is something like being

pregnant. You can be a little pregnant and no one would say that you are not “really” pregnant, but you have not yet come to full term. There is a tremendous range between the advanced enlightenment of the masters and the bit of enlightenment of which we are all capable. When we first become enlightened, we have begun a phase of maturity that potentially stretches far ahead of us. (pp. 4-5)

Due to the difficulty of assessing the relative maturity of enlightenment, it is admitted that there may be substantial differences in stage maturity between two participants in this study who nevertheless may both be reasonably considered exemplars of nondual consciousness. As Cook-Greuter (2005) notes, more data will allow finer distinctions to be made within the realm of transpersonal development. Whether this study’s sample reflects beginner’s enlightenment or advanced enlightenment, there is good reason to believe that the same traits would be appear across any group of exemplars: Put simply, each of the traits is well known in the mystical literature and does not appear in the research on egoic consciousness (Cook-Greuter, 1990, 2005).

One of the most significant traits found in this study is the awareness, arising at the time of awakening, that one’s true self was never born, will never die, and has always existed. Data on the theme of *spiritual immortality* confirmed the hypothesis that as a result of gnosis, participants would report having no fear of death whatsoever, in contrast to the fear that was known in egoic consciousness. These traits of perception regarding death were also reported in Nagle’s (2004) thematic analysis of exemplar interviews. In terms similar to those used by the participants in this study, Nagle’s participants insisted that consciousness does not die and stated that “death is a false idea. We are immortal” (p. 345).

Participants explained that nondual realization is essentially the “death” of the self-construct—a construct that entails, most centrally, the belief that the self is limited to

the body. The new ontology liberates consciousness from its former, deep-seated existential fear and perplexity about the nature of existence. Commonly, participants said that freedom from the fear of death gave them, for the first time, the true freedom to live.

The data suggest that egoic consciousness centers on the primal concern with physical survival against inevitable annihilation—a concern that surrounds the psyche in an often imperceptible atmosphere of dormant existential terror. That is, the terror is based on the sense of existing solely as a physical creature. Participants recalled that when all one has is their existential “story” of self, there is naturally a great sense of vulnerability and constriction against the process of life and death. Thus, narratives at times implicated the fear of death as the core of most suffering in egoic consciousness. For example, being free of this fear, participants claimed to have no worry about various major forms of loss that had formerly seemed so threatening, such as financial ruin, destroyed reputation, or serious illness.

These data make the concept of nonattachment more concrete: There is no separate self to defend against loss and death. The Tibetan teacher and scholar Geshe Thupten Jinpa (Watson, Batchelor, & Claxton, 2000) explained enlightenment as the release of the need for security.

The Buddhist nirvana is not just a psychological or epistemological state characterized by a temporary suspension of clinging to a self. More importantly, it is an ontological state, a mode of being where the person has effected a total transformation of his or her being. In such a person there is no longer any psychological and emotional need to grasp at any ground or solidity for security. (p. 14)

At times, this study has referred to consciousness as the ground of being. However, consciousness might just as well be described as the sky of being, a groundless expanse of freedom. Whereas psychological or emotional security means having wings to fly or

having shelter in the storm, the security of enlightenment is in knowing oneself as the sky.

A classic dilemma surrounding awakening is that from the standpoint of egoic consciousness, the ultimate security of nirvana appears to be absolute insecurity. Yet, the data in this study confirm the testimony from many mystics about the surprising nature of divine life. Adyashanti (2000) explained,

If you choose Freedom, life will become magical. The life you'll step into is one in which the Self is in hidden agreement with your humanness. The Self begins to harmonize with your life, and it may proceed in a way that you could never have predicted. The magical part is that the more you let go, the better it feels. The more you step into insecurity, the more you notice how secure and safe it is. Where you just stepped *out of* was unsafe. Everyone is so miserable because they seek security in things that are limited and always moving and changing unpredictably. (p. 21)

Having come to know their being as fundamentally invulnerable, participants gained the perspective to see that egoic consciousness virtually runs on fear. One of the best examples of this dynamic was provided by Kim (P6), who stated that her ego-identity had been based on a well-earned sense of worldly competence, and this prevented her from recognizing how pervasive her underlying fear of life had been. That sense of confidence—Kim had run a large and successful business—stemmed from a high degree of self-actualization (Maslow, 1987), a full expression of personal talents and inspiration. However, in Kim's present judgment, her confidence was only a superficial sense of strength that cannot be compared with the absolute existential fearlessness she now enjoys.

For the several participants who had achieved a successful, developed "self" in egoic consciousness, the subsequent transcendence of mortal identity may confirm Maslow's (1969b) distinction between "'merely healthy' self-actualizers" and

“transcending self-actualizers.” Maslow hypothesized that the latter group would be likely to have “unitive consciousness” and “to be living at the level of Being” (p. 32). This study’s findings suggest that Maslow’s schema was accurate in predicting that transcending self-actualizers would have had

peak experiences (mystic, sacral, ecstatic) with illuminations or insights or cognitions which changed their view of the world and of themselves. (p. 32)

Maslow was precisely right. Through these experiences, participants entered and knew themselves as pure Being and began to live in what Maslow termed the “B-realm” of “intrinsic values” (p. 32). Unlike any other stage, the traits of nondual consciousness directly reflect many of the intrinsic values that Maslow discussed, such as unconditional love, joy, spontaneity, and peace. For this reason, the phrase “Being consciousness” would be an adequate, alternative term for nondual consciousness.

In finding that their fundamental Being is literally beyond death, participants lost the existential anxiety that belongs to Maslow’s “D-realm,” characterized by a basic “Deficiency” outlook and deficiency needs. For the participants, spiritual immortality means that deficiency needs of the body—for food, shelter, survival—are subsumed by, and fulfilled from within, the “metamotivation” (Maslow, 1969b, p. 38) of the B-realm, rather than the level of identification with death anxiety. Whereas Kim’s (P6) former egoic life represented a partial triumph over fear through personal achievement, her current life in nondual consciousness represents freedom from the very source of fear, through the *nonachievement* of true identity, the B-realm.

In summary, the data suggest that the absence of neurotic worry and existential fear in nondual consciousness can be attributed to the awareness of immortal, absolute being. In retrospect, participants perceived the core fear of personal annihilation as the

source of all lesser worries—mental anxieties caused by mortal trembling at the gut level. Taken as a whole, the data indicate that the transition from egoic consciousness to nondual consciousness amounts to a shift from the false ontology of fear to the veridical ontology of peace—Maslow’s (1969b) “B-Love,” or, “the easy state” (p. 35)—where there is no death or separation.

In egoic consciousness, the illusions of limited selfhood and death persist solely by virtue of mental representation. The representational self consists ultimately of ideas and images taken as absolute. In short, even the internalized image of self as the body is a *mental* process, though in egoic consciousness it seems to be a sense-perceived, objective fact. The clearest point in the data on this process was offered by Sal (P4), who stated,

The idea that I have awareness and that this awareness is based on the physical body—all these are mental constructs, they’re all ideas. The body appears in consciousness. There’s no real body there.

Considering how entrenched the belief in *body-as-self* is for human beings, it is unlikely that such an unequivocal statement merely reflects the long-term influence of traditional spiritual training and study upon one’s convictions, as Ferrer (2000) proposed. It has already been seen that most of the participants, including Sal, did not follow a traditional course of spiritual study and were themselves shocked by the discoveries that came with nondual realization. Thus, one of the strengths of the sample is that it includes individuals who came to mysticism from many different directions. Whether they had practiced self-inquiry, meditation, witnessing presence, or nothing at all, participants came to realize how deeply mental constructs distort the perception of self and world.

