

Self as Representation and Presence:  
A Psychological Approach to Self-Realization

Tom Gibbons

*Abstract*

In recent years, the term “nonduality” has become increasingly used in Western spiritual circles. This paper discusses the use of this term - which means that reality is essentially one and undivided - with respect to a particular school of nonduality, Advaita Vedanta. The question is asked, if all is not ultimately divisible, how is it that we as humans generally feel separate and even alienated from the larger whole or Self? The suggestion is made, with reference to western developmental psychology, that our ego identity is what gives us this sense of individuality and this is a desirable and normal developmental achievement, the final stages of which are, *inter alia*, consistent and integrated self and object-representations. Through the pursuit of traditional methods of meditation and self-inquiry, it can be seen that while the development of such self and object-representations is a necessary developmental stage, they are still ultimately mental constructions, and thus do not constitute a solidly subsisting individual self truly differentiating and separating us from the world and our true nature. It is thus possible to affirm both that we have – and need - an individual ego in this sense and that we are not thereby separated from our deeper identity, the undivided Self.

In this paper I shall be putting forward a transpersonal and nondual theory of Self-realization. Broadly speaking this is a mixture of Western psychology and philosophy, specifically psychoanalytic, attachment and neurobiological theories (particularly the work of Margaret Mahler, Allan Schore and Thomas Metzinger) and an Eastern approach to spirituality, exemplified (though not exclusively so) by a particular “nondual” strand of Indian religious philosophy, Advaita Vedanta. I believe these two apparently wildly different approaches can be seen to complement each other, and in order to better explicate this I will also be bringing in the thinking of some current transpersonal psychologists - Michael Washburn, A.H. Almaas and Ken Wilber.

Both developmental theory and the tradition of Advaita share a similar emphasis – on discovering the nature of our everyday selves. Mahler *et al* (1975) put it this way:

We refer to the psychological birth of the infant as the separation-individuation process: the establishment of a sense of separateness from and relation to, a world of reality, particularly with regards to the experience of one’s own body and to the principal representative of the world as the infant experiences it, the principal love object. (p. 5)

In other words this corpus of work deals with the process whereby we come to identify ourselves with our bodies and establish ourselves as separate beings - how we develop a personal sense of identity and become coherent and functioning “entities” in the world. Interestingly, Advaita shares a similar concern, not so much with how we come to achieve our personal identity, but in the supreme importance for spiritual liberation of in some sense “seeing through” our personality (sense of separateness) and coming to know its true nature. Advaita means “not two” - that reality is ultimately One, even though it appears that we live in a world of separate objects and people. This is

essentially the question I will be exploring in this paper: in what sense is reality “One” when we typically have such a clear and definite sense of ourselves as separate from one another, of there being a fundamental subject-object dichotomy embedded in the very nature of things, and what if anything can be done about it?

## I

Advaita is one of a number of so-called “nondual” or “monistic” philosophies, most of which are of Eastern origin though some (such as the philosophies of Plotinus and Spinoza) are of Western origin. In fact, nonduality can be seen to pop up at all times and places, whether ancient India, the Greek-speaking Mediterranean in the centuries after the death of Christ, or medieval Germany or Japan. A current description which is both elegant and lucid comes from the Nonduality Institute (2015):

Nonduality is understood as the realization of a very subtle, non-conceptual, unbounded consciousness that is experienced as the essence of one’s own being and of all life. This is a mutual transparency of self and other, in which everything, including one’s own being, is revealed as made of a single, vast expanse of consciousness. It arises together with phenomena; it pervades the movement of perceptions, thoughts, emotions and sensations.

“Nondual” simply means that reality is not ultimately divided up in the various ways we tend to carve it up. It will not be possible in this paper to review all these approaches; indeed, within Advaita itself, there are arguments against not only the subject-object distinction, but also for example, against the existence of separate material objects. In this paper therefore I shall be focusing only on Advaita, and within Advaita, principally on the claim that the subject-object distinction is ultimately an illusion, as I will explain using not just arguments from the Vedantic tradition, but more importantly

for this paper, certain concepts derived from developmental psychology, which I believe have been essentially confirmed by more recent attachment and neurobiological research.

The Vedantic philosophical tradition has its source in ancient Indian scriptures, notably the Upanishads and other scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutras. David Loy in his book *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* points out that “The nonduality of subject and object constitutes...the heart of the short Isa Upanishad: “To the seer, all things have verily become the Self: what delusion what sorrow, can there be for him who beholds that oneness?” He then adds that, “So many other passages (i.e. in the Upanishads) could be cited that I can say, with no exaggeration, that asserting this...sense of nonduality (i.e. of subject and object) constitutes the central claim of the Upanishads” (1988, p. 26). Another well-known scripture, the *Avadhuta Gita*, says in verse 4: “All is verily the absolute Self. Distinction and nondistinction do not exist. How can I say:”It exists; it does not exist?” I am filled with wonder!” (1988).

So the claim is clearly being made that all is One, but one of what? To assist us in this inquiry, we shall turn to Adi Shankara (788-820 CE), a central figure in the Indian philosophical tradition who consolidated this very influential interpretation of the Indian scriptures known as Advaita Vedanta.

Drawing on his readings of the scriptures, but also philosophical argument, he set forth three levels of reality: The level of *absolute truth*, where all is Self or Consciousness (Also known as Brahman/Atman and *Satchitananda*, or Being, Knowledge and Bliss), where we can say, notwithstanding appearances to the contrary, that everything is in some sense “made” of consciousness, which constitutes the fundamental way in which phenomena are said to exist, the “beingness” of all things, including humans. The next

level is that of *relative truth*, which describes generally the everyday world we live in, which includes (for most of us) solid seeming material objects and individual selves, a world of individual particulars, of duality. This world is said to be real when we are experiencing it, though it is not ultimately real. Finally there is the level of *absolute illusion* that represents false knowledge. An example often given of the latter level is the mirage of an oasis in the desert. Though it appears to be there, it is simply not (Deutsch, 1969).

Deutsch also makes the very important point that *Satchitananda* is better understood as the way in which these “qualifying attributes” of the Self appear to man, rather than how the Self is in itself. “Satchitananda is a symbol of Brahman as formulated by the mind interpreting its Brahman-experience...Brahman as transcendental being given in spiritual experience defies all description or characterization” (1969, pp. 8-9). Deutsch goes on to quote the sage Yajnavalkya, who asserted that “There is no other or better description [of Brahman] than this; that it is not-this, not-this (*neti neti*)” (pp. 10-11). The Self thus contains all descriptions, but is ultimately beyond them all.

