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# Oneness in Everyday Life: Nonduality, Wholeness and Human Life After Awakening

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**Abstract:** In Advaita Vedanta a distinction is made between an experience of oneness and permanent awakening. The author argues that a nondual philosophy such as Advaita - as opposed to a direct experience of oneness – contains significant theoretical difficulties, which in turn are reflected in problems with actualizing nonduality in everyday human life. Alternative spiritual conceptions that might be more helpful in guiding the nondual aspirant in her spiritual life are examined, including the concept of “wholeness.” In the place of a reliance on an exclusive doctrine of nonduality, Jorge Ferrar’s concept of “Participatory Spirituality” and A. H. Almaas’s idea of “Total Being” will be suggested as a possible resolution of some of the difficulties set forth in this paper, both theoretical and practical.

**Keywords:** *Mysticism, Nonduality, Duality, Oneness, Awakening, Spiritual Bypassing, Total Being, Participatory Spirituality*

In the contemporary spiritual world, there are numerous teachers who claim to be teaching “nonduality,” and one can be forgiven for believing that the term “nondual” has in many circles become virtually synonymous with “spirituality” itself. This paper will argue that while the concept of nonduality has been employed by many traditions and commentators in differing ways, there is nonetheless an ancient nondual tradition, Advaita Vedanta, that has a claim to represent in important respects the mainstream of nondual thought and

practice, based as it is on some of oldest extant human scriptures - the Upanishads of India - and close to two millennia of commentary in India and elsewhere. Because of the centrality of this tradition, Western nondual aspirants and thinkers continue to be influenced by the theoretical and practical difficulties inherent in this approach in ways that this paper will hope to illuminate.

In Advaita Vedanta a traditional distinction is made between an

experience of awakening or oneness (Samadhi), and permanent awakening or liberation (Sahja Samadhi). This paper discusses what these terms might mean for those in the West following a spiritual path of nonduality, and examines obstacles that commonly arise on the path from initial awakening to a longer lasting realization. The main thesis is the extent to which Advaita possesses an “all-or-nothing” quality that can create unanticipated difficulties in integrating the transcendent experience of oneness with everyday “human” concerns, and it will be argued that the work of A. H. Almaas and Jorge Ferrar together offer a way out of this dilemma.

The first section of this paper is involved with defining the terms and discusses the nature of mystical experience in general, and how the concept of nonduality or awakening fits within the broader academic debate about the nature of mysticism. In the second section, drawing on the work of the philosopher Samkara, the argument will be made that a nondual *philosophy* such as Advaita Vedanta – as opposed to an *experience* of oneness – contains significant theoretical difficulties that may create unanticipated problems for the spiritual seeker. The third section moves to the practical issues facing a person who might have had a glimpse (or more) of this oneness, and the everyday difficulties that are often encountered in trying to embody and live a nondual doctrine such as Advaita. Here the

focus will be on the work of Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad on the contradictions - and even authoritarianism - that may be hidden in mystical doctrines of unity. The next section outlines alternative spiritual conceptions that might be more helpful in guiding the nondual aspirant including the notion of “wholeness” as suggested by Kramer and Alstead. In the final section, and in place of a restrictive reliance on an exclusive orientation of nonduality, Jorge Ferrar’s concept of “Participatory Spirituality” and A. H. Almaas’s idea of “Total Being” will be put forward as possible ways of addressing some of the difficulties set forth in this paper, both theoretical and practical.

### **Mysticism and consciousness**

David Spiegel, professor of psychiatry at Stanford University, observes that “Modern psychology has been a bit like the person who looks for his lost keys under the lamp post because the light is better there, first focusing on behavior, then cognition, then emotion” (Spiegel, 2017, p. 1). Perhaps by this he means that psychology has tended to overlook the question of who or what it is that is doing the behaving, thinking and feeling, as this turns out to be a much harder question to answer than looking at more circumscribed topics such as emotion and cognition.