The data on disidentification from mental constructs substantiate the hypothesis that participants would demonstrate transcendence of fixed, relative viewpoints, through

the recognition that reality is the consciousness in which all viewpoints appear. Participants expressed a clear distinction between the mind and their deeper being, in which the mind has its function. Therefore, nondual consciousness does not have the former, narrow reference point of the separate self from which to evaluate circumstances. The personal reference point still has a practical function in daily life, but it is no longer the basis of identity, meaning, and value. What is essential to grasp from the data is that, in the absence of an alienated mind that is trying to construct happiness or meaning, one has virtually lost the ability to judge events in a self-centered manner.

Moreover, the data indicate that disidentification from thought does not consist merely in the ability to calmly witness mental processes. Rather, it means that habitual mental patterns are no longer experienced as self, as “mine.” Rigid attitudes and opinions do not survive in that atmosphere of nonattachment. Whereas in egoic consciousness every moment of experience had been preemptively filtered through the subjective mental-emotional atmosphere, and this provided a relatively fixed sense of self and world, participants came to experience the present moment as an unmediated wholeness. Participants explained that they used to seek their identity in thought and that various self-interpretations used to create inner turmoil, or a false sense of security and happiness. In addition, habitual mental judgments about others and rigid philosophies about the world created a deep sense of alienation and strain against reality.

According to the data, as long as consciousness had mistakenly identified itself with self-images and sought reality within the sphere of dualistic perception, mental function had been essentially neurotic. One of the interesting features of this study is that two of the participants had at one time been deeply committed to Marxist-Leninist

ideology. Both individuals described their journey as an essentially desperate search for reality, a better world, the truth. Similarly, Zack (P12), who discovered spirituality while overcoming a substance addiction, found that common forms of spirituality and spiritual seeking had the same mechanics of addiction. He found that all seeking, fixation, and addiction has its source in the mind's refusal of reality-as-such. In Zack's experience, even the spiritual search for salvation became, ironically, an exercise in illusory alienation from the omnipresent essence of being.

As theorized in the literature review, participants stressed that mind-identification traps consciousness in the abstraction of past and future. Thus, thought creates the representational, physically bounded self that feels itself estranged from totality in both time and space. From this illusory standpoint, mind-identified consciousness is condemned to seek itself in fantasies about the mind-projected future. These fantasies are determined by what consciousness imagines itself to be, so they center upon whatever the psyche presently imagines will be most gratifying. Completion, or reality, could not be *here-and-now*, because what is perceived as being here-and-now is an objectified self, and an object implies separation.

Having imaginarily reduced itself to a "thing," consciousness can only fantasize about arriving at the totality that it already is. Yet, given that mind-identified consciousness perceives reality in terms of division, egoic fantasies always imagine the state of totality, or fulfillment, in terms of partial conditions. The ego is therefore abstractly alienated within the perceived duality of space and time. Consciousness can only see the intermediate world of abstraction for what it is by recognizing itself, which means to discover its oneness across space and its presence beyond time. In so doing,

consciousness experiences here-and-now as the nondual infinity of its own existence, rather than a portion of space-time inhabited by the bodily persona. This study provided data that describe this process and its outcome.

The data on timeless awareness offered clear support for the premise that mystics fundamentally know reality as the timeless present. The findings strongly corroborate Wade's (1996) summary:

The enlightened person is attuned to the underlying eternity present within each moment through which the transient world moves. All matter and events are seen to exist eternally and to consist of the same divine essence. Cosmic Mind creates into historical time and bounded space what was and is in eternity and absolute space. (p. 214)

Further, the results clearly indicate that transcendence of time in nondual consciousness does not mean the ability to focus attention on the present moment, or movement, of life. For the participants, timeless awareness is the recognition that the here-and-now is truly all that exists: It is the infinity of consciousness itself. Moreover, participants noted that timeless awareness is able to "embrace" relative time, allowing awakened consciousness to relax as the eternal expanse in which life moves.

Thus, narratives revealed that through nondual realization, thought was recognized as the province that conceives time through memory and projection. Participants emphasized that timeless awareness is a visceral gnosis rather than a conceptual understanding alone. It is the shocking discovery of eternal being. In summary, the entry to timeless awareness coincided with the collapse of identification with the thought-stream and its linear, temporal narrative.

Moreover, the data suggest that when consciousness recognizes the constructed nature of thought and time, it no longer restlessly seeks meaning within the framework of

past and future. The experience of time and thought is more lucid and calm than it had been in egoic consciousness. Meanwhile, participants commonly stressed that the mind is not a problem when it is recognized for what it is. From the perspective of awakened consciousness, participants regard thought as a useful tool, whereas when consciousness had been fused with mental activity, thought was subtly or grossly pathological.

Knowing themselves as consciousness, participants stated that they regard patterns of thought as impersonal rather than personal phenomena. Therefore, they are not vitally concerned with, or troubled by, the variety of thoughts that may arise in awareness. As Wade (1995), Washburn (1995), and Wilber (1986) described, cognitive-affective processes are integrated within the trans-rational unity of perception and action. This means that thought and feeling function in a more subtle and complementary manner, whereas in egoic consciousness compulsive mental machination and reactive feelings jostle and reinforce each other.

These findings portray a wholly transformed relationship to the psyche, along with resultant changes in how the psyche functions. In other words, nondual consciousness is not simply a state of peacefully witnessing the normal human chaos of thought and emotion. Chaos is certainly accepted if it is arising, and some participants reported more emotional turbulence than others. However, the general trend in the data is that the psyche does become more balanced and pacific.

While evidencing a refined awareness of their own unique psychologies and a strong capacity to navigate intense states of mind, participants nevertheless did not often speak of “working with” their psychological processes or of defining and analyzing the self according to passing mind-states. It rather seems that awakening had constituted the

final “analysis” of the mind—a summary judgment that utterly freed consciousness from any further attempt to find meaning and identity in the relative phenomena of mental-emotional complexes.

In this regard, a significant point in the data describes a participant who mastered the use of mental intention and visualization to change her life and trained others in this art. Nevertheless, Kim (P6) stated that this ability only served the “mind-made self” and is completely unnecessary to the awakened, pure awareness that has no need to manipulate life. Here, the terms that Kim used to describe this shift are interesting: They describe the mind dissolving into the heart, falling on its knees in prayer. What is seen here and throughout the data is that nondual consciousness is a mode of spontaneous reverence arising from the radiant depths of consciousness. The role of thought in this mode can be likened to the typically momentary experience of beholding a scene that transfixes the mind and renders words an inadequate and unnecessary addition to the moment. In such moments of depth and intimacy, the mind retains its ability to solve a problem if it arises, but the superfluous nature of most thinking is quite apparent.

At the same time, nondual consciousness does not depend upon rejection of thought, or the attainment of a particularly quiet mind. Nevertheless, the data on mental lucidity confirmed that awakening had the long-term effect for participants of reducing mental chatter, to a greater or lesser extent. The data confirm the hypothesis that participants would describe their awareness as being relatively free of compulsive mental chatter and attuned to the immediacy of present experience.

It is reasonable, then, to conclude that nondual consciousness removes the futile impulse to find absolute truth in thought, and the mind therefore tends to relax. For all

participants, the main feature of mental lucidity was that consciousness easily and more consistently rests in its nature as open, thoughtless awareness. Butlein (2005) reported a similar finding of “mental clarity” among several awakened psychotherapists and explained, “the mental and emotional system that thinks, reflects, and orients us, has been ‘dethroned’ and awareness now sits in the pilot seat” (p. 202). Dethroning is an apt metaphor, as it connotes a change in the relative function and role of cognition, rather than the extinction of thought. To put it simply, without the fuel of egoic investment, the mind has no need to engage in so much chattering, worrying, planning, and interpretation. As a short-term effect of awakening, the mind had been immersed in the supernal atmosphere of bliss. As a long-term effect, awakening pulled the plug from the source of obsessive mental activity and grounded the mind in stillness.

Participants expressed that a deep sense of peace is present in the midst of activity. Yet, for many participants, being free of the mental ego does seem to have strongly affected their *choice* of activities. Related to the themes of disidentification and mental lucidity, freedom from former ideas of progress and future happiness led to significant life transitions for many participants and a new way of living altogether.