Returning to Adi Shankara, I would like to make one further point: Shankara’s view is often misstated to mean that the everyday world we live in is a complete illusion; this is not correct, only the last level is a complete illusion. The relative world is real when we are living and believing it, though ultimately compared to the Self it is not real, and this includes the reality of our individual selves that is our main concern here. In Advaita Vedanta, the spiritual goal is to in some way transcend or, as I shall argue to “see through” – not “get rid of” - the relative reality of the individual self and realize one’s

essential identity with the eternal Self, which is all there is, as there are no ultimately separately existing objects or selves apart from the whole.

This naturally leads us to ask the question: if all is in truth blissful *Satchitananda*, how do we come to seem to be living in a world of individual particulars and separation with all the suffering and (frankly) lack of bliss, that typically seems to be the case? Eliot Deutsch (1969) puts the problem this way:

In the immediate, intuitive experience of nonduality, Brahman presents itself as the fullness of being, as self luminous consciousness, and as infinite bliss... All distinctions, contradictions and multiplicities are transcended and obliterated... It follows, then, that the existence of, or our perceptions of, an independent, substantial world of real objects, persons, and processes must be grounded in some pervasive error. We take the unreal for the real and real for the unreal. This is *maya*... Whenever the "I", "me" or "mine" is present, according to Advaita, there is also *maya*. (p. 28)

The debate and literature surrounding the concept of *maya* is extensive and we cannot begin to do it justice here. As we have indicated, we will focus on one aspect of *maya*, the subject-object distinction, which is said in Advaita to be evidence of ignorance (*avidya*). In describing the nature of *avidya*, Shankara uses the concept of "superimposition" (*adhyasa*). Superimposition occurs when

...the qualities of one thing not immediately present to consciousness are, through memory, given to, or projected upon, another thing that is present to consciousness and are identified with it... The main or primary application of *adhyasa* is made with respect to the self. It is the superimposition on the Self (Atman, Brahman) of what does not properly belong to the Self (finitude, change) and the superimposition on the non-self of what does properly belong to the Self (infinitude, eternity) that constitutes *avidya*. (Deutsch, 1969, pp. 33-34)

In accordance with this notion as set forth by Shankara, our argument here (to be further explicated below as I describe the development of personal identity) is that the

concepts of “I” or “me” and “other” are essentially concepts which are projected and superimposed onto the one Self, or Presence, and that this separation is at the root of the subject-object dichotomy - that there is a real “me” in here and a real “you” over there, and that these can be seen to be illusory in the sense that these are ultimately *mental constructions* drawn from memories, not truly independently existing selves.

The individual soul or *jiva* is thus a combination of the real (eternal consciousness and awareness is its ground, as it is the ground of all things) and the unreal (to the extent that it is identifying itself exclusively as a limited entity). These latter limitations (*upadhi* or limiting conditions) exist as long as ignorance through superimposition is taking place - it is an ongoing process occurring right now - and the individual “does not see himself as he really is, but as a being separated from other individuals, conditioned and finite.” (Deutsch 1969, p. 53).

These sentiments are echoed by the more contemporary twentieth century Advaita representatives Ramana Maharshi (2000), who has said that “When the ego is gone, Realization results by itself” (p. 101), and Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj (1973) who said “All you need to do is get rid of the tendency to define yourself. All definitions apply to your body only...One this obsession with the body goes, you will revert to your natural state, spontaneously and naturally” (p. 5). We will see in due course how these otherwise puzzling comments about removing ideas of body and ego might be clarified using the concepts derived from our review of developmental theory, and that the particular *upadhi* operative here can be very well described by Western psychology.

Before summarizing the main points of developmental theory as to how we become stable personalities, I wish to introduce some further ideas, those of Michael



Washburn, Ken Wilber and A.H. Almaas. So far I have briefly indicated that there is an “egoic” phase, where we develop our unique sense of self, and a “transegoic” phase, described in the language of Advaita, whereby we discover our true nature as the Self and the correspondingly relatively unreal status of the separate individual personality.

In this outline there is one period of time unaccounted for: after birth and before the individual consciousness begins to develop, a period we will call “pre-egoic.” With the publication of Wilber’s (1996) ideas of the “pre-trans fallacy” (p. ix) this period has been the subject of intense controversy in transpersonal circles. In what state is the infant in after it has been born but before it starts to develop self-consciousness? Does it matter?

For transpersonal theory it does matter: Washburn (1998) states that the newly born infant is in a state of pre-egoic fusion with what he calls the Dynamic Ground, which is the ultimate ground of our being and source of all potentials, including that of individual psychological development. Almaas (2004) makes a similar point when he distinguishes between “true nature as the ground of all manifestation, and its arising as the inner nature of the soul” (p. 529). What Almaas (2004) refers to here as “True Nature”, he also calls Being, which it is interesting to note is also a synonym for the Vedantic Self in one of its aspects, that of pure being.

Wilber (1996) criticizes such an approach by saying that it confuses a period when we are not aware of much at all, with the later period if and when we have achieved spiritual realization of the oneness of life, which is completely different. There is no question that the state of awareness of an infant of several months is quite different from a realized person, but Washburn (1998) says in response to this criticism, that while the

“primary matrix” (pre-egoic fusion) and “spiritual wholeness are by no means the same, they may nonetheless be expression of a common ultimate ground” (p. 68).

On this point I agree with both Wilber and Washburn to the extent that the consciousness of the infant is clearly quite different from that of the realized person, but that the infant is nonetheless inevitably enmeshed in the “primary matrix” or Dynamic Ground; it simply *doesn't know it*, and paradoxically cannot know it until the development of a separate consciousness has been achieved. If there is in fact a “common ultimate ground” as Washburn asserts, there can only be one such, and we thus take the terms “True Nature”, “Presence”, “Dynamic Ground” and “Self” to refer to the same underlying nature of all manifestation.

