

***Double Vision***  
***Duality and Nonduality in Human Experience***

People living in modern cultures suffer an extreme degree of alienation that was unknown in earlier times— from society, community, family, older generations, nature, religion, tradition, their body, their feelings, and their humanity itself. In a dehumanizing techno-culture that has lost sight of the deepest potentials of human nature, we need a spirituality that can help us connect with the intrinsic power, beauty, and goodness of being human. For humanity to move forward in a positive direction, we need a guiding vision of all that it means to be human.

Even in the best of times, being human is challenging and confusing, for it involves living on different planes of reality at the same time. To be fully human, then, requires cultivating a taste for paradox— an appreciation of how very different truths can be true at the same time. Indeed it is this multi-dimensional quality of our experience that is the source of all human creativity and greatness.

**DUALISM AND NONDUALITY**

Most people's consciousness, however, remains restricted to a single plane of reality: dualistic perception, as fabricated by the conditioned egoic mind, which sets up a solid division between the separate self over here and everything else over there. All our main patterns of self-defense — repression, resistance, denial, avoidance, withdrawal, projection, judgment, rejection, dissociation, aggression— are ways of separating ourselves from reality, standing apart from it, and substituting a mind-created virtual reality in its place. This tendency to fabricate our own separate reality is a way of trying to protect ourselves against "other"— those elements of reality that appear alien or threatening.

The dualistic ego-mind is essentially a survival mechanism, on a par with the fangs, claws, stingers, scales, shells, and quills that other animals use to protect themselves. By maintaining a separate self-sense, it attempts to provide a haven of security in an impermanent world marked by continual change, unpredictability, and loss. Yet the defensive boundaries that create a sense of safety also leave us feeling isolated and disconnected. So unless we develop beyond the defensive ego-mind, we remain subject to endless inner conflict, alienation, and suffering — the hallmark of what the Eastern spiritual traditions call *samsara*.

Fortunately, as human beings we also have access to a larger dimension of consciousness that is intrinsically free of dualistic fixation. The Eastern spiritual traditions

regard this egoless awareness as our true, essential nature, the very ground of our being. Tapping into this pure nondual presence, as in certain types of contemplative knowing, reveals a wide open field of awareness in which the separation between self and other, or perceiver and perceived, falls away.

By dissolving the cognitive filters that maintain the division between self and other, nondual awareness is the doorway to liberation from the conditioned mind and the narrow, conflictual world of samsara. It reveals absolute truth, the way things ultimately are: inseparable, undivided, interconnected. The Indian axiom, "Thou art That," expresses this discovery: our very being is not separate from the isness of all things. What I am is inseparable from the whole of reality as it appears and flows through me at every moment, in the flux of my ongoing experience.

If the dualistic egoic mind is pre-human, or subhuman, in that it is survival-oriented, nondual egoless awareness is trans-human, or suprapersonal, because it opens up a larger expanse of being or presence that is free from our usual preoccupation with how our life is going. These two planes of existence— subhuman and trans-human, samsara and nirvana— are the main focus of many Eastern traditions, which lay out a path leading from the bondage of conditioned mind to the liberation of unconditioned awareness<sup>1</sup>.

#### THE HUMAN REALM

This potential to transcend the limitations of the human condition is certainly a most essential human capacity, as the East has demonstrated<sup>2</sup>. Yet in their focus on liberation from

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<sup>1</sup> As the spiritual practitioner progressively stabilizes and integrates nondual awareness into his or her life, even the division between samsara and nirvana is worn away. At the higher levels of realization, the sense of moving from samsara toward liberation collapses altogether. Finally there is realization that samsara *is* nirvana, that dualistic perception is only a play of awareness, whose very nature is open and free.

<sup>2</sup> I recognize that this discussion of the East is highly generalized, and applies more to the traditions of India and Tibet than to those of China and Japan. Yet the West has developed an appreciation for individual development and personal experience that has been mostly unknown in the East. As Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, speaking of the Zen masters he studied with in Japan, notes:

As masters, they appear in a supreme form in which every personal element has been converted into something suprapersonal, almost remote from the world, or at least not involved in it. One rarely, if ever, meets the happy or suffering individual, through whose joy-filled, sorrow-filled eye

conditioned existence, the Eastern spiritual traditions often do not regard the human plane as particularly interesting or significant in its own right. In classical Buddhist thought, for example, the human realm is simply one of the six domains of samsara. It happens to be the most fortunate realm to be born into. But this is because being human is the best platform for liberation, rather than having any special significance in itself. It is the only realm in which it is possible to become enlightened.

While the East emphasizes liberation from the human condition, the Western spiritual traditions place special value on human incarnation in its own right, and are more interested in fulfilling the meaning of this incarnation than in going beyond it or finding release from it. The West appreciates the human realm proper, as a third, intermediate reality between unconditioned and conditioned, trans-human and subhuman. Instead of liberation, the West focuses on humanness as an evolving vehicle through which the divine, or unconditioned being, can progressively manifest in conditioned, earthly existence. As Karlfried Graf Dürckheim (1992), an early pioneer in East/West psychology, sums up this difference between East and West:

For us in the West, it is more important that a new worldly form should emerge *from* true nature and witness to Being...than that the ego should dissolve *in* true nature and *in* Being (1992, p.100).