In much the same way, modern philosophy after millennia of investigation into epistemology, ethics, logic and the other subjects encountered

in the philosophy curriculum, has in recent years turned its attention to the nature and source of consciousness itself, which the philosopher David Chalmers has described as the “hard problem” to distinguish it from the study of more discrete subject matter, such as understanding how human sight works within the brain (Chalmers, 1995). With this in mind, we might consider that transpersonal psychology is that branch of psychology that is taking the most direct look at the question of consciousness itself, that is to say, of who or what it is that is doing the thinking and feeling - the question ultimately of who or what we are (Hart, Nelson & Puhakka, 2000).

Historically, these kinds of questions were viewed with suspicion by some parts of mainstream psychology, on the grounds of being overly subjective and therefore potentially unscientific. One example of this is the field of behaviorism, especially early behaviorism, which asserted that only publicly observable behaviors and events could be made the subject of replicable scientific study (Herbert & Forman, 2011). In the field of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1989) famously interpreted what he called the “oceanic feeling” associated with mystical states as being merely an echo of very early childhood experience (pp. 8-22). The fact remains however, that many people in many recorded eras of human life have reported experiences such as nondual realization and oneness

(Katz, 2007), and transpersonal psychology has been one of few disciplines ready and willing to study these accounts directly and on their own terms, rather than as a by-product of another process, such as psychological or neurological disorder.

Terms such as “awakening” and “enlightenment” and “nonduality” undoubtedly mean different things to different people, so the first issue is to define these terms. In the widest sense these kinds of experiences fall under what is typically called in the west “mystical” experience. As David M. Wulff (2000) explains,

Mystical experience alludes any precise description or characterization...Most commentators agree, however, that any experience qualified as mystical diverges in fundamental ways from ordinary conscious awareness and leaves a strong impression of having encountered a reality different from – and, in some crucial sense, higher than – the reality of everyday experience. (p. 397)

In Western scholarship, there have been two main interpretative approaches to the variety of mystical experience. First, there are the advocates of the so called “perennial philosophy” who emphasize a common core of mystical experience across different times and traditions. The philosopher William James (1958) is an

exemplar of the perennial philosophy, and describes it thus:

This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neo-Platonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make the critic stop and think. (p. 141)

As against the perennialists, the “constructivist” Stephen Katz (1978) argues that there is really nothing like a pure, unmediated mystical experience, as every such human experience is ultimately conditioned by the culture, language and belief of the experienter.

There are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated... The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty. This epistemological fact

seems to me to be true, because of the sorts of beings we are, even with regard to the experience of those ultimate objects of concern with which mystics have had intercourse, e.g., God, Being, Nirvana, etc. (p. 26)

Robert Forman (1990) has written a response to Katz, critiquing the overall approach of constructivism. While he notes a number of positive aspects to Katz’s critique of the perennial philosophy - such as the respect for spiritual pluralism inherent in accepting the ultimate differences between different traditions - Forman continues to affirm that notwithstanding different language and spiritual cultures, it remains meaningful to speak of a common cross-cultural mystical core.

The constructivist interpretation of spiritual experience takes the view that it is essentially expectations and conditioning that result in particular kinds of experiences. Arguing from an opposing viewpoint, Forman (1990) observes that “it is not unusual to hear of an untrained and uninitiated neophyte who has a mystical experience without any deep preconditioning” (p. 20). He also notes that such divergence between expectation and experience occurs to those who might already be well grounded in their particular tradition. He gives as an example that of Theresa of Avila who reports that before she underwent the series of experiences for

which she has become so well-known, she said that “I did not know what I was doing” (p. 20). Forman (1990) adds that it appears to be a common response of mystics to report “surprise over their experiences. This itself suggests that there is a disconfirmation of some expectations” (p. 20). This point is reinforced by the contemporary research of Steve Taylor (2017), who interviewed many individuals who have had experiences of awakening and observed that,

The vast majority of people I interviewed aren't spiritual teachers and don't see themselves as part of any particular spiritual tradition or religion. These people have conventional jobs and no backgrounds in spiritual traditions or practices. (As a result, in many cases, they were initially confused by what happened to them.) (p. 191)

Forman's main criticism of constructivism however, is a discussion about the existence of a particular mystical experience that he terms a “Pure Consciousness Event” (PCE). This is defined as an experience of pure consciousness, which does not appear to be mediated by conceptual content as Katz suggests must always be the case.