Participants reported that disidentification from the mind allowed intuitive wisdom to replace the mind’s strategies for controlling the direction of life. As noted in Chapter 2, mystical traditions regard this very palpable “heart” knowing as a latent capacity that is activated by awakening. The data confirm that the functioning of this profound receptivity emerges from the absence of egoic will. The theme of nondual action substantiates the premise that “[Unitive individuals] are no longer driven to be one way or another, to achieve one state or another” (Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 34). Loy (1998)

explained his term, “nondual action,” as a mode of function that is unmediated by the conceptual filters of the representational self. Without the intermediary illusion of separate selfhood, seemingly external, objective events and internal, subjective responses are seen to arise together as a transpersonal whole. Participants’ ways of acting and responding in life are therefore marked by appreciation of whatever is happening. The data for this theme affirm the hypothesis that participants’ lifestyles would be marked by effortlessness, humor, and simplicity rather than resistance, conflict, or a perceived need for control.

Participants claimed to experience an extraordinary degree of ease and trust in life, as contrasted with their experience prior to nondual realization. The sense of trust was described as the absolute knowledge that reality is perfect, rather than a provisional faith that things will work out in the end—that is, that reality is not perfect now but it will be in the future. Thus, the findings bolstered several premises of this study. In the literature review, the absence of egoic striving was defined, in the positive sense, as the quality of resting in awareness. Further, the ability to act in spontaneous accord with the holistic intelligence of life was attributed to mind-body integration, meaning that thought, feeling, perception, and action function harmoniously. Given that behavior would be decoupled from egoic striving, it was theorized that exemplars’ lifestyles would be characterized by selfless motivation, or metamotivation (Maslow, 1969b).

What does this mean in daily life? Throughout participants’ narratives, nondual action was associated with a wonderful sense of liberation. There is an awareness that whatever is happening is what needs to happen. As Hannah (P13) noted, the functioning of her mind and body is entrusted to “perfect divine harmony,” and therefore her

experience is that “this life is given in service.” The data indicate that resting in awareness and trusting in the unity of existence do not depend upon provisional belief and willpower but rather upon the revelation of what reality is and how it functions. In other words, nondual action is a fluid and living fact of experience rather than a chosen approach to life.

As discussed in the literature review, Maharishi (1972) attributed “spontaneous right action” to the fact that awakened consciousness perceives and functions at the level of ultimate order. In fact, the degree to which participants’ descriptions of nondual action match Maharishi’s (1972) model is stunning. Mental function is no longer used to “push” life forward; however, nondual consciousness tends to sharpen capacities for perception, processing, and action. Perhaps the most useful metaphor to describe the role of the mind in nondual action was provided by Paul (P11), who explained that resting in a “neutral state” of full relaxation has quickened his intelligence and functionality and imbued his life with complete effortless in all situations. The living wisdom of awakened consciousness is that there is—finally, in actual experience—no gap between the observer and the observed.

Using unequivocal language, participants affirmed that reality is always whole, complete, and at peace, despite the appearance of worldly discord. Further, they indicated that this being-realization allows the body and mind to deeply relax, and to more fluidly, efficiently express their unique intelligence. Thus, the data lend support to descriptions in the developmental literature of how people at the nondual stage function: “Rather than passivity, the nonattached or impersonal stance allows for greater and more direct and powerful action where action is needed” (Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 34). The findings of this

study also link with Butlein's (2004) data on spontaneity and "unmotivated action" among purportedly awakened psychotherapists. However, Butlein's data were limited in that they reflected the experience of only three awakened psychotherapists, who described nondual action within the therapeutic session. This study has provided data that confirm nondual action as a radical change in functioning across all areas of life.

Paradoxically, the participants experience the determinism of selfless metamotivation as ultimate freedom and genuine fulfillment for the individual personality. In his commentary on the work of metaphysician Hubert Benoit, Joseph Hart (1970) explained this paradox:

Liberation is both a creative state and a state of complete determination. This is possible because the absolute, to which the man of Satori totally responds, is an abstract yet directly felt imperative to harmonious action. Noumena must be brought into life creatively before they become phenomena. Thus a man of Satori is at every moment creative in life, just as an artist who does what is needed is creative in art—each *ful-fills*. Misunderstanding about the relationship between creativity and determinism arises because we think of the guiding idea or absolute imperative at our own level of thought, i.e., too concretely. (p. 156)

The data offer an excellent example of how the paradox of nondual action is commonly misunderstood. Sal (P4) explained that people sometimes ask him why he takes any action at all, if he is already fulfilled by life and has no personal ambition. He stated that instead of acting in order to become happy, happiness now inspires his actions.

Thus, the findings show that the profound sense of well-being in nondual consciousness does not derive from a cognitive focus on positive versus negative conditions. Rather, abiding joy consists in the recognition of inherent plenitude and radiance. Participants experience these qualities as the essence of their being. On the question of suffering, the developmental and mystical literature maintains that the suffering experienced in egoic consciousness does not exist in nondual consciousness.

Thus, this study hypothesized that participants would report that they do not suffer negative emotional states—such as melancholy, anger, fear, or anxiety—and that they would experience an underlying sense of peace, even amid what appear to be negative circumstances. It was predicted that this equanimity would be defined by nonattachment to pleasure and nonresistance to pain. These hypotheses are strongly supported by the results.

During the interviews, exploration of participants' affective experience focused on identifying their typical, daily states of mind, and finding out whether these include emotional suffering. Findings revealed the presence of peace and joy and the absence of neurotic suffering. These can be understood as closely related, interdependent themes. The peace and equanimity described by the participants transcends the ability to patiently withstand negative experiences or to make a relative peace with life. Participants' sense of peace is considered beatific because it consists in a mental-emotional atmosphere that is marked by serenity, fearlessness, and exaltation.

As previously hypothesized, participants claimed to have an unmoving sense of contentment in which there is no need to seek fulfillment through pleasure. Narratives portrayed that the former sense of self, that was trying to locate happiness in a particular experience or situation, dissolved into the field of unitive beneficence. In nondual consciousness, there is no need to “get” something from life, for the simple reason that there is no separate self to get it— there is only life itself. The data allow a clear distinction to be made between the existential insecurity of egoic consciousness and the deep affirmation of life in nondual consciousness.

Participants claimed that peace and joy have their roots in the truth of nonduality, whereas suffering derives from confusion about reality. However, nondual consciousness offers a somewhat paradoxical perspective on suffering. For example, Paul (P11) declared that even suffering is “the joy of God” and that it is this realization alone, ironically, that brings ultimate relief from suffering. The data indicate that participants find themselves free of chronic fearfulness and worry, as distinct from the biological fear reactions and fleeting anxieties that may arise at times. Several participants pointed out the difference between secondary, mind-made emotions that, prior to awakening, had created a chronic haze of negativity, self-loathing, and despair, versus the healthy affective life that marks nondual consciousness. It was commonly admitted that though a situation might cause momentary fear, anger, or grief to arise, these feelings would not cause or constitute suffering, as they had in the past.

Commonly, participants claimed to realize that the whole structure of egoic consciousness is actually based on the primary emotion of fear and that the intensity of their past emotional suffering was largely caused by the ego’s fearful resistance of uncomfortable experiences. Unpleasant experiences were interpreted as threatening to the self. In contrast, participants reported that they now do not see anything as a true cause for fear and that disharmonious feelings quickly resolve themselves. Yet, whether a feeling resolves itself quickly or not does not seem to matter in this mode of being. Though participants distinguished between heavy, painful, or agitated states of mind and light, blissful, or calm states, they explained that all states of mind are transparent in awakened consciousness. Therefore, heavy states remain heavy in comparison to other states, but the sense of heaviness has no real significance or impact. Like everything else,

the heaviness is not solid, is not a thing, but exists only as a note in the song of an empty and total radiance.