The Western traditions also emphasize fully inhabiting our humanness, with all its precariousness and vulnerability. This means fully engaging in the relationships and existential situations we find ourselves in, and also becoming involved in the evolutionary task of transforming this world. For instance, the Jewish teaching of *tikkun ha-olam*, "repairing the world," stresses the importance of fully engaging and transforming worldly existence. Similarly, Christ's willingness to submit to crucifixion points to the necessity of entering fully into the human condition in order to purify or redeem it.

Drawing on the wisdom of both West and East, then, we could say that to be human is to be vulnerable and indestructible at the same time. Fully inhabiting our humanness involves a willingness to open fully to the rawness of creaturely existence, and feel what it is like to be

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the otherworldly glimmers in a unique personal sense ...Is such a master a person in our sense of the term ? (p. 101)

Indeed, psychotherapy could only develop in a culture where human experience is regarded as interesting and important in its own right.

subject to hurt, limitation, conditioning, and death. Transcending our humanness means gaining access to the larger domain of pure being and limitless awareness that is not bound by conditioned existence at all.

Being fully human means honoring both these truths —immanence, or fully engaging with our humanness, and transcendence, or liberation— equally. If we try to deny our vulnerability, we lose touch with our heart; if we fail to realize our indestructibility, we lose access to enlightened mind. To be fully human means standing willingly and consciously in both dimensions. This makes human existence an extremely interesting crossroads.

#### DOUBLE VISION: TRANSCENDENT AND IMMANENT TRUTH

A view that honors and appreciates the full range of human experience, then, must include three dimensions. First of all, there is samsara, the pre-human realm of conditioned existence, characterized by survival concerns and dualistic alienation. The *dualism* of the egoic mind sets up a strict divide between self and other, resulting in endless suffering and conflict. Then there is nirvana, trans-human liberation, characterized by a pure, open field of awareness that is not divided into subject and object. This awareness of *nonduality* is unconditioned, for it is not produced by any cause or condition. It does not arise and cease; it is always there, ready to reveal itself to the mind that knows how to tune into it. Nondual awareness is the doorway to liberation by revealing absolute truth: There is no separate self and no separate other, and thus dualistic alienation and conflict cease.

Thirdly, there is the human domain proper, which comes to full measure through bringing the complete openness of supra-personal awareness into personal responsiveness and vital engagement with the situations and people we encounter. On the human plane, our lives evolve and unfold through the relative *play of duality* — otherwise known as relationship. Indeed the central, defining feature of the human realm *is* relationship— the network of interactions with others that supports our life from the cradle to the grave.

Relationship only happens when there are two— who engage in a dance that continually moves back and forth between twoness and oneness. In this way, the human realm serves as a bridge linking samsara— the experience of separateness— and nirvana— nonseparateness. This is why being human is a living paradox, and also a field in which a vast range of feeling— from unbearable sorrow to unthinkable joy— is possible.

However, there is a one-sided perspective circulating in the contemporary spiritual scene that uses the absolute truth of nonduality to disparage or belittle the relative play of duality in human experience. This perspective casts nonduality in a primarily transcendental light, regarding only absolute truth— the nonexistence of separate entities— as real, while seeing phenomenal existence — the play of duality— as unreal, illusion, untruth. As one Indian teacher states this view, "Whenever there is duality, it is a dream state...a fraud." Yet in

regarding the play of duality as only unreal, this one-sided transcendentalism verges on nihilism— negating the significance of relative experience altogether. In the name of nonduality, it creates its own form of dualism by setting up a divide between absolute truth and relative human experience.

Because human existence is a bridge spanning two worlds— absolute and relative, freedom and limitation, indestructibility and vulnerability — it requires a capacity for double vision, where we recognize how opposite truths can both be true at the same time. In the light of absolute truth, the play of duality is illusory because self and other are not truly separate. Even though two waves appear to be separate and distinct, they are but transient pulses of one and the same ocean. This is transcendent truth. Yet from the relative perspective, each wave is distinct, with its own unique characteristics. This is immanent truth. It is the perspective of a surfer out on the waves who must attend and respond to the particular quality of each wave if he is to ride it skilfully and not endanger his life.

While most spiritual teachings recognize the paradox of the human condition, few articulate an integrated perspective that equally embraces transcendent and immanent truth. One contemporary Jewish rabbi, Rami Shapiro, articulates such a balanced view by regarding separateness and nonseparateness, form and emptiness as two expressions of God's nature (or of the nature of mind or reality, if we use nontheistic terms):

From the shore, the sea appears a vast field of waves, each separate and unique. From beneath the surface, the waves disappear into a sameness, a unity with diversity. Which view is right? Both are right. The waves are no less real for the ocean's oneness. Nor is the oneness less real for the waves....The key is not to abandon one [truth] for the other, but to hold firmly to both (Shapiro, 1996, pp. 6-7).

The play of duality is real and unreal at the same time. Or we could say it is neither real nor unreal, and that is why it is a play. Transcendent truth —that separate waves are only an appearance —is what is true in the depths. Immanent truth—that each wave is different and unique — is what is true on the surface. A balanced spiritual perspective honors both these truths. Speaking of the equality of the two truths, Shapiro writes:

There is no first and second, there is no primacy of one over the other. There is only co-arising and interdependence....The temporal and fleeting world of *Yesh* [Hebrew for form, separateness] is needed to reveal the powerful and eternal presence of *Ayin* [emptiness, nonseparation]. And both are needed to express the completeness of God (Shapiro, 1996, pp.10-11).