Stephen Bernhardt (1990) summarizes the nature of a PCE and his objections to the constructivist approach in this way:

It is hard to see how one could say that the pure consciousness event is mediated, if by that it is meant that during the event the mystic is employing concepts, differentiating his awareness according to religious patterns and symbols, drawing upon memory, apprehension, expectation, language or accumulation of prior experience, or discriminating and integrating. Without the encounter with any object, intention or thing, it just does not seem that there is sufficient complexity during the pure consciousness event to say that any such conceptually constructive elements are involved. (p. 232)

Bernhardt continues, “It is not part of my project to prove that the pure consciousness event is veridical: based on the evidence put forward in Part 1 of this volume, I will assume the event occurs” (p.220). Though it is obviously of prime importance whether the nondual event is a “true” experience, giving us information about the universe and our place in it, it will not be possible to review all the evidence and arguments for this proposition here. Rather, the existence of the experience of the

unmediated experience of nonduality will be taken to be veridical to those to whom it has occurred, which will allow consideration will be given to the various explanatory frameworks which have been erected from and around this experience, particularly as they relate to living life from a nondual perspective. It is important to note at this point, however, that while this paper will proceed with this provisional understanding of what is meant by “nonduality” and “awakening”, the important question of its “truth” will be taken up again in the last section, especially with respect to how best to deal with notions of ultimate reality that compete with Advaita, and offering a framework of how these might be interpreted.

The philosopher W.T. Stace (1987) made a critical distinction, which will be followed here, between “mystical” experiences, and their interpretation. He made a further important distinction between what he called “extroverted” mysticism and “introverted” mysticism. Regarding extroverted mysticism, he regards the German mystic Meister Eckhart as an exemplar for understanding this whole group, and quotes him as follows:

All that a man has here externally in multiplicity is intrinsically One. Here all blades of grass, wood, and stone, all things are One. This is the deepest depth. (p. 64)

He describes “introvertive” mysticism thus:

Suppose that, after having got rid of all sensations, one should go on to exclude from consciousness all sensuous images, and then all abstract thoughts, reasoning processes, volitions, and other particular mental contents; what would there then be left of consciousness? There would be no mental content whatever but rather a complete emptiness, vacuum, void. One would suppose a priori that consciousness would then entirely lapse and one would fall asleep or become unconscious. But the introvertive mystics — thousands of them all over the world — unanimously assert that they have attained to this complete vacuum of particular mental contents, but that what then happens is quite different from a lapse into unconsciousness. On the contrary, what emerges is a state of pure consciousness — “pure” in the sense that it is not the consciousness of any empirical content. It has no content except itself. (1987, p. 86)

The similarities between this description and the PCE can be noted. Interestingly, Stace believed that this introvertive

mysticism was superior to the so called extravertive mysticism. But why should this be so? Forman (2000) for one, takes the view that the extravertive kind might actually be more “advanced,” and he refers to the distinction already made between Samadhi and Sahaja Samadhi, which he thinks corresponds to the introvertive and extrovertive categories:

Samadhi is a contemplative mystical state and is “introverted” as Stace employs the term. Sahaja Samadhi is a state in which a silent level within the subject is maintained along with [simultaneously with] the full use of the human faculties. It is, hence, continuous through part or all of the 24 hour cycle of meditative and non-meditative activity and sleep. This distinction seems to be key: introverted mysticism denotes a transient state [after all, no one who eats and sleeps can remain in transcendence forever], whereas extrovertive mysticism denotes a more permanent state, one that lasts even while one is engaged in activity. (p. 8)

This point is a central one for this paper – that a person may have a transcendent introverted mystical experience, one of pure consciousness, and that this is a different proposition to bringing this experience into everyday life with all one’s “human faculties.” As Forman (2000) puts it “I believe that such a

permanent mystical state is typically a more advanced stage in the mystical journey” (p. 8).