## II

Contemporary psychological developmental theory of the self was first comprehensively expounded by Margaret Mahler and her colleagues (1975) and while their conclusions have been clearly refined and added to by subsequent researchers and writers, I will argue that not only have her basic conclusions (as they affect our conclusions herein) not been overturned by, for example, recent findings in attachment theory and neurology, but they have been essentially confirmed. Though there has been a good deal of debate and criticism on the specifics of Mahler's developmental stages, I believe the following points first asserted by Mahler continue to hold true: that there is a “psychological birth” that takes place in the years following physical birth, as the infant brain develops in interaction with its primary caregiver(s), and that the end result of this process is essentially a representational self that feels different and separate from other selves and the world. So this leaves us with the intriguing question that if a newborn

infant is not born with a ready-made identity - which is therefore something that must develop later on - what exactly is it that develops at some later point? Where does it come from? To paraphrase a Zen koan – where was “I” before this and what is it that happens when “I” appear?

Turning now to Mahler’s account of the development of ego identity or sometimes the “body ego” as she sometimes calls it, we begin with the infant as part of the primary matrix, it has no self boundaries and is part of the undifferentiated ground; Mahler *et al* (1975) call this the *Normal Autistic Phase* which essentially involves the infant spending a good portion of its time sleeping and being utterly self involved, and which lasts for a few weeks. This is followed by the *Normal Symbiotic Phase* which lasts until the infant is about five months of age. During these phases (as well as later, of course) the newborn’s most significant experiences involve its interactions with its primary caregiver(s), usually the mother. In fact, the infant is not aware of a distinction between itself and its mother; the two are effectively “fused”. However, Mahler *et al* (1975) say that here we may find the first dim awareness for the infant of the caregiver and itself forming a sort of unified system with a common boundary against the rest of the world. Washburn (1994) observes that this vague sense of the unity with the caregiver might constitute a sort of pre-self:

In Mahler’s view the symbiotic infant has no awareness of itself as a being that is distinct from the primary caregiver. The symbiotic phase therefore is still pre-differentiated. The symbolic infant, however, Mahler stresses, has achieved a vaguely articulated awareness of an infant-caregiver totality, a totality that is at once the symbiotic infant’s world and self. To speak paradoxically, we can say that the symbiotic infant has differentiated a not differentiated self. (p. 47)

As this phase draws to a close at around four to five months of age, the infant begins to embark on a true differentiation of itself from its caregiver and environment, and this overall process is called by Mahler *et al* (1975) the *Separation-Individuation* process. This process is in turn divided into a number of sub-phases, some of which have their own sub phases. These are, and we shall take each in turn: differentiation (4 or 5 months to 8 months), practicing (8 months to 15 months), rapprochement (15 months to 24 months), and object constancy (24 to 36 months).

The differentiation phase is also called by Mahler *et al* (1975) “hatching”, because the “shell” of the earlier more undifferentiated periods has begun to break open and “There are definite signs that the baby begins to differentiate his own from the mother’s body”, and there is a corresponding sense of “alertness” and interest in the environment. These developments correspond with physiological and cognitive changes in the infant’s body (as of course do all these developmental stages) that allow a greater mobility and differentiation of objects in their environment (such as Mother’s face). It is also the time when a burgeoning sense of difference can result in the child choosing items such as blankets and stuffed animals which remind her of her mother when she is not around, that act as stand-ins for her. These were termed “transitional objects” by the British Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott and shows a grasp that the mother is not always there physically (Mahler *et al*, p. 54), further laying the ground for the differentiation that forms the core of individual selfhood. Estelle and Morton Shane make the very important point that the foundation of the nascent ego is the infant’s body image (1989):

A central core of dim body awareness is hypothesized, based on behaviors that demarcate self from other. For example, the infant is observed molding to his mother, distancing from her, feeling his own and is mother's bodies, and handling transitional objects.

At around eight or nine to fifteen months – the *Practicing* period - the child begins to become mobile and start to crawl and then to walk. There is thus the physical possibility of freely chosen separation from the mother, and the corresponding potentials for curiosity and exploration, but also object loss. As Washburn (1998) puts it, though the bond with the mother is still very strong and the infant is still essentially undifferentiated, “...the infant in the practicing sub-phase begins to relate to the caregiver less as a being who must be clung to and more as a safe home base from which to go out and explore the world” (p. 49). Since there is still no real difference in the child’s mind between herself and her mother, she can go out, and if something untoward occurs, she falls down for example, she can return to home base and all will be made well again. This is also the phase in which what Mahler *et al* (1975) called attention to the phenomenon of infantile omnipotence and narcissism, where the infant exults in feeling indestructible; if anything goes wrong, it is back to home to mother and all is well. At least in an ideal world, that is to say; this account of the development of the human sense of self can always go awry at any point. If the caregiver is busy or distracted which is inevitable at one point or other, or even downright neglectful or abusive, this will naturally affect the growing and vulnerable little person’s inner and deepest sense of her self. Events such as these, early in life, can and do have profound affects in the trajectory of later life.

There is still a good distance to go before the child can truly be considered an individual. At the age of about 15 months, the practicing phase is succeeded by the period of *Rapprochement*. In a general way what is occurring here is that the freedom afforded by greater mobility evidenced in the previous phase has shown the child that she can

leave her mother (or her mother can leave) from a physical point of view and this will tend to lead to the dawning conclusion that the two of them are not at all times and all places one; that they might not be irrevocably fused and united. So as a greater sense of difference continues to creep in, the child may grow more tentative and even anxious around her mother. The word *rapprochement* after all comes from the French word *rapprocher* ("to bring together"), and means the re-establishment of cordial relations. Often used in international relations between countries, the most important aspect to take note of here is that it is the *re*-establishment of relations. (Mahler *et al*, 1975).

As the child continues to explore on her own, she will often revert to home base, because there is a growing realization that as she and her mother are not necessarily wholly one unit, and she may even begin to realize that she could lose this most important object that literally constitutes her world. In short, there emerges here a conflict between the drive for independence and the drive for safety back to the caregiver, which may take the character of a crisis and which at the very least can result in a sense of thoroughgoing ambivalence.

The infant is deeply impressionable and affected by the quality of these interactions, which remain in the developing mind as memories. The growing cognitive powers of the young brain increasingly allow images of both the child and the caregiver to be stored as impressions and memories; specifically images of oneself and the caregiver, or "self-representations" and "object-representations".