DANGERS OF DEHUMANIZATION

Seeing nonduality as the only truth, while regarding the trials and the playfulness of duality as simply illusory or unreal, makes it difficult to fully engage with our humanity, our existential predicaments, and our felt experiencing. It fosters spiritual bypassing, the tendency to use spiritual ideas to avoid dealing with basic human needs, feelings, and developmental tasks (Welwood, 2000a).

A one-sided transcendental perspective is especially problematic when it comes to helping people meet the difficult challenges of human relationship. It does not grant relationship much significance to begin with, because it does not recognize an "other" at all. As Advaita Vedanta teacher H.L. Poonja puts it, "Know that what appears to be love for an "other" is really love of Self [unconditioned, impersonal being] because "other" doesn't exist. All love is love of Self (1995, p. 471)."

Of course there is a certain truth here: Love does indeed come from beyond us, from pure being, from the absolute source that shines through us and those we love. And the essence of love does involve a dissolving of the boundaries of separation. Yet defining love purely as a mutual recognition of transpersonal being is incomplete and unsatisfying in human terms. On the human level, relationship is a dance of duality— a transformative encounter between two distinct beings, relative self and relative other in all their differences. And this dance has an integrity, reality, and value all its own.

Nondual teachings that mainly emphasize the illusory quality of human experience can, unfortunately, serve as just another dehumanizing force in a world where our basic humanity is already under siege at every turn. What is needed in these difficult times instead is a liberation spirituality that helps people recognize nondual presence as a basis for fully inhabiting their humanity, rather than as a rationale for disengaging from it. We need a spiritual vision that values and includes the central playing-field where our humanity expresses itself— relationship.

#### RELATIONSHIP: THE PLAY OF DUALITY

Valuing the human domain per se, with its possibilities for creative expression, relational intimacy, and passionate aliveness, has been a major emphasis in the West. One of the great prophets of the human realm is Martin Buber. Buber's immanent perspective provides an interesting contrast to the transcendental emphasis found in many Eastern traditions. In his view, human beings cannot exactly reside in the rarefied air of absolute truth. Instead, where human life unfolds and find its meaning is in the play of duality. Human existence reaches its fullest expression in and through our capacity to enter into I/Thou relationship with reality in all its forms. The encounter and communion between I and Thou raises the dualistic perception of subject and object to a higher octave.

Egoic consciousness, which regards the other as an "it," is a form of monologue, because it essentially involves talking only to oneself, seeing and reacting to reality through our own thought-projections. At the other extreme, the realm of absolute being is essentially characterized by silence, since our essential nature cannot be realized or adequately described through words or concepts. The Buddha expressed this by holding up a flower when asked to speak about true nature. To fully inhabit the human realm, by contrast, is to live in dialogue, in Buber's view.

Dialogue is something much more profound than mere verbal exchange. Its essential characteristic is meeting and honoring the otherness of the other— as *sacred other*— which allows a mutual alchemy to take place. In his words, "The basic movement of the life of dialogue is the turning toward the other...accepting with one's essential being another person in his particularity (1965, pp. 22-23)." This is a far cry from darshan with a spiritual teacher who sees you as the absolute Self or non-self that you ultimately are. In Buber's perspective, trying to transcend duality short-circuits the possibility of I/Thou communion.

Dialogue is not limited to person-to-person contact. Buber speaks of dialogue with God, and also describes encountering a tree in this spirit: "With all your strength receive the tree, give yourself up to it... Then, indeed, you will be transformed (quoted in Mannheim, 1974, p. 20)." Even the great Indian mystic Ramakrishna seemed to recognize this sacred dimension of duality when he exclaimed, "'I don't want to *be* sugar, I want to *taste* sugar."

The conditioned ego is immune to this kind of transformative exchange because it remains stuck in subject/object perceptions based on past conditioning . Absolute being also does not change and transform because it is timeless — "as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be." But the human realm, where the play of duality unfolds, is a theater of ceaseless change and evolution.

#### TO BE ONESELF

To encounter the otherness of the Thou is to appreciate another as not only different from you, but also unique, unlike any other you have ever encountered. Buber defines *uniqueness* not as individualism, but as the bearing of a particular gift that no one else can offer in quite the same way. Your presence in the world, your personal embodiment, the offering you make by manifesting as "you"— no one else can express this in the same way that you do. In Buber's words:

Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. 'It is the duty of every person...to know and consider...that there has never been anyone like him in the world, for if there had been someone like him, there

would have been no need for him to be in the world. Every single person is a new thing in the world and is called upon to fulfill his particularity in this world. Every person's foremost task is the actualization of his unique, unprecedented and never-recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, be it even the greatest, has already achieved.

The same idea was expressed by Rabbi Zusya when he said a short while before his death: "In the world to come I shall not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' I shall be asked, 'Why were you not Zusya?' (1970, pp. 16-17)

What does it mean to be yourself in this sense, to "be Zusya"? It doesn't mean proudly proclaiming, "I am me" — the separate personality who has this set of traits, these preferences, this history. To be yourself in Buber's sense means to find the deepest laws of your being, to let your life find and carve out its true path, and to bring forth your innate gifts and qualities in time, through your interchange with life in all its aspects. Being yourself in this sense refers neither to the conditioned ego-self nor to the absolute no-self beyond all characteristics, the timeless buddha nature that is the same in everyone. It involves appreciating yourself as a being-in-process, continually uncovering your true gifts and embodying them in the flowing current of time, relatedness, and action. We could also call this the *true person*.