It is not hard to see why this might be the case. As Forman observes above, the PCE is a temporary experience whereby one’s everyday sense of self and “faculties” are in some sense transcended in a process that he believes is analogous to “forgetting” (p. 41). The problem of course, as he points out, is that sooner or later one has to start navigating the world again, if only to eat and sleep, let alone engaging in more challenging operations such as raising families and pursuing careers; and to be able to do so in something like an ongoing nondual state is a rarer “achievement.” It is worth pointing out in this context that the psychologist and spiritual teacher John Welwood (2000), from whom more later, says something similar using the language of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition: “From anecdotal evidence, stabilizing the pure presence of Rigpa in the ongoing realization of self-liberation appears to be quite rare, even among dedicated students of Dzogchen/Mahamudra” (pp. 109-110).

### **Samkara and Advaita Vedanta**

In keeping with the theme that there is a major difference between the transcendent experience of nonduality and living permanently there, the specific historical case of Advaita will now be examined. The argument will be made that the attempt to make the experience of nonduality into a



consistent and coherent philosophy exposes precisely the difficulties the aspirant finds in living her life from this point of view, of moving from Samadhi to Sahaja Samadhi, or from introvertive mysticism to extravertive. Philosophically one might put the issue this way: what precisely is the relationship between the pure, infinite formlessness of the Self and the finite human world of feelings and thoughts, objects, relationships, and so forth?

Advaita Vedanta is a very influential interpretation of certain central Indian scriptures - the Upanishads, the Brahmasutras and the Bhagavad-Gita, particularly as systemized by the 7<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher Samkara (please note in the following excerpts that Samkara is sometimes translated as Shankara. The spiritual tradition of Advaita for two principal reasons. First, as Deutsch and Dalvi (2004) state with respect to Samkara:

Samkara was a great revolutionary in Vedanta... And the success of his teachings was nothing less than phenomenal. Here is a philosophy which insist upon nirguna Brahman - Brahman without qualities - as the sole reality, upon the absolute identity of man with this distinction-less reality, and upon the relativity if not the falsity, of all empirical experience. And this philosophy... Soon became the

dominant philosophical system in the whole of India. (p. 162)

Not only does the system continue to be extremely influential in India, it has been taken over to a significant degree by those in the contemporary Western world who are looking for or have experienced, an experience of oneness or nonduality. Indeed, the word "Advaita" - the Indian word for nonduality which literally means "not two" - is often also used interchangeably in the West for awakening (Katz, 2007). A close look at what Samkara has to say on the subject of nonduality may be a helpful starting point for those trying to live from this point of view in the contemporary world.

Though Advaita developed as scriptural exegesis by Samakara and other commentators, the approach outlined by Elliot Deutsch (1969) will be taken:

We do not accept the authority of the Veda [or, for the most part, the authority of any other Scripture]; consequently we are not concerned whether one system or another best interpret certain obscure passages in it... Our criterion of philosophical truth or significance is not whether a particular system of thought is consistent with some of the body of work; rather it is whether that system of thought is "consistent" with human

experience. Philosophically, we judge a system of thought in terms of its adequacy in organizing the various dimensions of our experience; in terms of his providing us with new ways of looking at, of gaining insight into, the nature of the world and of our life and it... The reconstruction of Advaita Vedanta that we propose to undertake, therefore, is a re-creative presentation of an Eastern philosophy in which the philosophy is lifted somewhat out of its historical and traditional context and is treated as a system of thought and path of spiritual experience capable of being understood by any student of philosophy. (pp. 5-7)

