

C 6: Western Approach to Nonduality

James Corrigan, *Can we talk together? Understanding the nature of scientific and spiritual discourse*

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There is a growing realization that reality is a nondual whole in which aware presence has a central role. Spiritual traditions attempt to remove our conceptual ideas about reality so that a direct experience of this living presence can be accomplished. For Science, however, conceptual reasoning has unquestioned authority. Science seeks to know 'what' this aware presence is, yet there is strong and valid suspicion in spiritual circles that such 'knowledge' only hides the truth from us. This has direct implications for all forms of discourse between us. I will be speaking about the emerging difficulties that exist in our common understanding of thought as a self-directed activity in light of the turn toward this nondual understanding of reality, as well as the problematic assumptions that underlie the way we all think about phenomenal experience, explaining how both hinder our progress. My goal is to show that there is a way forward to a common philosophical grounding for both spiritual and scientific approaches to understanding reality, as well as the very real possibility to 'turn the volume down' and just be – thought-free. C 6

Greg Goode, *The #1 stumbling block to nondual realization*

This will be a practical session, like a lab, with graphical illustrations and experiments. When one does self-inquiry, there are many possible stumbling blocks along the way. The most common one I have seen while facilitating the inquiry of others is what I call the container metaphor. This is the web of everyday assumptions about human nature according to which we are something non-physical enclosed in something physical, like a Ghost in the Machine. According to this metaphor, based largely on the 17th century philosophy of Rene Descartes, our awareness is on the inside of the container, and objects existing apart from awareness are on the outside the container. This metaphor not only causes everyday feelings of finitude, fear and separation, but also conditions the way we interpret nondual teachings. Even advanced inquirers can interpret awareness as something localized and contained, akin to the sensory and cognitive field. This interpretation is a stumbling block that causes gross problems in one's inquiry, such as feelings of confinement and the fear of solipsism, and subtle problems such as the "intersubjective impasse" and the thought that being awareness means we need to shoot for omniscience. In this session we will do several experiments in awareness that dissolve the container metaphor. We will see that our direct experience is never one of containment or separation, but rather that we are always unbounded and free. We will discover the nature of our experience as loving, open, uncontained awareness.

Jody Radzik, *Folk theory of nondual enlightenment*

In the late 19th-century, the European spiritualist movement came into contact with the idea of nondual spiritual enlightenment. With only native Western conceptual structures to work with, the idea spawned a folk theory of nondual enlightenment in the West. The 19th-century spiritualists were particularly enamored of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, with its description of the fantastic siddhis. When this became the main selling point of a number of New Age progenitors, the folk theory became the genesis meme of practically all New Age religion. This constellation of speculative and superstitious notions about experiential nondual understanding is comprised mainly of images one might arrive at upon considering what it would be like to be the entire universe, God, or simply nonexistent, and is a reflection of a much older folk theory of enlightenment in the East. The result has been a stream of miracle and prosperity cults like "The Secret," as well as a very long line of celebrity gurus, fakes and flimflammers. But could there be an even more insidious effect to these notions? The presence of nondual awareness is ongoing, according to Zen, Dzogchen, and Vedanta. Yet knowing it appears to be very uncommon. There have been many reasons proposed as to why. To these I would add that it's possible ideas about what nondual enlightenment is like as a subjective experience may actively prevent the understanding from coming to subjective awareness. Perhaps the ideas, in their form as neurological impulses, somehow occlude nondual awareness from being recognized as our own consciousness. The rope becomes a snake. Thus, the ideas many use to bring themselves to greater understanding could be the very things that stand most in their way, and yet to see this provides a foil against which we can begin to create new tools of understanding.

Tomas Sander, *Joyful irony and western emptiness teachings*

Within Buddhism, the emptiness teachings systematized by Nagarjuna are often said to be the highest expression of the nondual nature of reality, as well as the surest route to the liberation from suffering. Yet these teachings have been notoriously demanding to study. I will be introducing the framework for Western emptiness teachings, which combine soteriological savvy from the ancient East with examples and antidotes from the modern West. To see one's self as empty is to joyfully affirm one's membership in an essenceless, interdependent web of dependencies. But for someone interested in pursuing emptiness teachings, it can be hard to find them presented in a stepwise, systematic way. And even then, the teachings can be difficult to understand. They are sometimes given in the Tibetan Buddhist curriculum, and rarely found anywhere else. But the West has its parallels to emptiness teachings, articulated by anti-foundationalist, non-metaphysical teachers, beginning with the Greek Pre-Socratics. I will discuss three modern examples of this kind of teaching: Ludwig Wittgenstein on the notion of meaning, W.V.O. Quine on the notion of objectivity, and Kenneth Gergen on the social construction of the self. When pursued wholeheartedly in a supportive context, Western analogues to Buddhist emptiness teachings can result in an open-hearted, life-affirming "Joyful Ironism." The joy arises when one experiences new life-options made possible by the cessation of existential anxieties. The ironism is not the literary trope, but the combination of full engagement in the world with the deep-rooted knowledge that the world lacks a metaphysical foundation. Joyful irony is ironic not only about reality, but also about views and descriptions, including the very notion of "joyful irony" itself, which is

regarded as no less empty than anything else. This talk is based on joint work with Greg Goode.

James Swartz, *The epistemology of non-dual knowledge*

The Epistemology of Non-dual Knowledge Knowledge requires a means. If reality is non-dual consciousness, then the means we have evolved for understanding ourselves and the world are inadequate means for consciousness because consciousness is subtler than perception. Therefore, an investigation involving perception will never verify the non-dual nature of consciousness. At the same time, the existence of consciousness does not need to be scientifically verified, because it is self evident. If our instruments of knowledge, the senses and the mind, are inadequate means, and we do not need to prove the existence of consciousness, in so far as we cannot seek any kind of knowledge unless we are conscious beings, how will we come to appreciate the non-dual nature of the self in so far as the self can only be consciousness, if reality is non-dual? Knowledge is nothing but the removal of ignorance. Therefore all that stands in the way of self knowledge is ignorance. Vedanta, the Science of Self Inquiry, is a time-tested proven means of self knowledge. It not only reveals the non-dual nature of consciousness, but makes the significance of this knowledge in terms of the removal of suffering obvious. Liberation, freedom from existential suffering, can only be gained by understanding the nature of the self, not through experience, mystical or otherwise, because consciousness, the nature of all living beings, is not available for objectification and perception only works with reference to objects. This talk will outline this remarkable means of knowledge, the Science of Self Inquiry, from beginning to end. It begins with a discussion of the four human motivations, considers the two basic theories of enlightenment, the qualifications necessary for enlightenment and the nature of the self. It ends with an overview of the value of the Yoga as an indirect means of self realization.