These memories, moreover, have a very specific structure as far as the creation of identity is concerned, and to better explain this, we will now have an introductory excursus into the field of *object relations*, which according to one of the great

synthesizers in this field, Otto Kernberg (quoted in Almaas, 1988, p. 54), is defined as an image (object-representation) of the caregiver, a representation of the child (self-representation), and a feeling of affect between them. *The whole relationship, in other words, gradually becomes internalized as a unit of identity*, so to speak. Not all experiences carry equal psychic weight in the formation of our personalities, however; those that are most pleasurable or traumatic, or earliest in time or regularly repeated, tend to make a deeper and more lasting impression. Among the earliest and deepest images of ourselves is our identification with our body. As Mahler and her collaborators put it (1975): “We use the term identity to refer to the earliest awareness of a sense of being, of entity – a feeling that includes, we believe, a cathexis of the body with libidinal energy” (p. 8). This formulation can help explain that our experience of our body may not be direct; it is mediated and experienced through an *image* of our body, which in turn forms the basis of our eventual overall self-representation.

An example of an object relation would be where the mother is angry and critical of her child, and the child might experience and then remember an image or representation of the angry mother, an image of itself as weak and overwhelmed and an affect between the two of fear and possibly anger (which may or may not be conscious and acceptable to the child). This whole structure constitutes a unit of object relations which is internalized. One comes to know oneself *only* in relation to the other (the object). This is how one “comes into being” as a separate person; in this case perhaps, a person who, as part of their identity, feels fundamentally weak and defenseless.

Of course if there is just one occasion of our example of the mother being angry and critical, then it will not have much impact on the developing mind of the child

(unless the single occasion is unusually traumatic). What gets repeated – positive or negative, good or bad - tends to begin to form the core of the ego identity, which is the “self-representation” end of the object relation, and there are of course many layers of experience over the years as the child grows up. We can see from this analysis that if there are disturbances in the relationship between mother and child, whether through abuse or neglect, it will be very difficult to develop a consistent and positive self-representation, as the two are indissolubly linked. How can I have a benign self-image when the object-image of my caregiver is, say, scary, erratic or abusive? It is thus important for effective functioning in the world that we develop such a reasonably positive, coherent and consistent self-representation; it is not a stage we as humans can “skip over” without consequences.

Having outlined the core concepts of object relations as they relate to the formation of identity, we now return again to the Rapprochement phase better able to understand how this phase has a particularly strong effect on our self-image – who we think we are. As Washburn (1998) puts it:

The serious ambivalence of the child during the rapprochement crisis causes the child to split its primary object representation and its self-representation into all-good and all-bad representations. The caregiver with whom the child seeks rapprochement is seen as a being who is all good: nurturing, loving, protective. And corresponding to this all-good object representation is an all-good self-representation: the child sees itself as a helpless innocent wholly deserving of the caregiver’s vigilant love. On the other hand, the caregiver with whom the child has come into conflict is seen as a being who is all-bad: absent, engulfing, angry, punishing. And corresponding to this all bad object representation is an all bad self representation: the child sees itself as a being who is imperious and contrary and wholly deserving of the caregiver’s abandonment or punishment. (p. 53)



As mentioned above, the course of ego development rarely runs completely smoothly, and from this account we can see that as our individual identity is formed, it is formed with a specific character and flavor, whether independent or anxious of separation, worthy or damnable.

The child, at about 24 months, having navigated her way more or less successfully through the potential terrors of rapprochement, now has the challenge to fully establish *Object Constancy* the final phase in Mahler's system of development of personal identity. As we might expect from our account so far of ego and object relations psychology, a successful end point is reached when the child realizes that she and her mother are different, and that she has her own personal sense of a separate identity. In object relations parlance, the child has internalized a coherent and stable representation of both her mother (the object-representation) and of herself (self-representation), the two being indissolubly interlinked in their creation, as we have seen. In a very real sense, the child no longer needs her mother to be always physically available because she has internalized her mother, and in doing so, has also internalized her idea of herself (who she is in other words, her sense of herself), which as we have seen can be more or less secure, worthy, and so on.

In outlining this way in which we come to have a personal ego identity, it is necessary to make a distinction between ego as *identity* and ego as *executive function*. Identity is only one of many functions that ideally are performed by the ego, which include reality testing, judgment, autonomous functions such as attention, concentration, perception, and a synthetic/integrative function in which the individual integrates all these various parts of her psychic world, including object relations (Goldstein & Noonan,

1999, p. 38). Clearly these latter functions have also been developing during and as part of the whole separation individuation process, though our main focus has been identity. Notwithstanding this, it goes without saying the ego functions outlined above must also be more or less effectively developed as the child grows. And as we shall argue later, these functions do not change as Self realization takes place; the ego aspect that undergoes a shift is the aspect of ego identity. A Self-realized person must still talk and walk and feed themselves, all of which require that these ordinary ego functions be in reasonable working order.

What is important for our argument herein and the rationale for our explication of this process in the detail we have, is that the core of ego-identity is a *representation*, which is the core insight that later work also continues. Moreover as noted, it is interesting that at many points Mahler refers to ego identity as “body-ego,” as the core of the representation is an image of a separate body that extends to the boundaries of the skin – what is inside is “me” and what is outside is “other” - indeed, most people when asked if their self was housed inside themselves or outside, would undoubtedly answer the former. It is surely no accident that in common parlance when a person feels bad about himself, we say, “He has a bad self image”, but not that “He has a bad self” Why this is so important, and the exact relation between self-representation and Self (as earlier described) constitutes the next stage of my argument.

In summary, I will be arguing that the definition of ego identity we have established so far dovetails with Advaita in two ways: the inner boundary established by the self-representation based on the body image creates the subject-object distinction and is thus the most basic source of *avidya* and is also simultaneously the source of the

superimposition of the individual self onto the Self, creating *maya*. We come to Self-realization when we see that what we have been taking ourselves to be, as real as it feels, is in truth fundamentally a mental construction, and not a solid, independently subsisting “self” somehow housed within in us. This approach also helps us to make more sense of what Ramana and Nisargadatta spoke of, above, that the ego is “not real” and that we are not our body. Having finished our review of Mahler, we can interpret these comments as meaning not that we get rid of our ego, understood as ego identity, but that that we can come to understand its true nature as a representation which we may need to navigate the world, but which is not substantially true. Similarly, ‘disidentifying’ with our body means we are disidentifying with the underlying *image* based on the contours of our body, not ‘getting rid of it’ in any way.