Samkara is uncompromising in his interpretation of what is disclosed in the nondual experience, which in accordance with the language of the Upanishads is called by him Brahman. The descriptions of Brahman that Samkara quotes with approval from the Upanishads, as well as his own words on the subject, seem to point in a direction that is similar to a PCE. That is to say, from Samkara's point of view, there is only one reality, the infinite formless consciousness without any further qualities. This is called by him nirguna Brahman, which is "just that transcendent indeterminate state

of being about which ultimately nothing can be affirmed" (Deutsch, p. 12). A good scriptural source for the same point of view found in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad

It is like this. When a chunk of salt is thrown in water, it dissolves into that very water, and it cannot be picked up in any way. Yet, from whichever place one may take a sip, the salt is there! In the same way this immense being has no limit or boundary and is a single massive perception. When however the whole has become one's very self (Atman)...Who is there for one to perceive and by what means? By what means can one perceive him by means of whom one perceives the whole world? Look – by what means can one perceive the perceiver? (Deutsch & Dalvi, 2004, p. 42).

This passage highlights an important aspect of nonduality, the apparent disappearance of a separate, individual self. It is also worth pointing out here the similarities of this passage with the well-known Buddhist Scripture, the Heart Sutra:

Shariputra, all Dharmas are empty of characteristics. They are not produced, not destroyed, not defiled, not pure; and they neither increase nor diminish. Therefore, in emptiness there is

no form, feeling, cognition, formation, or consciousness; no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or Dharmas; no field of the eyes up to and including no field of mind consciousness; and no ignorance or ending of ignorance, up to and including no old age and death or ending of old age and death. There is no suffering, no accumulating, no extinction, and no Way, and no understanding and no attaining. (Buddhist Text Society, 1997)

These passages clearly point to similarities in what Advaita and Mahayana Buddhism (as set forth by the philosopher Nargajuna) regard as the ultimate reality or the Absolute - using different terminology to be sure, but very close nonetheless. As the philosopher and Zen practitioner Professor David Loy (1988) puts it: “The similarities between Mahayana Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta are so great that some commentators conceive of the two as not really distinct from each other” (p. 199). He goes on to quote the Indian commentator Dasgupta with approval:

His (Sankara’s) Brahman was very much like the sunya (void) of Nargajuna. It is *difficult indeed to distinguish between pure being and pure nonbeing as*

*a category.* (Italics in original) (1988, p. 199)

Taking Samkara’s view of nirguna Brahman as representing the central Advaitic tradition, he is thereby faced with a very large and obvious problem: as Deutsch and Dalavi (2004) put it,

If Brahman is undifferentiated, without quality or distinction, then the Vedantin is immediately confronted with the fact that ordinarily we do not realize Brahman as so conceived. We experience in our normal, rational, sense based consciousness a world of multiplicity and we take it to be real. The Vedantin of a non-dualistic persuasion is presented with these problems: (1) why do we fail to realize the true nature of Brahman... (2) what is the relation that obtains between Brahman and the world of multiplicity? (3) What if anything is the nature of Brahman’s activity? (p. 104)

If nonduality represents the true nature of everything, including ourselves, why is it that so few of us are aware of it, and for those who have experienced this for themselves, why can this perception seem to come and go?

The basic answer that Samkara gives to this problem is that the appearance of multiplicity and separation is essentially

an illusion, called in the Indian tradition Maya, or from the point of view of the individual, Upaya or “limiting conditions”. It might appear that the world of individual people and objects and movement is real, but ultimately it is not, only Brahman (the one consciousness looked at as composing the whole universe) and Atman (the one consciousness looked at as one’s true Self) is unchanging and real.