Only the true person can be intimate, can relate in an intimate way to other people and to life itself. The conditioned ego, identified with roles and identities formed in the past, is incapable of true relationship. Similarly, in timeless, nondual awareness, there is also no relationship; there is only direct knowing, silent presence without involvement in the polarity of self and other. So to be fully engaged in relationship, we have to step into and inhabit our human form— the person.

#### INDIVIDUATION

The true person is the self-in-process unfolding and ripening in time. This developmental process, through which the person evolves and blossoms, is the path of *individuation*. Dialogue— the creative, transformative interchange between self and other — is the flower of individuation. The rarity of true dialogue in our world indicates the rarity of individuation as well.

Psychotherapy can be instrumental in furthering individuation by helping people heal the wounds of relationship, develop their capacity for personal relatedness, and shed the conditioned identities that form the defensive shell of ego, preventing the seed of the person from blossoming forth. How fully the suchness of *you* shines through — in your face, your

speech, your actions, your particular quality of presence, your expressions of love — is partly grace, but also partly a result of how much you have worked on polishing your vessel, so that it becomes transparent to the pure being that is its ground.

Individuation, as I am describing it here, thus goes beyond the secular humanistic ideal of self-actualization— simply finding personal fulfillment or developing one's individual talents as an end in itself. The true person is a higher octave of the separate individual who remains confined within his individuality. According to Buber, the evolution from individual to person happens through fully engaging in the human relational field:

Dialogue between mere *individuals* is only a sketch; only in dialogue between *persons* is the sketch filled in. But by what [means] could a man from being an *individual* so really become a *person* as by the strict and sweet experiences of dialogue, which teach him the boundless contents of the boundary? (1965, p. 21, my italics)

The dialogue between self and other permits a larger way of being ("the boundless contents of the boundary")— an interrelational presence that thrives on the play of differences.

While the true person evolves in the cauldron of human relationship, this evolution also requires a certain degree of spiritual transcendence — a capacity to recognize and open to our larger being, which lies beyond the person altogether. Indeed the true person is one of the potentials of our larger being— to find and express itself fully in the world, in a personal way, through the ineffable suchness of "you" and "I." Individuation is the forging of a transparent vessel— *the authentic person who brings through what is beyond the person in a uniquely personal way.*

We can thus distinguish absolute true nature— universal beingness, which is the same in everyone— from individuated true nature— how each person embodies absolute true nature in a unique form of expression. Individuation is the process of bringing the absolute into human form — the "form" of our person, animated by our capacity for personal, interrelational presence, embodied in the world.

#### A BALANCED UNDERSTANDING

A nondual view that gives greater value to the transcendent than to the immanent is unable to recognize any significance in individuation, the dialogue between I and Thou, the appreciation of otherness, or intimate relationship. On the other hand, a purely immanent approach, such as Buber's, does not recognize the important role that transcendence— the capacity to step beyond the personal, dialogical realm into nondual, supra-personal presence— can play in human development. We need a more comprehensive view that recognizes the nonduality of transcendent and immanent, absolute and relative, emptiness and form.

This is the understanding that can be found, to different degrees, in Buddhist and Hindu Tantra, Zen, Kashmir Shaivism, Sufism, and other traditions, which vary in the emphasis they place on the balance between the two truths. It is a view that can fully embrace paradox, for it recognizes that we live in form and beyond form at the same time. In terms of relationship, this paradox might be expressed as: "Through you I see beyond you to what expresses itself as the you I love."

One Indian teacher in the Advaita tradition, Swami Prajnanpad<sup>3</sup>, who also studied Western science and psychology, provides an interesting example of what such a balanced nondual view might sound like in modern terms. He builds a liberation teaching based not on transcending duality, but on attending more closely to the difference between self and other:

Ego makes you see only yourself and no one else. But it disappears as soon as you see that, along with you, there are others also. With this realization, the feeling comes that, like your own "I", others too have their similar "I". And, when you accept the other's "I", you have also to include in it, his ways of living, his customs and patterns of behaviour, his ways of thinking— the whole of his being. Just as you have your own ways, he too has his own ways. As soon as this fact is accepted, the emphasis on your own self is lessened.

One has only to try to observe and see this: all are different, all are separate. This is only this. That is only that. You may call it good, or you may call it bad, but the fact remains: This is not that. That is not this. That is only that, what it is in itself. How then can you compare this and that, for they are each different and unique?

All things are different from one another. This one is simply this, nothing but itself, complete in itself, established in its own glory, unique. This is *brahman*, the Absolute.

To judge is to compare; but everything being distinct and singular, there is never anything to compare. Everything is incomparable, unique, and absolute. Nothing is absolutely good or bad. There are only differences. What is left then? The other is what he is. Try to know and understand him if you feel like doing so.

The course of life of someone else is different from yours. He will move forward according to his own circumstances. If I have something to do with him, then indeed I shall try to understand him. What sort of person he is, why does he say so, what is his attitude, how does he behave and speak? I shall try to know all that. Then only shall I be able to deal with him. As soon as you accept "that" as it is, your ego disappears then and there.

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<sup>3</sup> Swami Prajnanpad had a small ashram in Bengal and died in 1974. He did not write or give general talks or satsangs, but only met individually with his students. His work is preserved in his letters and some conversations that his French students recorded.