Are these basic insights from the work of Mahler and her colleagues still helpful to us today? Have they been superseded or refined in such a way that they are no longer a good guide to how we come to have a self? The work of Mahler and her colleagues has evolved into what is today broadly called the field of intersubjectivity in infant research. One of the first such theorists was Daniel Stern (1985), who like Mahler also based his findings on painstaking observational studies, but was also able to supplement this with minute analysis of videos of mother-child interactions. He disagreed with Mahler in a number of respects, one of the most important of which is summarized by Elizabeth Bader (2010, p. 8):

...the infant is primed from the beginning to be interested in others. The infant’s developmental task, then, is not so much separation from mother, as the creation of ties with others, including mother. The development of the capacity for mutual recognition between mother and infant is particularly emphasized.

In response to Stern's findings, Fred Pine, one of Mahler's original co-researchers has this to say in his introduction (written in 2000) to "The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant" where he notes several criticisms of the original research and responds in various ways. We can perhaps summarize these concerns by noting that a common criticism is whether the actual phases and associated age ranges are universally applicable to all infants. Noting that human development varies widely by individual and upbringing, he states in reply that "...the clinical value of our ideas on merger and separation-individuation supports our inferences and their significance, even though it does not confirm our specific developmental hypotheses." (2000, p. x). Pine also refers to the specific point made by Daniel Stern (1985), and alluded to above, that the infant is born with some sort of primitive ego and that subsequent experiences of merger and lack of differentiation are thus likely the product of fantasy. Pine responds that:

"I am not convinced, however – because development of merger experience exist side by side with moments of awareness of differentiation from the outset...A more likely trajectory is some diffuse impression of the world out there, not quite fantasy but certainly not clearly reality, followed, optimally, by a gradual sorting out culminating in the mental construction of a better approximation of external reality." (1975, p.xiii)

For our purposes, I do not believe that Stern's stated concerns and Pine's responses fundamentally compromise the basic hypothesis we are putting forward, that the sense of personal ego identity is created from historical layered self and object representations. For further support of this view, I note the point made by the authors of a 2003 review of three prominent contemporary intersubjectivity researchers (including Stern) that affirms the centrality of some sort of primitive representations of self and other from an early age (Beebe, et al, 2003, p. 828):

All three conceptualize a highly complex, presymbolic representational intelligence, a motivated and intentional (rather than reflexive) infant, capable of distinguishing self from environment at a perceptual level.

Not only this, but I will argue that we can also look to recent neurological research to confirm Mahler's (and my) conclusions. For several decades and over the course of a number of densely argued and well sourced books and papers (1999, 2008), Allan Schore has synthesized a vast amount of psychoanalytic, attachment and neurological research that amongst other things, bears very much on the question of the development of the self. In his 2008 summary of the research for clinicians, Schore, and his wife Judith, makes the following statement in support of Mahler: "Through sequences of attunement, misattunement, and reattunement, an infant becomes a person, achieving a "psychological birth" (Mahler et al. 1975). This preverbal matrix forms the core of the incipient self." (p. 4)

Though we do not have space to consider all the ways in research on the brain has added to our understanding of infant development, we might consider the following quote also from the Schores (2008) as reinforcing our view of the construction of identity after birth in the interactions between child and caregiver, using the language of neurology:

...the hard wiring of the emotion processing limbic circuits of the infant's developing right brain, which are dominant for the emotional sense of self, are influenced by implicit intersubjective affective transactions embedded in the attachment relationship with the mother. (p. 6)

Note here that an "emotional sense of self", like a self-representation, is not an independent substantially existing separate self in itself. Almaas (1988) has this to say on the sense of self:

The final result is the internalizing of a self-representation (an image or an impression) that is associated with a feeling of self. It includes the feeling

of self or identity as part of the representation, as characterizing or coloring it. The feeling of self or identity is experienced by the infant as coexistent with, and in fact an important part of, the representation or image connected to his body. The reason for this is that when the child remembers the interaction with the mother, he remembers an image of himself (a body image that includes feelings, sensations and thoughts) and the memory includes a feeling of identity...so self-representations are always connected with, or imbued with, a feeling of self.

And Schore continues in the same vein:

Studies in neuroscience now report that this early maturing right hemisphere is centrally involved in “maintaining a coherent, continuous and unified sense of self” (Devinsky 2000), and that a right frontal lobe process, one that connects “the individual to emotionally salient experiences and memories underlying selfschemas, is the glue holding together a sense of self” (p. 5/6)

Turning now to a contemporary philosopher, Thomas Metzinger, of whom the Harvard scientist Alan Hobson has said (2005, p. 2): “[other philosophers] have begun to put together philosophy, physiology and psychology, the three domains of William James. But *no-one* [emphasis in original] has done this as thoroughly as Thomas Metzinger.” The following excerpt takes a view that I believe is absolutely consistent with the conclusions reached so far in this paper:

No such things as selves exist in the world. For all scientific and philosophical purposes, the notion of a self – as a theoretical entity – can be safely eliminated. What we have been calling “the” *self* in the past is not a substance, an unchangeable essence or a thing (i.e., an “individual” in the sense of philosophical metaphysics), but a very special kind of representational content: The content of a self-model that cannot be recognized *as* a model by the system using it. The dynamic content of the phenomenal *self*-model (hereafter: “PSM”) is the content of the conscious self: Your current bodily sensations, your present emotional situation plus all the contents of your phenomenally experienced cognitive processing. They are constituents of your PSM. All those properties of your experiential self, to which you can now direct your attention, form the content of your current PSM. This PSM is not a thing, but an integrated

process. Intuitively, and in a certain metaphorical sense, one could say that you *are* the content of your PSM. A perhaps better way of making the central point intuitively accessible could be by saying that we are systems that constantly *confuse* themselves with the content of their PSM. At least for all conscious beings so far known to us it is true that they neither *have* nor *are* a self. Biological organisms exist, but an organism is not a self. Some organisms possess conscious self-models, but such self-models certainly are not *selves* – they are only complex brain states. (2005, p. 3)

We shall give the last word to the Buddhist psychiatrist Mark Epstein who writes of “the self that does not exist...the representational self [as] an internalized concept of who or what we are, made up of a shifting amalgam of intrapsychic representations that coalesce in varying ways into our repertoire of self images.” (2007, p. 212). This well captures the paradoxical sense that while our self is insubstantial, composed as it is of memories and images, we nonetheless feel we *are* this self, and cannot do without it.