From a common sense point of view this might seem a difficult doctrine to defend, but it makes perfect sense on a logical reading of nonduality – if there is only one nature, then any apparent differences that seem to indicate separate events or objects cannot be part of that one non-separate truth. What can it then mean that one part of the unitary nature is eternal and unchanging, and other parts appear to be temporary and separate; in what sense can these two aspects be part of the same nature - doesn’t this seem to indicate some inherent division within itself?

As Keith Ward (1987) states the problem,

The whole question of the relation between my finite self and Brahman is critically complex; and I have to confess that in the end I find it incoherent as Shankara propounds it... [As] there is no reality independent of Brahman; so there is really no alternative than to say that Brahman is both holy free of all

contact and change; and also manifests itself in various forms, known by the ignorant and termed limiting adjuncts of its essential being. *But this is to erect a vast dualism at the heart of a doctrine which is committed above all to non-dualism at any price.* (Italics added) (p. 22)

In summary, the experience of nonduality, defined broadly as a PCE or Nirguna Brahman, involves by definition a certain forgetting or transcendence of the everyday world and everyday concerns, and while this experience is real and meaningful, it is difficult to actualize in everyday life precisely because humans are inevitably drawn back into the world of multiplicity and everyday human life.

### **Human life and difficulties with embodying nonduality**

While the nondual experience, the experience of the essential oneness of life, is a widely reported experience across different times and religious and cultural traditions, the attempt to erect a philosophy of oneness based on this insight is rather more problematic. If the essential unseparateness and oneness of life is truly what is real, then such an approach must account for the multiplicity of life that appears to surround us, the everyday experience of being a “subject” in a world of “objects.” The philosophy of Advaita attempts to address this by discounting the relative

world as Maya or illusion, created through Upadhi or limiting conditions, though as this discussion has made clear, it is not at all obvious that the attempt is successful.

For many spiritual seekers, one of the most attractive aspects of nonduality is the lack of hierarchy and authority as experienced in the more obviously dualistic Abrahamic religions. Since a principal doctrine of nonduality is the ultimate non-separateness or nonexistence of the individual self, this experience of fundamental selflessness means that there are ultimately no individual entities to form hierarchies or to wield authority over other entities. There can be a deep sense of freedom – consonant perhaps with ideas of democracy and equality that are congenial to many Westerners - at no longer having to be part of the age-old human drama of dominating or being dominated, whether spiritually or otherwise.

Since the experience of awakening or enlightenment is one of essential unity (which by definition does involve at least a temporary loss of the sense of separate selfhood), the contrast with the relatively contracted and separate everyday human ego-self can appear very pronounced indeed. The awakening experience can seem so superior to ordinary reality that this experience often becomes reified after initial awakening and begins to be incorporated into one's experience as a

subtle and pervasive judgment that favors selflessness over everyday human emotions and behaviors. Kramer and Alstad (1993) assert that a common way of accomplishing this reification,

...is to construct a realm different from and superior to daily life, label it spiritual, and then create authorities who give unchallengeable directives on how to get there.  
(p. xviii)

This process might be more obvious in the case of the Western religions such as Christianity, where there is a clear dualism between the all-powerful creator God and individual souls. Here, individuals are given rules on what to believe and how to live, and the lines of authority (or authoritarianism) are clear. However, with religious traditions from the East which have at their core the experience and philosophy of unity, this “authoritarianism” may be harder to discern.

Kramer and Alstad (1993) describe the differing orientation of Eastern spirituality:

Much of eastern religion postulates that people, perhaps everyone, can attain godhood through lifetimes of proper action [good karma] ... Thus the east link spirituality with either seeking or attaining such a state, which is often called

enlightenment, i.e. being a cosmic or spiritual “knower.” This creates two basic stances – seeker and knower... But taking on the role of knower fits into the predilection of seekers to want an authority they can trust... Being treated as a knower is one of the most seductive and difficult places to be. One is treated very specially – for what is more special than being considered a vessel of the truth?... The need to appear right when presenting oneself as a spiritual knower is greater than in any other arena because knowing is what makes one essentially different from seekers. (pp. 43-44)