Unity with the other means to see, understand, and feel the other as he is. Understanding engenders empathy, empathy calls forth love and unity.

When you see the other, you are free from the other. Does there appear to be a contradiction here? When I see that he is just he, how do I get free from him? How can I keep him, as well as get free from him? You get free from him when you say, he is. Why? Because you have no expectations toward him!

Try simply to understand that he is he. This effort to understand, the feeling that I have understood, gives you freedom from him. When you have understood that this is this, that is that, you are free from the whole of the world.

Now do you get it? One is free from him by understanding what he is. Why? Freedom from whom? From my own mental creation, from the relationship that I have forged in my mind with him (in Prakash, 1986).

This perspective is interesting because it honors immanent truth within a nondual approach. It is also quite compatible with Buber's focus on relational duality. Swami Prajnanpad suggests that accepting each being as unique and different, and following its own laws, cuts through the narcissism of the self-enclosed ego. When we try to fit others into our expectations or struggle with the way they are, we actually contract and harden the boundaries of the separate self at the same time. We become smaller ourselves. But the act of appreciating the differentness of others, letting them be as they are, literally loosens and dissolves the boundaries that keep us separate at the same time. "The feeling of being not separate emerges in the heart only by accepting what is different," as the Swami puts it (1981a, p. 172).

In this way, we can come to know others in their suchness, and be at-one with them. Unity, or nonseparateness, then, does not come about through transcending the difference between self and other, but through fully allowing the other's differentness — which naturally undermines self-centeredness.

Swami Prajnanpad recognizes the paradox involved here, asking: "How can I be one with the other by regarding him as another entity?...This seems to make no sense at all...Well, it is only by accepting the other as another entity, that the other entity disappears. Contradiction indeed..." When I allow the other just to be what he, she, or it is, without imposing my preferences or offering any resistance, the other is no longer something separate over there, apart from me. I meet and mingle with the other in the open field of awareness, where separate selfhood and otherness dissolve and fade away. Then I discover what it really

means to love— to open to others as they are, without imposing my judgments or agendas on them <sup>4</sup>.

Swami Prajnanpad asks: "What are 'you'? The perfect 'you' is always in contact. Always in contact." Here he comes very close to Buber's central dictum, "All real living is meeting." But Swami Prajnanpad takes one large step beyond Buber, by seeing the relative play of duality as an entry-point into absolute nonduality. Real contact, he says, "is always *advaita*, nondual." In fully accepting and opening to the other as the unique being he, she, or it is, "you are one with that. A paradox indeed." And "what finally comes about is that this acceptance becomes all-pervasive. Nothing indeed remains alien. Nothing different exists...Duality, which is the cause of all conflicts, of division, or disharmony— all that ceases to exist...(in Prakash, 1986)."

#### AT ONE WITH OUR EXPERIENCE

This kind of balanced nondual perspective is not just a teaching for friends and lovers, but has implications for our whole orientation toward life. According to Swami Prajnanpad, letting each element, each being, each moment be just what it is at that moment, established in its own suchness, allows *brahman*—the essence of reality that is greater than any individual form— to be revealed. The absolute *is* how it is unfolding at this moment— in you and in the world. In classical Eastern terms, "emptiness *is* form," or "brahman *is* the world".

Since every element of reality— each being, each moment in time, each experience — is different from every other, this means that everything always arises freshly and uniquely as just what it is. The fact that all things arise freshly and uniquely in each moment means that they are inherently self-liberated, free of all the concepts we have about them— which are based on past conditioning. Similarly, the living, breathing process that we are is always free from all the concepts or beliefs we have about it. Letting our experience be helps us make an important shift— into that unbounded, all-encompassing space of pure being, which alone can let be. In the moment, the small, bounded, dualistic ego falls away.

Letting the relative be as it is, then, reveals the absolute. Thus there is no need to give absolute being a special status apart from the relative process of form evolving in time, for these are inseparable. Realizing this frees us up to move fluidly between engaging with our experience and discovering its spacious, indefinable nature, without regarding either side as more real than the other. There is no need to set up any divide between duality and nonduality.

So if you are angry and upset right now, any attempt to give up, change, or transcend that emotion only creates more dualistic separation. Your anger at this moment is also the

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<sup>4</sup> This perspective also provides a spiritual base for an approach to couples therapy based on recognizing that intimacy grows out of differentiation, the capacity of two partners to fully honor themselves and each other in all their differences.

absolute; it is how the absolute, the truth beyond all form, is manifesting. And if you can open to the anger and be one with it, then the flow of reality will continue to unfold and evolve without becoming frozen in a solid state. Then you are free of the anger. Just as each being unfolds according to its own laws, each state of mind will naturally unfold and move beyond the form it is presently taking, if we do not obstruct this process.

Swami Prajnanpad likens liberation to a ripe fruit letting go of its hold on the branch and falling to the ground. As the fruition of human development, liberation is not superior to individuation, any more than the fruit can be said to be superior to the flower from which it formed (1981b, p. 356). Every element of reality and every stage of development, unique in what it is and different from all others, has equal value. In this way, duality (*dvaita*) provides the vehicle that allows us to realize nonduality (*Advaita*) :

Life is *dvaita*, everything has two aspects... All activities are in *dvaita*: you are *dvaita* now and here! Start from this *dvaita*, see this *dvaita*, know this *dvaita*, fulfill this *dvaita*, let this *dvaita* wither away. And that is *Advaita*: don't forget the secret and mystery of action: be where you are, overgrow yourself, and the consummation will automatically manifest itself. Be what you are, now and here: that is to be *Advaita* now and here...