### III

But how can we come to see this, to overcome the *uphadi* of the powerful core belief that our self-representation based on the body-image is who we really are? After all, this conditioning has been pounded into us from very early on; that we are separate individuals in a world of separate objects, and this goes universally unchallenged.

According to mainstream Western psychology and neurology then, personal identity is formed essentially in the first three years of life, and is constituted by a mental image, a self-representation, which is itself formed in conjunction with and arises out of the relation with important caregiver(s), and this is the end of the story of identity from this point of view. But what, exactly is our self-image supposed to be an image of? What is the self that we are said to have an image of? How can what is in effect a snapshot (or

layers of snapshots) of ourselves retained in memory, actually be who we are in any living sense? On this point modern psychology and neurology are silent (though of course Advaita is not). This is because, as A.H. Almaas (1998) points out, the authors in this tradition (we have only been able to mention a couple in our brief review) as well as the effect of everyday linguistic usage, tend to confuse *self* and *self-image*.

It is understandable that most authors use the word self to refer to self-representation, for it is, in a very deep sense, synonymous with self. Although the self-representation is a mental construct, we do not ordinarily experience it as such. Quite the contrary, most of us normally experience the self-representation as the self. (p. 57)

This is very important, because we may be able to come to see, through traditional spiritual practices such as meditation and self-inquiry, that what we have been taking ourselves to be is not in fact something real and alive, but a representation based on past impressions and memories which have been in many respects unconscious, and we have just taken the results for granted. To use a common analogy, conventional ideas of “me” are no more my true self than a menu is the food itself.

So what is the living self? Who are we really if we are not the self-image we have believed ourselves to be all these years? And does the self-image, the ego identity, serve any useful function at all, and why must we go through this lengthy process of acquiring a self, only to attempt to get rid of it or “see through” it? The answer given by Advaita, and echoed by thinkers such as Almaas, is that our true nature is pure awareness or Presence or “Is-ness”, not the *contents* of awareness (including our self-images). We are what is ultimately aware, the witness of events when we are no longer completely identified with the particular contents of our consciousness (though these events continue



to occur). We still need our ego structures to live and navigate in the world; however, we are no longer identified with them exclusively.

In fact, as Washburn might say, we need to separate and lose contact with our “Dynamic Ground” of Being so that we can develop a separate sense of self, even though it turns out ultimately to be not quite what we thought, in order that we might come back to our source, and know it as it is, which is not possible for us as infants and children. So if we are not able to develop a functioning ego we will probably not be able to access spiritual experience, or at least not be able to stabilize there. For this, we need a reasonably coherent ego structure. It is also possible as Nisargadatta says (reported by Almaas, (1998)), that human life, including our alienation from our source and ground, is necessary to develop self consciousness in the fashion we have outlined, and that this in fact may be the way the Absolute, the Self comes to know itself:

When we turn to the depths of the Absolute there is no experience; there is cessation. Nisargadatta recognizes the absolute truth as pure awareness, but he also says that pure awareness needs something to manifest in order to be aware. The Absolute is the witness, but the witness cannot witness itself because there is nothing to witness then. This is a very interesting characteristic of the absolute truth. (p. 430)

To complete my “theory” of Self-realization, we now turn to how we might begin to shift our identification from the “small self” ego-identity to the “large Self”, or the whole of nondual witnessing awareness. As we might expect, having established with the help of Western psychology the exact nature of who we think we are – an image - this then will become the “target” of our spiritual inquiry, to understand that this is who we have been taking ourselves to be, even though as Almaas says above, we are not ordinarily aware of this: how then do we become aware in this way?

Given the approach outlined so far between Self and self-image, we can come to understand that in our daily lives we have been trying to do something that we can never do – to turn a self-image into the Self, that is to say, to become a real person through identifying with a self-image. *We have been trying to live up to, to be our self-image, but the ego cannot do it, no matter how much it tries.* Yet at the same time we feel convinced that there is something real and true to aspire to, that we truly do exist and can become ourselves in some deep and meaningful way. I would suggest that a good deal of everyday distress is caused by the unarticulated but deeply felt sense that in some way we are incomplete and unreal, but we can't quite put our finger on why this is, or what can be done about it.

This accounts, I believe, for the common experience of disappointment and futility when we get when get what we thought we always wanted, become who we always thought we wanted to be. There may be temporary happiness and fulfillment, but this still isn't "it", because according to our nondual point of view, it is in fact impossible to be a "person" as generally conceived: a "person" can only ever be a self-image, and a self-image cannot ever be a real person. We can and do identify with a self-image, but this self-image is, as we have said, akin to a photograph, it is a memory, not a living reality.

Nondual inquiry and meditation can show us that we are not the self-image; we are the Presence, the awareness, within which all mental phenomena, including self-images, occur. The difference between the two is clearly stated by Almaas (1998):

The self can experience itself either purely and immediately, or through memories and structures created by past experiences. When it is seeing itself directly, it is aware of itself as primordial purity, without veils, without obscurations. It recognizes this pure condition as its ontological

nature. This primordial purity or ontological nature is recognized as the self's ultimate truth. So we say that the self has an Essence. The central property of this Essence, or true nature, is that it is an ontological Presence. Presence is the Essence of the self, just as protoplasm is the Essence of the body. (p. 25)

Our goal then, is to shift the identity from the self-image(s) to Presence, the Self, the larger awareness. Essentially this is achieved when we give up the struggle to be something we can never logically be – a mental image; then we can “get” what we always wanted, which is to be who we are, to truly and effortlessly be ourselves. Being does not require a special effort to exist, to be, it already *is* by its very nature; similarly, we cannot *try* to be ourselves by greater and greater efforts, as we end up feeling deficient when we invariably fail. We have been diverted by attempts to be someone and something else that we have been told is who we are.

So how, as a practical matter, can we come to understand the nature of our conventional sense of self and see through our self-representations, defuse and dis-identify with these self concepts and core beliefs, and in turn come to experience and eventually to wake up to (and as) and identify with the space in which all this is occurring, the Self? We will suggest two broad approaches by which we can attempt to “achieve” this (though achieving anything when the Self is everything is misleading). As Shankara would put it, we are simply removing false ideas of ourselves. Two of the time honored approaches to spiritual understanding are meditation and Self-inquiry.