As described in the literature, the data on suffering strongly suggest that the duality between pain and joy, or positive and negative experiences, does not exist in nondual consciousness. The transcendence of suffering depends, therefore, on the ontological insight that grasps the nature of all phenomena. In the absence of that insight, egoic consciousness can only imitate the quality of nonattachment, whereas the findings suggest that nonattachment is intrinsic to nondual consciousness. To clarify, gnosis reveals that consciousness is *in fact* nonattached: It is neither defined nor contained by phenomena, because all phenomena are itself. Thus, what appears to be the personal quality of nonattachment arises naturally, over time, as the expression of an ontological fact. Through awakening, consciousness gains the freedom to experience all phenomena from the standpoint of self-existing peace and joy, rather than create unnecessary suffering or seek fulfillment in what is transient.

In summary, participants' equanimity and ease does not depend upon the mastery of techniques for relaxation, concentration, manifesting desirable outcomes, or accessing an external source of wisdom. For them, dualistic ontology is simply gone and there is no separate self that has to achieve peace: Peace is a function of reality-consciousness. Amid some variations in the strength or type of emotions that arise for participants, the common element in their narratives was that maturing into nondual consciousness has essentially eliminated the chronic emotional pain and psychological turmoil that existed prior to awakening. The affective ground of participants' everyday consciousness is marked by extraordinary serenity and joy.

Another function of nondual ontology is that the participants do not experience other people as fundamentally separate entities. The theme of *unitive relationships* confirmed the hypothesis that participants would report a sense of complete identification with others as manifestations of the same source, while recognizing and respecting differences in expression. The prediction that participants' interpersonal relationships would therefore be marked by harmony rather than conflict proved accurate.

As discussed above, the egoic self-subject—wherein consciousness has actually objectified itself into a limited subject—relates to supposedly external realities through the lens of duality. Whether the ego is relating to a life circumstance or to another person, it presumes an object-to-object relationship. For the participants, the recognition of nonduality removed this framework from the sphere of interpersonal relationships. The data show that this shift had a significant long-term impact on participants' experience of relationships, as compared with the period prior to awakening.

The data confirmed that in nondual consciousness, the experience of “others” is that “There are no others in the Absolute sense” (Wade, 1996, p. 218), yet there is “recognition of the bounded selves that exist in the material plane as multiplicities of the One” (p. 218). The participants explained that the bodily persona, which had been taken to be a bounded and absolute self, now functions as a transparent and relative *self-in-community*, witnessed within nondual consciousness. Due to the recognition that all appearances are expressions of the absolute, nondual consciousness includes a deep appreciation for the richness of apparent multiplicity.

Consistent with other aspects of their experience, participants stated that they perceive relationships as a process arising within oneness, rather than an exchange

between separate people. Several participants contrasted their former experience of relationship as a “thing” that one has—laden with emotional projections and fantasies about the future—and their present experience of relationship as a fluid and delightful process that is always unfolding. One of the striking elements in this shift is the total release of the expectation or belief that another person will provide the necessary conditions for happiness. Narratives pointed out how past egoic relationships had been based in unquestioned, selfish demands for love. With awakening came the experience of self-sufficient love, or B-Love, in Maslow’s (1969b) terms. This engendered the awareness that other people may not know their absolute identity as love, and therefore forgiveness for unconscious and unloving expressions of mental-emotional conditioning.

Meanwhile, the data indicate that this stage increases, rather than inhibits, discernment and integrity in relationships. Several participants reported that through awakening they came into a deeper acceptance for others as well as a harmonization with their own personality and its inclinations. This development connects with the theme of nondual action, whereby the discovery of the absolute self allows the personality to more fluidly express itself in the world. For example, a few participants spoke of no longer having to worry about how they behave in regard to others. They described being free from former habits of self-conscious self-manipulation, and conversely, the desire to control or please others. Thus, in relationships, as in every other arena, participants claimed that life lives itself. It appears, again, that the recognition of implicit, absolute harmony tends to engender relative harmony in outward affairs. Nondual consciousness is not a static state of subjective transcendence that leaves objective affairs in a neglected mess. Given that the former split between these realms is overcome, there seems to be an

intelligence in nondual consciousness that naturally moves to heal what may be fragmented in the psyche and its relations. Though this stage cannot be confined to any particular appearance, the data suggest a tendency toward harmonious adjustment to life.

Related to the theme of unitive relationships, the data on unitive love confirm the hypothesis that participants would claim to experience love as a fundamental quality of existence. The data defined unitive love as synonymous with nonduality—a function of the absence of all illusory separateness and self-enclosure. Unitive love is marked by a powerful sense of compassion and solidarity with all beings, and includes an expansive, at times rapturous appreciation of life in all its forms. The data convey that participants live in an atmosphere of “blessedness” and enjoy “the sense of being favored to live in a beatified world” (Washburn, 1995, p. 229). Yet, participants simply feel that they have discovered the world, or life, as it really is, in all its simplicity and wholeness.

Unitive love was distinguished from relative, conditional love. Reality-awareness enables the human heart “to be the world” (P6), which means to exist in direct identification with all that it apprehends and to overflow as gratitude and reverence rather than to seek to gain something from the standpoint of incompleteness. Unitive love includes peace, impartiality, and compassion for those who suffer. Further, participants clarified that the overwhelming, blissful type of love that arose upon awakening eventually becomes more calm and embodied.

In their recognition of all things as the universal essence, participants exemplify the highest stage of moral development proposed by Kohlberg (1981):

[At] Stage 7 we identify ourselves with the cosmic or infinite perspective itself, we value life from its standpoint. At such time what is ordinarily background becomes foreground and the self is no longer figure to the ground. We sense the unity of the whole and ourselves as part of that unity. This experience of unity,

often mistakenly treated as a mere rush of mystic feeling, is at “Stage 7” associated with a structure of ontological and moral conviction. (p. 345)

As noted by Cook-Greuter (2005), nondual consciousness is marked by a “completely internalized transpersonal or interindividual morality” (p. 34). To clarify, nondual morality is completely internalized in that it is wholly ontological: It stems from the level of singular, all-inclusive identity, rather than mediation between objects. Spiritual teacher Robert Adams (1997) elaborates on this unique condition:

What is compassion? Actually compassion is when you are reconciled with this entire universe. There’s nothing in this whole universe that you are against. Think about that. Compassion means reverence for all of life, everything is alive, there is no such thing as dead matter. (p. 211)

Meanwhile, in light of the themes of nondual action and disidentification from mental constructs, it is clear that unitive love does not predetermine a set of moralistic attitudes or responses to a situation but functions spontaneously in the moment. For example, it may be that an awakened individual is in fact extremely unlikely to engage in violence, but to state that unitive love disallows any act of violence would be to impose dualistic thinking on the nondual functioning of reality. Therefore, the data on unitive love and moral vision bear out Assagioli’s (1991) assertion that

The soul that has been thus enlightened sees every fact and every event as being connected with other facts and events, justified by a higher logic; it sees the universe upheld and permeated by a perfect justice and an infinite goodness. (p. 147)

Apparently, this infinitely broader perspective on life events may at times surprise the enlightened soul who has stumbled upon it. Some participants explained that they have been surprised at the absence of a seemingly appropriate psychological response to a life event. For example, it is striking that despite having engaged for years in contemplative prayer and devotional practices, Dana (P2) found herself essentially unable to pray for

her daughter's healing from lymphoma, given that her consciousness was rooted in gnostic surrender to reality. In this situation, nondual consciousness did not preempt all normative psychological reactions, including profound grief, but it did change *some* of the reactions, behaviors, and perspectives on these processes. In summary, participants affirmed that unitive love both acknowledges and expresses the indivisible wholeness and ultimate rightness of reality at all times, despite appearances that existence may be cruel, fractured, or simply meaningless.

In addition to exploring how participants understand and experience such qualities of nondual perception, interviews inquired into participants' views of the teleology of human development. One of the hypotheses proposed in this study was that participants would express the certainty that human development is essentially a process of spiritual awakening whereby reality is discovered as an absolute good. This hypothesis was largely confirmed by the thematic data.