Be true to yourself, be true intellectually, emotionally, and in action! That is to be the Absolute now and here. Don't divide yourself into: (1) what you are now and here (relatively) and (2) what you should be (absolutely). This division or this duality is the root of all misery. You are what you are now and here—that is the only 'you' that you know...And move on and on, simply because you are a dynamic process only. A bud is a bud now and here...The bud will flower and fulfill its existence— how? By fulfilling the condition in which it is...You can start only as you are now—as an individual and as a person (1981b, p. 8, 11, 12)

This kind of perspective avoids two major pitfalls on the spiritual path —spiritual bypassing and the spiritual superego (Welwood, 2000b)—which are ways of imposing on oneself a higher spiritual perspective that lies far beyond one's actual state, thus creating further inner division. When people try to bypass, or prematurely transcend, their current psychological condition by trying to live up to some noble spiritual ideal, this does violence to where they are. And it strengthens the spiritual superego, the inner voice that tells them they should be something other than they are, thereby reinforcing their disconnection from themselves.

#### PSYCHOTHERAPY IN A SPIRITUAL FRAMEWORK

Interestingly, Swami Prajnanpad studied and appreciated Freud in the 1920s in India, developing his own version of psychotherapy, which he practiced with his students. This would only be possible for a nondual teacher holding a balanced perspective, with its understanding

that the absolute —in the form of you and your experience — is naturally reavealing and actualizing itself in and through where you are at each moment.

This understanding also provides a nondual framework for working with emotions and psychological blockages, an approach I describe as "psychotherapy in a spiritual framework (Welwood, 2000c)." The heart of this approach, as I practice it in my own work, is what I call "unconditional presence"— learning to be present with your experience just as it is. If you are suffering, you must suffer (which literally means "undergo") that experience fully. If you can acknowledge and be one with your pain, your confusion, your emotions, your reactions to pleasure and pain, and your resistance, if you can enter into these experiences fully, directly, intimately, they can move through you freely and fluidly. This fosters a natural unfolding in the direction of truth, compassion, and liberation (Welwood, 2000d).

Relating directly to what is fosters unfolding along two different lines: affective and cognitive.

#### Affective Work

The most basic problem people have is that they are afraid of their experience. Because feelings and emotions often seem overwhelming and threatening, they become suppressed, avoided, or denied— which reinforces inner division between the flow of experiencing and the ego-mind trying to control or manipulate that experience. If we can learn to acknowledge, allow, open to, and be one with what we are feeling, our experience naturally unfolds and releases its knots, revealing larger, egoless qualities of being— such as compassion, strength, clarity, peace, balance, groundedness— that those emotional knots normally cover and obscure.

#### Cognitive Work

The second problem people generally have is that they do not recognize what is actually happening, but are instead blinded and misled by their thoughts— the stories and movies their mind projects onto reality, based on scripts and identities formed in the past. Psychotherapy can address this problem by helping people recognize the difference between "things as they are" and their mental overlay.

For example, a wife reacts to her husband's neglect with anger and blame that only pushes him farther away. First of all she may need to work with her emotional reaction, by learning to open to the anger instead of trying to get rid of it by discharging it on her husband. Then she can begin to look at what is really happening, apart from her emotionally-laden interpretations of what is going on.

For herself, she might see that her anger is driven by a movie playing in her mind— "I don't matter to him" — which in turn triggers an even more intense horror movie, dating back

to childhood —"I don't matter at all." Looking into her sense of not mattering, she sees that she has a hard time feeling it is all right to have her emotional needs or clearly expressing them.

Out of this lack of entitlement she creates situations where people tend to neglect her, leaving her feeling frustrated, empty, and desperate. This pattern of frustration is what makes her hyper-reactive to her husband's inattention. Her work, then, involves freeing up the belief that she is not worthy of receiving what she needs, so that she can let herself acknowledge her emotional needs and then communicate them clearly and directly.

This work on herself allows her to see that her husband tends to withdraw because he has a hard time standing up to her anger without collapsing into self-blame. He is afraid of her intensity, her emotional reactivity, and her tendency to criticize. Seeing that this is why he withdraws, not because she doesn't matter, further frees her up, allowing her to find new ways of dealing with the situation.

#### FINDING ABSOLUTE TRUTH IN RELATIVE EXPERIENCE

Those who hold a strictly transcendental view of nonduality often find it hard to understand the value of working with experience in this psychological way. Why engage or inquire into the emotionality of ordinary life, they argue, since it is only a symptom of egocentricity, ignorance, dualistic fixation?

While there is a certain logic to this argument, it can lead to spiritual bypassing—avoidance of the chaos and uncertainty of one's existential situation—rather than genuine "wisdom gone beyond." How is it possible to truly go beyond a state that one has not yet fully met? When a nondual perspective is used to rationalize spiritual bypassing, it can become an instrument that reinforces disconnection.

Swami Prajnanpad's teaching provides an example of how one can work directly with emotional turbulence within a larger perspective of transcendent truth. In the light of absolute nonduality,

emotional reaction is a warning that you are not in Truth...Emotion is an illusion because it is created by thought [which] wants to have something which is not...