I shall turn first to meditation. If we accept the view I am putting forward that as our normal sense of self based on a representation is not real, the approach we must take is not to try to change that, to try become a better person – a better self image, in other words - through what amounts to a self improvement project, but to see through and

understand that the feeling of myself, my sense of myself, is based on a mental construction. We are not trying to develop a better self-image as we do in psychotherapy (a perfectly reasonable goal, but not ours here), we are trying to see that we were never, and could never ultimately be, a self-image in the first place.

There is a metaphor commonly used in Eastern thought when describing the process of meditation. Imagine that our thoughts and feelings are like clouds in the sky and that if we watch and observe them come into view, cross our view and then leave our view, that there is no real need to react to them at all. The impulse we usually have to “do something” (or to “be someone”) in response to particular thoughts and feelings can be very strong, and this is precisely the degree of attachment and fusion we have with those particular thoughts and beliefs. We can teach ourselves to allow whatever is there to simply be there, and whatever internal responses come are allowed as well. We don’t try to encourage any particular thoughts or feelings, not do we reject any.

The more we do this, the more we learn not to react to our internal experience. We learn in fact, that we have a choice. If the thought comes up, “This meditation is the dumbest most boring thing I’ve ever done, I’m uncomfortable, and I want to get up and leave...now”, we can watch this thought, and realize, though it may be hard, that we do not have to do anything about this thought, we can simply witness it, observe it. We don’t deny it or avoid it, in fact we are doing exactly the opposite of avoiding - we are allowing it completely without resistance. What is different is that our normal impulse (i.e. that since I am uncomfortable I usually automatically get up or change my position), is not acted on.

Something interesting can then begin to be seen. If we don't react to particular thoughts and images, they seem to lose some, or even all of their power, over time. *It seems as if reacting to the thoughts is itself the fuel that powers the belief.* If we strongly react to a thought and get pulled into it, it seems to gain strength and ends up lasting longer than if it is simply allowed it to be. That which is paid attention to grows in importance; by contrast, that which is not strongly reacted to begins to lose its power over time.

One approach to these kinds of automatic thoughts is to dispute them, which is often appropriate, but this is not what we are doing here. We are taking an approach having more to do with *not* engaging, than engaging. We want to see if it is possible for us to simply observe that we have had these thoughts, and allow them to be without reacting either for or against as this approach causes fewer disturbances. In fact, this is exactly what begins to happen if we practice meditation for a while; the thoughts begin to pass away more quickly, mostly because we're not interfering with them in one way or the other. By not reacting to our thoughts, we can see that it is no longer necessary to believe them as we used to and if we continue with this process, all manner of thoughts and beliefs will surface including deeper and deeper self-images which can thereby be slowly loosened of their hold on us. We can begin to see that our thoughts and beliefs and images of ourselves are not in fact solid, subsisting entities, but empty mental constructions that have derived their power from our (and our culture's) implicit and often unconscious belief in them. And when our mind quiets down, and we begin to get out of our own way, the possibility of something very interesting can occur: the awareness can wake up to itself, it can realize that the only "thing" substantially here is

awareness itself, and that our self images are just 'arising' in awareness but not alive in themselves, and that this awake awareness is what we truly are.

This in a nutshell is the process of meditation. We don't try to grasp or push away the thoughts, images and feelings that invariably begin to come to us in meditation. Instead, we allow them to come, and just as surely they will go in their own time, and in their own way, and the mind naturally begins to settle down on its own, and not be constantly pulled in every direction by the agitation of ego activity.

This process is put very beautifully by Mahathera (1990):

In the midst of every pleasant experience, you watch your own craving and clinging take place. In the midst of unpleasant experiences, you watch a very powerful resistance take hold. You do not block these phenomena, you just watch them, you see them as the very stuff of human thought. You search for that thing you call 'me', but what you find is a physical body and how you have identified your sense of yourself with that bag of skin and bones. You search further and you find all manner of mental phenomena, such as emotions, thought patterns and opinions, and see how you identify the sense of yourself with each of them. You watch yourself becoming possessive, protective and defensive over these pitiful things and you see how crazy that is. You rummage furiously among these various items, constantly searching for yourself -- physical matter, bodily sensations, feelings and emotions -- it all keeps whirling round and round as you root through it, peering into every nook and cranny, endlessly hunting for 'me'. You find nothing. In all that collection of mental hardware in this endless stream of ever-shifting experience all you can find is innumerable impersonal processes which have been caused and conditioned by previous processes. There is no static self to be found; it is all process. You find thoughts but no thinker, you find emotions and desires, but nobody doing them. The house itself is empty. There is nobody home. (pp. 103-4)

We now turn to our second category, of Self-inquiry. Here we inquire directly into our present experience and ask who is having this experience right now? One of the greatest modern sages in the Advaita tradition is Ramana Maharshi (1982), and he recommends *Self-inquiry* to explore our present experience and ask who is this person I

call “me”, the one I am taking myself to be, the one who is having these current experiences?

When other thoughts arise, one should not pursue them, but should inquire: "To whom do they arise?" It does not matter how many thoughts arise. As each thought arises, one should inquire with diligence, "To whom has this thought arisen?" The answer that would emerge would be "To me". Thereupon if one inquires "Who am I?" the mind will go back to its source; and the thought that arose will become quiescent. With repeated practice in this manner, the mind will develop the skill to stay in its source. (p. 4)

Given our view of the true Self, the practice of inquiry becomes primarily to stay with and beware of and present to our moment by moment particular and individual experience, "...to let it be and not do anything to it except allow our natural curiosity to unfold it and reveal what it is all about" (Almaas, 2008).

This process is simple, but not easy. We will come across a great deal of discomfort and resistance at various times. Almaas (2008) continues that, "We don't need to go along with the tendency to resist our experience. We can learn to be spacious by being aware of the resistance, being present with the resistance, feeling what it is like, and being curious about it." The dynamic nature of the Self is such that if we are "...able to allow our experience – to embrace it, hold it, and feel it fully rather than rejecting it or trying to change it – we give it the space to be itself. Then it will naturally unfold because that is the nature of our True Nature."