Participants' awareness of positive cosmology is defined as an experiential understanding that reality is ultimately benevolent in nature and that it seeks to know and enjoy itself through creation. One of the striking features of this theme is the conviction with which participants affirmed absolute perfection and nonduality in statements such as, "There's only light, and in fact that's all there's ever been" (P6); "All there is, is goodness" (P10); and "Enjoyment is literally what this is made of. There's nothing other than that" (P11). In both language and tone, participants seemed eager to share what was for them, apparently, the most wonderful discovery to have stumbled upon in a lifetime.

Throughout the data on this theme, participants compared the manifestation of ineffable spirit to an artist's joyful process of creation, or to a form of entertainment

whereby absolute consciousness enjoys every experience it has, including the painful and tragic. Participants often likened reality to a divine game in which consciousness conceals itself from itself by taking form and eventually finds itself through awakening. While acknowledging that awakening is a natural tendency in human development, several participants rejected the idea that humanity is destined to awaken as a whole or that awakening can be considered the goal of existence. Participants noted that consciousness is already awake and whole. In the final analysis, the appearance of human beings being asleep in the egoic dream of separation is itself a harmless, innocent, and apparently necessary illusion that happens within eternal awakeness.

The theme of positive cosmology therefore expressed two sides of a classical paradox in mysticism. First, it can be seen that from the relative perspective of changing experience, there is a process of individual development and awakening to the absolute. This process can be likened to the seeming movement of the sun as it is perceived from the earth: In this case, there appears to be an individual who changes. This perspective is expressed in language through the ultimately false but pragmatic distinction between awakened and unawakened individuals: Enlightened consciousness sees all individuals as being already awake and fully liberated. In other words, separation only seems to exist from its own perspective.

Thus, the apparent return to “God” or oneness does not reflect an actual movement or event, for there never existed a separate person who was exiled from, or asleep to, the reality known by God or oneness. There was no deluded human being; both delusion and subsequent enlightenment only appeared as seeming events in consciousness, which does not change. Adyashanti (2004) explained,

Getting off that wheel of *samsara* [dualistic suffering] means waking up to the fact that the only thing actually on the wheel is a misunderstanding—the idea that I am this being with these feelings and problems. We call it *samsara* because it's not actually real. It only exists between your ears. (p. 171)

Thus, the notion that a separate person becomes more conscious does not accurately reflect nondual ontology. Though psychological and physical development are processes of increasing complexity, the noetic unfolding that occurs through and amid that process expresses the ultimate sophistication of simplicity:

As consciousness or truth cannot really vary or have degrees, when we talk of a developing consciousness in people it is more accurate to say that each individual is at a certain evolutionary stage of being less ignorant or less unconscious. (Long, 1984, p. 121)

In summary, participants portrayed the human process of awakening as a joyful game that appears to occur within the intrinsic perfection of consciousness, rather than a divine plan to correct an actual problem. Several participants emphasized that in their experience, consciousness simply enjoys being and creating, and that its nature as love and joy is, if anything, obscured by the mind's pretensions and obsessions about knowing what will happen in the future. Given that awakening removes the separative self-sense that imagines and desires enlightenment as if it could be an object or attribute of the self, it makes sense that the participants do not harbor a desire for others to be enlightened, though they may be moved to share the possibility of liberation with apparent others who suffer in the egoic dream or are simply curious to discover the truth.

As reflected in other themes, participants stressed that the idea of a better future—in this case through collective awakening—is a dualistic mental construct that denies the present wholeness of reality. Speaking from the relative point of view, participants described nondual consciousness as the most healthy, natural, and accurate mode of

perception available to human beings. Meanwhile, speaking from the absolute point of view, they tended to deny that reality has any need or plan to manifest more awakened human beings.

Taken together, the themes found in this study provide a relatively clear portrait of nondual consciousness as a stage of development. The following poem, attributed to Lao Tzu (Mitchell, 1989), elegantly captures the process and outcome of awakening:

Each separate being in the universe
 returns to the common source.
 Returning to the source is serenity.
 If you don't realize the source,
 you stumble in confusion and sorrow.
 When you realize where you come from,
 you naturally become tolerant,
 disinterested, amused,
 kindhearted as a grandmother,
 dignified as a king.
 Immersed in the wonder of the Tao,
 you can deal with whatever life brings you,
 and when death comes, you are ready. (p. 15)

The traits that were identified reflect the key premises in the literature and are consistent with the traits identified in other research, which include the awareness that subject and object are not separate, timeless here-and-now awareness, spontaneity/metamotivation, acceptance, lack of self-interest, cognitive flexibility, awareness of immortality, absence of suffering, universal love, unconditional peace/bliss, and mental clarity (Butlein, 2005; Brown & Engler, 1980; Nagle, 2004). This study has also provided data that help clarify exactly what concepts such as “spontaneity,” “acceptance,” or “lack of self-interest” actually mean in nondual experience, given that these terms can easily be misinterpreted and reduced to qualities of egoic consciousness. As in Nagle’s research, participants in this study clearly view their present condition as one of ultimate fulfillment and freedom.

These individuals claim, in many direct and indirect ways, to have reached what can at least provisionally be considered the height of metaphysical wisdom and psychospiritual well-being. This common trait lends support to the view of nondual consciousness as the culminating stage of development.

Implications for Theory

Whether nondual consciousness will remain a stage exemplified by relatively few people or not, the work of gathering data on nondual consciousness is perhaps one of the most effective ways that transpersonal psychologists can bridge spirituality and psychology and bring a broader, more accurate developmental paradigm into focus. The premise behind this statement, and behind this study, is that a central task of transpersonal psychology is to uncover the spiritual reality that vastly transcends current, normative conceptions of what it means to be a human being. This spiritual reality cannot be understood in terms of a separate self or finite psyche: The ultimate significance of spirituality is lost when it is understood as a subjective epiphenomenon of separate selfhood.

Therefore, one of the goals of this study was to help answer questions in transpersonal psychology as to the ontological status of the self. Theorists (e.g., Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Cook-Greuter, 2005; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1986) generally use one of two basic paradigms to formulate their answer. The data from this study have been interpreted as providing support for the premise that every version of the separate self, as experienced in egoic consciousness, is essentially a species of identification and a function of consciousness, which is capable of dropping all partial identifications. This ontological standpoint has been described as the basis for the

structural-hierarchical paradigm (e.g., Alexander, Heaton, & Chandler, 1994; Cook-Greuter, 2005; Wade, 1996; Wilber, 1986) that combines structurally oriented psychology with nondual metaphysics. Though he adopted a contrasting paradigm, Washburn (1995) offered a useful summary of the structural-hierarchical view:

For the structural-hierarchical paradigm, then, there is no separate self because one's true existence coincides with reality itself. One's true existence is none other than the Brahman of Upanishadic Hinduism, the Void of Mahayana Buddhism. The mental ego, *qua* separate self, is an illusion. It is not any existing thing—not even, as the dynamic-dialectical paradigm maintains, a partial and incomplete thing. It is rather only a case of mistaken identity. It is a case of developmentally necessary and warranted mistaken identity, to be sure, but a case of mistaken identity nonetheless. (p. 44)

In contrast, Washburn's *dynamic-dialectical paradigm* proposes that development progresses through the interplay between two poles of the psyche, the ego and the Dynamic Ground, while the ultimate ontological status of these is left open.

This study's findings contradict the subtle duality inherent in Washburn's (1995) model, though his integrated stage has been cited in this study for its valuable descriptions of some postegoic traits. What distinguishes the dynamic-dialectical and structural-hierarchical paradigms is their respective ways of understanding the ontology of the ego vis-à-vis consciousness and, therefore, the nature of trans-egoic development. Both paradigms value and critically examine the extraordinary developmental processes reported by mystics. However, the data suggest that the dynamic-dialectical paradigm fails to account for the most important element of these processes, which is the unmistakable shift to nondual ontology.