Yet from the immanent perspective,

once the emotion arises, it *is* Truth for the time being. Why? Because it is there. So I can't deny it...Let it come. Allow it to express. Be with that emotion and then be that emotion....Then you will see that very soon it will disappear.... (in Roumanoff, 1989)

Bringing these two views together, Swami Prajnanpad articulates the paradox of double vision:

Emotion is an illusion, no doubt, but this emotion is real [even] though it is an illusion. It is Truth because it is here. How contradictory! (in Roumanoff, 1989)

To avoid spiritual bypassing, transcendent truth needs to be grounded in a willingness to wade in and immerse ourselves in the stormy waves of immanence. We need to broaden the terms of the equation that offers only a choice between samsaric, dualistic mind, and enlightened, nondual awareness. We need to include a third, intermediate term in the equation— the relational play of human experience, where evolution takes place as heaven manifests on earth, infinity infuses finitude, and eternity embodies itself in time.

Opening to the full play of human experience allows for the possibility of a sudden dawning of wakefulness, known in Tibet's Mahamudra tradition as "coemergent wisdom" or "wisdom born within." This is a sudden dropping away of dualistic fixation, allowing a direct and often abrupt entry into nondual presence. It arises right on the razor's edge where ignorance and clarity, appearance and emptiness, stuckness and freedom rub up against each other, and where their striking contrast triggers a moment of vivid awakeness right in the midst of worldly entanglement. When we recognize that unconditioned awareness can infuse each and every moment, regardless of how much we are suffering, then the play of being a person, being in relationship, facing our neurosis, and honoring the experiential process as it unfolds in time can all become vehicles for arousing a clarity of presence that is born right within the heart of duality.

Our alienation and neurosis itself, then, when fully met, are the seeds of wisdom. Trying to transcend our human shortcomings and imperfections, our "sins and defilements," does not liberate them. Only entering into them and suffering them consciously allows us to exhaust their momentum, move through them, and be done with them. Swami Prajnanpad calls this process of full conscious experiencing, *bhoga*, stating: "It is *bhoga* that liberates (in Prakash, 1986)."

The faith that is needed here is the recognition that whatever we are experiencing is truth, for the moment; it is all that we have to work with because at that moment, it is "what is." Since the struggle and neurosis of the samsaric ego is also what is, experiencing it fully and directly *is* awakening. For wakefulness comes about through entering into what is, rather than moving away from it. So when we can remain open and present with the experience that is arising, neurotic as it may seem, we discover— either gradually, through psychological inquiry, or abruptly, through coemergent wisdom— that this experience is not solid, fixed, or definite in the way it first appeared to be. As it starts to flow, unfold, ripen, or release, it reveals its true nature as the play of original wakefulness, embodied in human form.

## RELATIONSHIP AS EVOLUTIONARY TASK

Even though many great yogis, saints, and sages have for thousands of years realized the wisdom gone beyond that transcends all form, all strife, all duality, this level of realization has not penetrated very deeply into the fabric of worldly life on this planet. Why has it been so difficult for the Kingdom of Heaven or at least a relatively enlightened society to manifest on Earth?

No doubt there are many reasons for this. But perhaps in part it is because we have not yet learned to fully stand in our humanness while also being able to step beyond it, to be true persons, with one foot in the absolute and the other foot planted in the transformative process of interpersonal relationship. If our focus is purely on liberation from samsara, and we have no interest in its embodiment in the true person— through relationship, dialogue, and individuation — then where will the Kingdom of Heaven put down its roots on Earth?

The greatest ills on the planet— war, poverty, economic exploitation, ecological devastation— all stem from our inability to tolerate differences, engage in intelligent dialogue, and reach mutual understanding with one another. Social organizations and institutions at every level— marriages, families, schools, corporations, nations— are in disarray. And spiritual communities are hardly exempt from the internecine wars, schisms, and political intrigue that beset most secular organizations.

All the great attainments in the area of spiritual practice and realization, wonderful as they are, have hardly begun to transform the overall quality of human relationships on this planet, which are still driven by the most primitive of motivations and emotions. As the poet Rilke wrote, "For one human being to love another, this is the most difficult of all our tasks."

In itself, loving is certainly not difficult, for open, loving presence is an intrinsic, essential quality of our very nature. Why then is it so hard to embody this open presence in relation to other people in all circumstances? The source of this problem lies partly in early wounding around loving connectedness suffered in childhood— which is especially prevalent in modern societies. Out of this wounding, unhealthy relational patterns develop and perpetuate themselves unconsciously, despite our best intentions.

The hard truth is that spiritual realizations often do not heal our deep wounding in the area of love, or translate readily into skilful communication or interpersonal understanding. As a result, many spiritual practitioners— teachers and students alike— either withdraw from engaging in personal, intimate relationships at all, or else wind up having the same relational difficulties and problems that everyone else has. Even though they may have a loving, compassionate intention toward all beings, most modern spiritual practitioners nonetheless continue to act out unconscious relational patterns developed in childhood. Often what is

needed here is psychological work that allows us to bring the underlying psychodynamics that maintain these patterns into consciousness.