Our principal goal in this “allowing” and “inquiring” process, is to be aware of self-images as they emerge, so they can be identified and understood for what they are. What had previously been unconscious and determinative of our sense of ourselves begins to surface. When this happens, there may be a pervasive feeling of fakeness and deficient emptiness, because the image simply isn't real; our ego feels unreal in its

depths, and we naturally defend against this at all costs, though it can turn out to be an authentic experience. Almaas (1989) puts it this way: “This hole is there in our depths, and we are constantly avoiding it. When we allow ourselves to experience it, we might learn that emptiness is nothing, only peacefulness, and that the chasm is nothing but a boundless peace. It is an emptiness, and it doesn't have a selfhood, but it is not as scary as we imagine it” (p. 46).

As we increasingly become aware of our self-images, we move towards the deeper goal of Self-realization and of freedom and liberation: “Being liberated means there is no clinging to anything; there is no worry, no concern, no heaviness. The mind is not fixated, focused or bound to any particular content; you are aware of whatever arises in the mind, without effort, without even trying to be aware” (Almaas, 1990, p.3) If we are not constantly referring our experience back to some inner loadstar of ourselves - our self image(s) - the mind and internal experience can begin to flow more easily and unimpeded by an agenda of who we are and how things should be, which was set in the distant past. We are truly living in the present – *as* the aware presence - which is real and immediate in a way that the past or future cannot be.

A number of implications for nondual realization immediately flow from this conception. We notice, for example, that we have devoted a good deal of our lives to looking to get support. Support that is, for our identity, even though typically we are not aware that this is what we are doing. Like Narcissus, our self-image only becomes real when someone else recognizes it - when we are “seen” and reflected by the other (just as our mothers brought us psychologically into being by their gaze and mirroring of us). After a period of time spent on freeing ourselves from our ideas of ourselves through



meditation and self-inquiry, with the result that we no longer have to rely so much (or at all) on others for our sense of knowing who we are, we become more autonomous and less dependent on the opinions of others. We know ourselves not through a constant referral, conscious and unconscious, to our minds and our representations, but by simply being ourselves.

This may in turn lead to a marked sense of aloneness, because using our model of object relations, it is not just our self-representations that are surfacing and being understood as such, but also, of necessity, our object-representations as well. As the process deepens, it can feel not just as if we are losing our selves, but also others as well (our parents notably), as the symbolized internal world populated by the important persons in our life loses its hold on us. Of course they are not actually lost or dying, nor is our body lost or dying, it is just our image of them and ourselves that is dissolving – ‘ego death’ it may be called - but if this process of spiritual awakening to our true nature is genuinely occurring it can feel very real indeed. We can begin to see what Plotinus (1984) was referring to when he spoke of the spiritual quest as the “Flight of the Alone to the Alone”.

In fact our whole sense of being a separate person can disappear entirely, as occurred to the writer at a retreat in June 2007. I had been thinking of my trip from my home in Bermuda to Pennsylvania, where the retreat was taking place:

And suddenly I had this distinct experience that in reality *no-one* had come up from Bermuda and no-one was here now in this room. Indeed, all individual identities disappeared, as if up in smoke. All beliefs/ideas of people, trees, and anything “separate” just disappeared, and in its place was a large, empty consciousness and awareness on or in which was contained (un-separately) all phenomenon, which were clearly without any substantial independent existence and were just empty appearances. There was no significance to them other than as pure appearance. There was an

enormous sense of freedom, as there was nothing there to be bound or limited or which could suffer. Just the One Consciousness Being empty but purposefully going about its business, wending its way wherever it was and is going. (Gibbons, 2007)

What I saw in this experience seems to accord with the Advaita teachings, and our overall approach in this paper that while our individual sense of self is not ultimately real, a larger and truer Self is, and that our typical commonsensical approach to life, to protect and advance the interests of a separate existing “self” is not (paradoxically) in our best interests. Indeed, what could make less sense than spending our life governed by the needs and compulsions of an entity that is ultimately non-existent, at the expense of the grandeur and luminosity of our true nature?

However, the gradual surfacing of our self images and experiences of “having no self” does not get us out of the woods yet!

...each time we rest in the nature of mind, the ground of the ordinary mind gets weaker. But we will notice that how long we can stay in the state of the nature of mind depends entirely on the stability of our practice. Unfortunately “old habits die hard”, and the ground of the ordinary mind returns; our mind is like an alcoholic who can kick his habit for a while, but relapses whenever tempted or depressed. (Soygal, R. *et al*, 1994, p. 266)

This quote from a different tradition, Tibetan Buddhism, points us in the direction I believe we should go – that experiences of the Self do not automatically lead us to permanent Self-realization, and that ego tends to stick around in various forms. Indeed, even Ramana (2000) conceived of his ego as still existing in his realized state, which he likened to the moon on a sunny day; barely there, but there nonetheless. In fact, we clearly need some degree of ego identification to function in the world.

Experientially, Presence or Self as described by Advaita and contrasted with the everyday sense of being a separate entity, might be experienced in the following way, as

A. H. Almaas (1998) writes:

In self-realization, our experience of ourselves is as a pure act of consciousness. We know ourselves by being directly ourselves. All self-images have been rendered transparent, and we no longer identify with any construct of mind. There is no reactivity to past, present or future. There is no effort to be ourselves. There is no interference with our experience, no manipulation, no activity – inner or outer – involved with maintaining our identity; we simply are. (p.16)

This vivid description of our self as Presence is what I believe is referred to in the Upanishads and in other Vedantic scriptures and commentaries as “Self” with a capital “S”, and contrasted of course with our selves with a small “s” which we associate with ego identity and our personalities.

However, with the illumination and assistance provided by developmental psychology as set forth above, we can see that when we speak of our ‘selves’ in the everyday sense, we are speaking of something that on the one hand is absolutely essential for us to operate in the world and quite “real” as executive functionality, and on the other hand, ultimately only ideas and mental constructions, a memory or complex of memories and not an ontologically real and separately existing entity with a life of its own.

The personal identity, the personality, the *jiva*, gets its life from the Presence in which it is embedded and on which it depends. Our true self and identity is the Self, which lives *through* the medium of a human body and mind as vehicles (which are themselves made of the same essence as the Self), and not vice versa. We can become, as Almaas puts it (2004), a window for the Absolute to see the universe, we can consciously become the eyes and ears and sensing of and for the Self.

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