Washburn's integrated stage largely resembles what this study has described as nondual consciousness. Meanwhile, there are key differences to explore in light of this study's findings. Washburn (1995) proposed that at the "far horizon of integrated life" (p.

244), which he considers rare and excellent in itself, there exist the even rarer cases of prophets and saints, as well as those who are graced with the gift of “mystical illumination.” It is true that some exemplars of nondual consciousness play a prophetic role in the transformation of culture and/or exhibit the extremely selfless, compassionate service to humanity that is associated with sainthood (Nagle, 2004; Sovatsky, 2004; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001). Meanwhile, Washburn’s description of the third rare case, mystical illumination, to some extent matches the theory and data on nondual realization that is provided in this study. However, Washburn separated spiritual awakening from mystical illumination. This study, in contrast, views illumination as the essence of awakening and goes further than Washburn by claiming that illumination is indeed a metaphysical revelation.

In Washburn’s summary, mystical illumination includes almost all of the features of nondual realization, except that it entirely leaves out the authoritative gnosis of nonduality. For Washburn, mystical illumination is the ultimate experience that the ego, or “soul,” can have of the “Dynamic Ground,” which he often refers to as “spirit.” First, the structural-hierarchical paradigm rejects the concept that an entity called the ego is having the experience. In direct experience, it is always pure awareness rather than a body or an ego that experiences phenomena. Thus, the presumed ego is derivative to bare, witnessing awareness and cannot be the true subject of any experience. The failure to make this ontological distinction allows Washburn to maintain the illusory split between the ego and spirit.

This study's findings strongly support Wilber's (1996) narrative regarding the role of witnessing awareness as both a necessary obstacle and a doorway to nondual realization:

At some point, as you inquire into the Witness, and rest in the Witness, the sense of being a Witness "in here" completely vanishes itself, and the Witness turns out to be everything that is witnessed. The causal gives way to the Nondual, and formless mysticism gives way to nondual mysticism. "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form." Technically, you have dis-identified with even the Witness, and then integrated it with all manifestation. (p. 227)

Washburn does not deal strictly with awareness as an experiential fact, prior to all concepts, and so reifies the ego as a veritable, if limited, self and locus of awareness.

Meanwhile, in Washburn's narrative, the Ground, or spirit, seems initially to be equivalent to what this study has defined as consciousness. However, Washburn hesitates to consider the Ground as representing nondual, metaphysical reality. In his model, the ego becomes enlightened through its newfound permeability to the Ground, and the psyche is transformed, but this transformation does not carry the ontological authority of gnosis.

Washburn defined illumination as "the ultimate vision" by which the soul (ego) tastes spirit "in the fullness of its radiant glory" (p. 247). He described the experience of this "supreme 'state'" (p. 247) as being statistically rare even among integrated individuals. In short, illumination is viewed as an experience that some but not all enlightened persons have. Yet, Washburn's description of integrated individuals largely defines what this study considers the outcome of illumination—that is, the radiance of spirit infuses everyday experience *and* is known as the true nature of existence. It seems that Washburn has misinterpreted mystical illumination and subsequently categorized it as a show of mystical fireworks that has no ontological significance. He has therefore

defined a stage that looks like enlightenment but lacks the definitive ontological shift. In contrast, this study has presented data that explain why mystical illumination is the *prerequisite* for nondual consciousness.

While Washburn described spiritual awakening and many qualities of nondual consciousness with great precision, he differed from Wade (1996) and Wilber (1986) in that he classified the trans-egoic “Ground” as an intrapsychic, numinous phenomenon that does not necessarily constitute a transpersonal, metaphysical reality. This amounts to an agnostic stance regarding the nature of the Ground. Washburn (1995) wrote,

In stressing the existence of the power of the Ground, I am not advancing an opinion on the ultimate ontological status of this power. Such a judgment would in any case be unwarranted. It would exceed the limits of human cognition. We simply cannot know—in this lifetime at least—whether the power of the Ground, in addition to being an intrapsychic phenomenon, is also an extrapsychic (metaphysical, cosmic) noumenon. Human experience suffices to affirm that the power of the Ground is a dynamic reality of extraegoic origin and numinous-sacred character, but it is not a sufficient basis from which either to affirm or deny the possibility that the power of the Ground is something that exists independently of the psyche. This position is *not* psychological reductionism; it is simply a confession of ignorance. Spirit may have its ultimate origin in a metaphysical source lying completely beyond the soul. As experienced by the ego, however, spirit is of necessity something that expresses itself within the boundaries of the soul. The ego can have no experience, and therefore no knowledge, of the power of the Ground as it may (or may not) exist beyond these boundaries. (p. 131)

Washburn claimed that human experience confirms the influence of the Ground but does not reveal its ontological status. This assertion ignores the kind of key human experiences that have been documented in this study and throughout the mystical literature, little of which appears in Washburn’s bibliography.

It is surprising that Washburn’s work so accurately conveys so many aspects of testimony regarding mystical illumination—for example, the unparalleled bliss and grandeur—while it essentially discounts and does not discuss the most important feature

described by mystics. Namely, mystics claim that awakening is, above all, a metaphysical revelation of nondual spirit, rather than an amazing event happening inside the psyche. This, of course, is the source of controversy surrounding mysticism: Mystics claim to know God, reality, and truth in their direct experience, though they claim it is not knowable in any objective, reducible sense.

The metaphysical nature of gnosis is clearly defined in this study's findings as the factor that brings unconditional peace and constitutes absolute self-knowledge. The data suggest that nondual realization is the catalyzing event/process for the transition to the beatific qualities that are described in Washburn's integrated stage and similar stages in other transpersonal models. Moreover, it is clear that mystics do not emerge from nondual realization feeling uncertain as to whether this numinous "Ground" of consciousness is merely an intrapsychic force or a metaphysical truth. As far as they are concerned, the question of *inside-versus-outside* has been conclusively answered: Inside and outside are concepts that do not have meaning within the singularity of consciousness. The mental ego is seen to have been a construction that presupposed the self as a bounded center of awareness—an interior center that, by definition, cannot reach to the unknown, metaphysical exterior.

In summary, Washburn stated that the apparent duality between the psyche and absolute reality cannot be resolved in human experience, "in this lifetime at least" (p. 130), and throughout his work neglected to mention that mystics consider the refutation of that ontological split to be the hallmark of genuine awakening. When have mystics—whose testimony Washburn obviously values—ever suggested that metaphysical truth is not available for discovery in this lifetime, the timeless present? By saying that human

experience does not suffice to confirm metaphysical truth, Washburn ignores the fact that mystics do feel qualified to speak about metaphysics.

If anything, mystics tend to feel that metaphysics is their *sole* area of authority and generally treat it as an important and wonderful subject to share with others. Given that this is both the contemporary and historical case, it falls upon transpersonal scholars to further uncover and address their testimony. If the participants in this study have not discovered themselves as absolute reality, it may be asked why they so confidently claim to have done so, and why they claim to know beyond all doubt that death occurs only to the body, that consciousness is an eternal reality. Maintaining the original premise that nondual consciousness cannot be assessed in any objective manner, this study concludes that several striking themes at least strongly indicate the presence of this stage, as generally described in the structural-hierarchical paradigm.

Implications for Transpersonal Psychology and Future Research

As noted in Chapter 2, disagreement about the ontological status of consciousness is also found in scholarly discourse regarding the perennialist viewpoint of mysticism and its relationship to transpersonal psychology. The findings presented here confirm the continuing relevance of the perennial wisdom to transpersonal psychology and allow for further exploration of this debate. As Kaisa Puhakka (2007) pointed out, the perennial wisdom's emphasis on direct gnosis of truth is a much-needed antidote to the widespread intellectual malaise and cultural fragmentation caused by postmodern, relativistic epistemology.