Swami Prajnanpad recognized the significance of this discrepancy between people's spiritual practice and their ability to embody it in their relationships, often telling students who wanted to study with him to "bring a certificate from your wife." He saw marriage as a particularly powerful litmus test of one's development, because in it one is "fully exposed...All one's peculiarities, all of one's so-called weaknesses are there in their naked form. This is why it is the testing ground." In solitary spiritual practice, the spiritual aspirant "may accomplish perfection and feel: 'Oh! I am at ease, oh, I can feel oneness.' " But in marriage, "everything gets confounded." Yogis discover that their so-called realization "was only on the superficial level. It had not percolated deep within. It simply appeared to have gone deep. Unless you are tested on the ground where you are fully exposed, all those outward achievements are false. This is the point, and you have to grasp this completely (in Prakash, 1986) ."

So instead of simply attributing the difficulties of human relationship to the nastiness of samsara, perhaps we need to accord relationship its rightful significance— by recognizing the major evolutionary challenge that it represents. It is a great wilderness in which humanity has hardly begun to find its way. Developing more conscious relationships is an important next frontier in human evolution (Welwood, 1990). And it will require a capacity to marry nondual realization— which dissolves fixation on the separate self— with careful attention to personal relational patterns that block or distort the free flow of loving presence.

If the only two choices we had were to live in the samsaric ego or in our larger buddha nature, then digging into all the messy issues, emotional conflicts, and communication problems that crop up in personal relationships would not have great value. As a distraction from awakening to our larger nature, it would simply be dirtying our hands. But if we allow for a third truth — the genuine person—then working with our relational issues has real importance and value. For interpersonal work helps the person to develop and evolve, to become a more transparent vessel through which absolute truth becomes embodied on this earthly plane<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The difference between the two-term view (ego/being) and the three-term view(ego/person/being) leads to many different consequences. For example, in the two-term view, your anger at your partner would be seen as an expression of ego, and thus something to let go of or overcome. But in the three-term view, your anger may have a meaning and significance that needs to be understood and respected in its own right. It may indicate important directions for growth and development. Of course, anger is sometimes totally reactive and thus inappropriate to express. But expressing anger can also help you learn to

Of course, if we become totally caught up in the personal life, with all its endless relational issues, then we are unlikely ever to find true freedom or peace. But the danger of slipping too quickly into the larger reality of timeless, impersonal awareness is that we may use transcendence as a form of denial and avoidance of our relational inadequacies, and thus fail to become fully human.

To accord relationship its proper significance, then, and welcome its challenges as an integral part of the spiritual path requires double vision: honoring engagement in the human condition and liberation from it as coequal, coemergent, cocreative truths. In accordance with this recognition, nondual awareness can then serve as the basis for entering more consciously into the human incarnation. This is the uncharted territory still waiting to be explored.

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stand up for yourself, or force your partner to face his or her hurtful, narcissistic tendencies. Perhaps you move into forgiveness too quickly or easily because it is more comfortable for you to forgive and forget than to acknowledge your hurt and anger about how he/she has treated you. Perhaps the direction of growth for you as a person in this situation, despite what most spiritual books might say, is to express the anger forthrightly. And if you do this skillfully, rather than belligerently, this may also serve your partner, by letting him/her see elements of his/her character structure that need to be worked on.

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<sup>1</sup> As the spiritual practitioner progressively stabilizes and integrates nondual awareness into his or her life, even the division between samsara and nirvana is worn away. At the higher levels of realization, the sense of moving from samsara toward liberation collapses altogether. Finally there is realization that samsara *is* nirvana, that dualistic perception is only a play of awareness, whose very nature is open and free.

<sup>1</sup> I recognize that this discussion of the East is highly generalized, and applies more to the traditions of India and Tibet than to those of China and Japan. Yet the West has developed an appreciation for individual development and personal experience that has been mostly unknown in the East. As Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, speaking of the Zen masters he studied with in Japan, notes:

As masters, they appear in a supreme form in which every personal element has been converted into something suprapersonal, almost remote from the world, or at least not involved in it. One rarely, if ever, meets the happy or suffering individual, through whose joy-filled, sorrow-filled eye the otherworldly glimmers in a unique personal sense ...Is such a master a person in our sense of the term ? (p. 101)

Indeed, psychotherapy could only develop in a culture where human experience is regarded as interesting and important in its own right.

<sup>1</sup> Swami Prajnanpad had a small ashram in Bengal and died in 1974. He did not write or give general talks or satsangs, but only met individually with his students. His work is preserved in his letters and some conversations that his French students recorded.

<sup>1</sup> This perspective also provides a spiritual base for an approach to couples therapy based on recognizing that intimacy grows out of differentiation, the capacity of two partners to fully honor themselves and each other in all their differences.

<sup>1</sup> The difference between the two-term view (ego/being) and the three-term view(ego/person/being) leads to many different consequences. For example, in the two-term view, your anger at your partner would be seen as an expression of ego, and thus something to let go of or overcome. But in the three-term view, your anger may have a meaning and significance that needs to be understood and respected in its own right. It may indicate important directions for growth and development. Of course, anger is sometimes totally reactive and thus inappropriate to express. But expressing anger can also help you learn to stand up for yourself, or force your partner to face his or her hurtful, narcissistic tendencies. Perhaps you move into forgiveness too quickly or easily because it is more comfortable for you to forgive and forget than to acknowledge your hurt and anger about how he/she has treated you. Perhaps the direction of growth for you as a person in this situation, despite what most spiritual books might say, is to express the anger forthrightly. And if you do this skillfully, rather than belligerently, this may also serve your partner, by letting him/her see elements of his/her character structure that need to be worked on.

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