Puhakka (2007) first acknowledged that postmodern thought helped to question positivist epistemology and pave the way for transpersonal studies. However, Puhakka

noted that when the postmodern technique of conceptual deconstruction “hit the streets,” its finer points were lost amid a new culture of crass relativism and alienation. Here, any person’s “truth” is as valid as anyone else’s truth, given that truth was presumed to be limited to the insular subjectivity of each human being’s experience. Though transpersonal psychology originally represented a clear break from the reductionist epistemology of mainstream psychology, the challenge of overcoming the subtle reductionism of postmodern thinking often remains unrecognized. Whereas the pluralism of postmodern thinking would seem to appreciate diversity, it conceives of diversity without unity, erroneously perceiving notions of universality as threatening to the appreciation of diversity.

Puhakka (2007) observed the ongoing dance of the “unity vs. diversity” dialectic in transpersonal psychology and suggested that the field may be in danger of emphasizing the plurality of perspectives at the cost of unity, essence, and depth. This study’s findings point directly to these qualities and add the dimension of depth to an otherwise two-dimensional horizon of disconnected percepts and human narratives. As Puhakka noted, the perennial wisdom is not as much a philosophy as it is a prescription for entering postsubjective, nondual consciousness. Yet, the question at the heart of the matter remains, at least for many scholars in academic psychology, whether such a realization is possible. Puhakka affirmed the reality of gnosis, and held that this possibility is essential to what transpersonal psychology can offer the world:

Transpersonal psychology’s potential as an antidote to postmodern malaise lies not in its theoretical or paradigmatic formulations, nor even in its valuing of human experience in all its forms, but in its commitment to developing and discovering ways of knowing that do not depend on conceptual thinking or on perception shaped by culturally, linguistically, and psychologically conditioned schemata. (p. 11)

Related to this claim, Puhakka emphasized the crucial distinction between experiential deconstruction and conceptual deconstruction: Whereas experiential deconstruction illuminates absolute reality and liberates consciousness from the “solipsistic prison of individual subjectivity” (p. 13), conceptual deconstruction consists in the endless reduction of abstractions to other abstractions.

Though it is certainly valuable to explore various means of experiential deconstruction, it is perhaps more urgent that transpersonal psychologists point out the *results* of deconstruction in their most striking form: a stage-level change reflecting quintessential spiritual wisdom, psychological integration, and unobstructed intimacy with life. It is also important to emphasize that deconstruction is an organic process that occurs whenever attention is allowed to relax: It does not depend upon one awareness practice having been adopted and mastered, such as meditation, as much as the consistent intention to relax into conscious presence. This is the direct mystical teaching that is clearly needed and valued in our culture at this time, as evidenced by the tremendous popularity of Eckhart Tolle’s (1999) teaching and similar work by other spiritual teachers (e.g., Katie & Mitchell, 2002; Ruiz, 2004).

In this regard, due to its unique sample, this study demonstrates the increasing relevance of contemporary nondual spirituality to transpersonal psychology. Nondual spirituality deemphasizes the apparent choice between discrete spiritual paths, practices, and traditions—any of which may be valuable—and points to the unconditioned process of becoming intimate with what is.

The emergence and blossoming of understanding, love and intelligence has nothing to do with any tradition, no matter how ancient or impressive—it has nothing to do with time. It happens completely on its own when a human being

questions, wonders, listens and looks without getting stuck in fear, pleasure and pain. When self-concern is quiet, in abeyance, heaven and earth are open. The mystery, the essence of all life is not separate from the silent openness of simple listening. (Packer, 2009)

Thus, nondual spirituality cuts equally through the mystique of spiritual traditions and the fog of suffering. With refreshing clarity and compassion, nondual teachings destabilize the normative belief that human beings can have no true and lasting relief from psychological suffering.

In our culture, we make the suffering of samsara noble. It is almost a sacrilege to imagine that who you are is not a problem to be solved. We are never expected to actually hop off this wheel of suffering and wake up from this trance of “me.”(Adyashanti, 2004, p. 171)

It is also important to note that the promise of spiritual freedom as an accessible goal and ever-present reality has little to do with the hyper-masculine or false transcendence by which real mysticism has at times been tainted and misunderstood (Caplan, 1999). In its essence, mysticism reveals the feminine and masculine principles in their deepest expression and demonstrates their ultimate interdependence and inseparability. Almost half of this study’s participants were female, and the mystical literature cited throughout this work has included many female voices. Analysis of contemporary mystical literature reveals that many nondual teachers are women who, as awakened consciousness, (a) do not identify exclusively with the gender of the body, and (b) are nevertheless especially involved in helping women express and celebrate their feminine psychology both *through* the liberating realization of nonduality and as a skillful means of relaxing the often overly masculinized ego into that realization (Robinson, 2007; Valine, 2005).

While nondual teachings emphasize the ever-present availability of awakening, this study may raise more questions than it can answer as to what factors, if any, helped

the participants to reach such a high level of insight and subsequent psychological integration. Though the data begin to define the spontaneous process of egoic deconstruction after awakening, for many individuals, deep egoic identification persists long after awakening, prolonging the transition to mature nondual consciousness (Caplan, 1999; Kapleau, 1965). The conclusion drawn from this study's findings and the literature is that for some people, mental-emotional patterns are more deeply entrenched and therefore require a much longer period to dissolve. Such patterns may render some individuals more susceptible to getting lost in well known *cul-de-sacs* of transpersonal development, whereby the ego claims awakening for itself and creates a new spiritualized identity or becomes fixated on bliss or other phenomena (Adyashanti, 2004; Caplan, 1999; Greenwell, 2005).

Thus, it is not clear whether the participants in this study somehow accessed a particularly helpful practice or insight that aided their maturation process, or how they were able to do so. Clearly, participants did not follow a uniform path of action in the outward sense. However, an intrinsic logic of experience, uniquely woven into each person's life circumstances, was deduced from the themes, and this logic seems to define egoic deconstruction.

It can at least be said that the mystical literature affirms this study's findings on deconstruction and consistently explains that consciousness, once awakened, moves with greater speed and power to clarify itself (Caplan, 1999; Chang, 1959; Kapleau, 1965). Nevertheless, major obstacles can ostensibly frustrate this movement. In this regard, many mystics have explained that the maturation process varies among individuals and persists through numerous apparent lifetimes or incarnations (Adams, 1997; Caplan,

1999; Kapleau, 1965; Meher Baba, 1967), which are shaped solely by the nature of mental-emotional conditioning. For example, Kapleau's (1965) seminal work on Zen practice and enlightenment details the dramatic awakening of a young woman, Yaeko Iwasaki, who died soon after reaching what her teacher, Sogaku Harada Roshi, described as the highest degree of clarity. Harada Roshi pointed out to her that for most people the progression from initial awakening to deep enlightenment usually takes around 10 years, whereas for Yaeko it occurred within a few weeks. The strength of Yaeko's vow of spiritual aspiration, "made through countless lives and embracing all sentient beings" (p. 294) was implicated as the factor responsible for rapid growth in this lifetime. It can therefore be deduced that equally unique cases may take much longer than 10 years, perhaps due to karmic patterns that extend well beyond one lifetime.

Thus, the fact that some individuals awaken but do not as quickly or fully embody mature nondual consciousness does not necessarily mean that egoic deconstruction is not occurring. Further research on nondual realization may bring out the additional themes and subthemes on stage transition that this study was not able to focus on, due to its primary aim of identifying stage traits. This data would help describe variations in developmental progress and the factors involved, though the deeper nature of karma may remain a metaphysical factor extending beyond visible time and space. Possible areas of research within the transitional phase include the relationship between kundalini and awakening, the dark night of the soul, or the phase of causal fixation that was identified in this research. Concerning initial awakening, qualitative research might also be used to examine changes in identity/ontology experienced by spiritual seekers through the mystical practice of self-inquiry (Ramana Maharshi, 2004).

Hopefully, this study has shown that researching enlightenment does not require a search for the perfect human being—an effort complicated by too many assumptions about how spiritual maturity should look. Instead, this exploration involved a few simple questions and plenty of listening. Questions about identity are potent when they are posed to people who claim to have found eternal life, who claim to be free of suffering, and who show all the known signs of having undergone a revolution of awareness.

The implications of this study for the practice of psychotherapy are particularly relevant. Findings support recent literature (Blackstone, 2006; Brazier, 1995; Butlein, 2005; Capriles, 2000; Prendergast, Fenner, & Krystal, 2003) that describes nondual consciousness as the most potent factor for facilitating growth in the therapeutic setting, as well as the best vantage point from which to understand psychospiritual suffering and relief. Given what he considers to be a lack of clarity about what sanity entails, Capriles (2000) felt compelled to call for a *metatranspersonal* psychology that is founded on nonduality. Capriles suggested that too many transpersonal psychologists consider the goal of therapy to be increased access to various transpersonal states, rather than the absence of delusion. Research conducted by Butlein (2005) suggests that this assessment may be accurate: The group of unawakened transpersonal therapists reported that they seek to encourage transpersonal experiences, while the purportedly awakened therapists more simply attended to the inherently liberating action of shared conscious presence as the basis for healing and potential awakening. In Capriles' (2000) view, access to transpersonal experience is a necessary aspect of growth, but the potential for genuine freedom should be the guiding vision for therapy.

In summary, the results of this research strongly suggest that the study and embodiment of nondual consciousness constitute a natural meeting place for mysticism, psychology, and cultural engagement. Consciousness is the unconditioned presence in which all expressions of life can be fully met, understood, and allowed to be what they are. When consciousness recognizes itself deeply, whether through meditation, psychotherapy, or social exchange, conditioned patterns of the psyche become attuned to the order of Being, the basis for intimacy across the greatest apparent divides. Whatever the differences are among diverse expressions of human culture, it is clear that all of these are noticed within the same lucid awareness, a universal presence that, once it has the chance to relax out of fear, leans inevitably toward appreciation.

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Appendix A: Solicitation Letter

Date

Dear potential participant,

I am a doctoral student in psychology, and am writing because I would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation research. The aim of my research is to better understand what is popularly called spiritual enlightenment, especially the experience, or realization, of nonduality. The research plan is to interview several spiritual teachers about the nature of their awareness and experiences.

I am contacting you because you are a spiritual teacher whom I believe may have a deep and clear awareness of nonduality. I have established the following requirements to help ensure that participants will be able to provide helpful information for this study.

1. Participants in this study must be active spiritual teachers who assist others in the realization of nonduality.
2. Participants must feel confident that they can speak from their direct experience of nonduality, rather than from intellectual understanding alone.
3. Participants must be willing to discuss how their awareness or spiritual development affects various aspects of their life.

If you feel that you meet each of these requirements, your participation will be most appreciated. However, if you feel that you do not meet any of these requirements, please decline to participate.

Participation in this study will require approximately 2 hours. This time includes reading and signing the Informed Consent form, filling out a brief demographic questionnaire (5 minutes), and a confidential interview in person or by telephone lasting approximately 90 minutes but no more than 120 minutes.

During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experience of nonduality and how it affects your life.

Throughout the research and writing of this dissertation, your personal identity will be kept strictly confidential. Please see the enclosed Informed Consent form for more details.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the Informed Consent form and mail it back to me in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. [Changed wording of this request when soliciting by electronic mail.] If you have any questions or concerns please contact me at (650) 851-1952 or mcosteines@gmail.com. You may also contact my

dissertation Chair, John Astin, Ph.D., at (831) 566-6204. Thank you in advance for your help in this research.

Sincerely, Michael Costeines

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

To the potential participant in this research:

You are invited to participate in a study to help the researcher understand the experience of nonduality, popularly referred to as enlightenment. The information gained in this research may help psychologists to understand the nature of enlightenment and its relationship to human development.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to speak briefly with the researcher about your direct experience of nondual awareness and its impact on your life. In this process, it is possible that you will gain further insight into your experiences.

The procedure will involve an audio-taped, 90- to 120-minute interview about your experiences. The interview will be conducted at a neutral location that is convenient to you, or by telephone if necessary.

For the protection of your privacy, all information received from you will be kept confidential as to source and your identity will be protected. All data will be password protected and archived only on my personal computer. Any transcription of materials will be conducted only after the transcriber has signed a Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement. All printed materials will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my office. My dissertation committee members and I will be the only people with access to this information. Fictitious names will be used in my dissertation and any additional literature created from my data, unless I am authorized by you to use your name. In the reporting of information in published material, any information that might identify you will be altered to ensure your anonymity, unless I am otherwise authorized by you.

This study is designed to minimize potential risks to you. If any psychological concerns arise for you as a result of this study, the lead researcher can provide referrals to licensed psychotherapists and psychospiritual counselors. If you have any concerns or questions, I will make every effort to discuss them with you and inform you of options for resolving your concerns. If you have any questions or concerns, you may call me at 650-851-1952, or Kartikeya Patel, Ph.D., head of the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, at 650-493-4430.

If you decide to participate in this research, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the conduct of this study and for any reason without penalty or prejudice. You may request a summary of the study's collective research findings, which will include themes derived from all interviews conducted, by providing your mailing address with your signature.

I attest that I have read and understood this form and had any questions about this research answered to my satisfaction. My participation in this research is entirely voluntary. My signature indicates my willingness to be a participant in this research.

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

Mailing Address (if you want a summary of the research findings)

Please return this form in the envelope provided to:

Michael Costeines
1050 High Road
Woodside, CA 94062

Thank you very much for assisting me in my research.

Appendix C: Demographic Questions for Participants

Directions: Please answer all the questions to the best of your ability. If you have any questions please contact lead researcher, Michael Costeines, at (650) 851-1952 (or mcosteines@gmail.com).

Name_____

Address_____

Please check preferred mode of communication: Telephone___ Email___

Age_____ Sex: F / M Ethnicity_____

Place of birth (only if born outside U.S.)_____

Marital/domestic partner status_____ # of children_____

Total # of years of education completed_____

Approximate # of years involved in spirituality_____

Approximate # of years as a spiritual teacher_____

Describe style/format of teaching (e.g., private consultation, public talks)

Current religious/spiritual tradition, if any_____

Former religious/spiritual tradition(s), if any_____

Current religious/spiritual practices, if any (e.g., prayer, meditation)

Description of practice and years practicing_____

Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Please tell me the story of your awakening.
2. How would you describe your experience now compared to the way you were before?

Probes:

What do you identify or experience as your self now?

How does that compare to before your awakening?

Is there anything different now about your sense of

- a. Relationships; love and connection with other people, life forms, and nature
- b. Painful emotions, such as anxiety, fear, anger, and sadness
- c. Thought and mental chatter
- d. Life purpose
- e. Time
- f. Ability to negotiate the tasks of everyday living
- g. Sensory experience?

3. How, if at all, has this realization/[their preferred term] affected your life and the way you live it now?

Probes:

a. How you spend your time

b. Make your livelihood

c. Relationship to wealth and material possessions

d. Ability to negotiate the tasks of everyday living

e. Role of sex or romantic relationships

4. Please tell me about the challenges you have experienced, if any, in the process of shifting from what we might call the egoic, strictly personal experience of life to a more awakened/[their preferred term] experience.

5. In your view, what is the ultimate goal of human development, if any?

6. Is there anything I have not thought to ask you that you think might be important or beneficial for me to understand about the nature of your experience and its impact on your life?

Appendix E: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

As a transcriptionist, I agree to maintain strict confidentiality with regard to all participant information and contact contained within the audiotapes that I transcribe. I agree to keep the tapes and transcripts in a locked filing cabinet or safe when they are not in use by me. I will also help to aid the researcher in protecting the identity of all participants to ensure anonymity.

Transcriber's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date