The “knower” in these traditions is ultimately understood as egolessness:

The prevalent idea in the east is that the self is either a limited structure to be transcended [Hinduism] or a false construction to be transcended [Buddhism]... Both promote the idea that the ultimate achievement is an awareness that is totally selfless, with the corollary the more selfless the better. (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 101)

If the spiritual aspirant is comparing her everyday human experience with an

ideal of nonduality, or perhaps comparing herself with the teachings and experience of an enlightened teacher (or even her own previous nondual experiences), her everyday experience will likely come up short. Indeed the very “otherness” of this oneness can lend itself to a fundamentally dualistic distinction between oneness and human life. This can make it seem necessary to rely on those who have apparently “transcended” such limitations:

There is another equally important, crucial to understand reason why people want so much to believe that someone, somewhere, does not have the common foibles of humanity – that it is possible for a few special people to be above it all. Instead of enumerating the many ways human beings heap uncaringness on each other, let’s categorize them as all containing aspects of self-centeredness. Most moral judgments pertain to the wrongness of particular expressions of self-centeredness... In this line of thinking, to be a better human being is to be less self-centered; and to be the best possible person is not to be self-centered at all... The way spiritual growth is traditionally presented involves getting rid of the aspects of oneself that are disliked or disapproved of. Here becoming a better person means

tempering such self-centered expressions as jealousy, competitiveness, pettiness etc. (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p.53)

Advaita and other Eastern nondual paths look upon self-centeredness as the essential expression of the separate self, and therefore ego loss becomes the ultimate goal,

...as the necessary doorway to a different and sublime relationship with the spiritual. This involves a goal of eliminating self-centeredness through eliminating the self. Detaching from the cravings of ego is the origin of the spiritual ideal of detachment. (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 54)

Kramer and Alstad (1993) sum up the way in which the genuine experience of an underlying unity is turned into an *ideology* of oneness by documenting the assumptions behind the subtle transformation of the experience into the philosophy:

1. Such experiences are more real than ordinary reality, and so unity is superior to diversity.
2. It is possible to be in the mystical state all the time and, of course, the more there the better.
3. The path to unity is through negating individuation. Here descriptions of unity turn into prescriptions for individuals

to no longer act like individuals.

4. Following a presumed “master” is the best way to get there. (p. 314)

It seems clear then, that following an ideology of nonduality may in fact result in a new duality between the selflessness of the non-dual state as against the everyday human “self-centeredness.” This duality may not be as obvious as that between good and evil, or between God and creation, but it is a duality nonetheless. On an individual level this can take the form of an ongoing struggle between those parts of oneself that are deemed “good (the giving, loving, cooperative, compassionate, altruistic elements) and the aspect labeled bad (the different expressions of self-centeredness)” (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 201). This surely reflects an important aspect of the same dualism that we find in Samkara’s work, when he divides the world between “Brahman” and “Maya.”

Several other consequences may flow from this duality, including the devaluation of conventional human goals and pursuits. The contemporary writer and teacher A. H. Almaas (1988) makes a distinction between what he calls the “man of the world” and the “man of spirit”. Broadly speaking, the former values the personal life of the individual self, the life of family, relationships and community, and enjoys the pleasures of life and pursuing personal goals and projects – an

approach that from the point of view of nonduality might be considered an expression of selfishness, and ultimately illusory. As against this, the man of spirit (i.e. the nondual aspirant), "... Makes a higher reality to be the center of life, and believes that the personal life must be subordinate in relationship to such a higher reality" (p. 10).

Almaas (1988) continues:

These two approaches to human life are diametrically opposed to each other. The most well-known profound teachings about human nature point one way, and humankind in general is going another way, or at least so it seems. The contradiction between the two perspectives is not only an appearance; it is quite real has far-reaching consequences for human life and for the course of human evolution. (pp. 10-11)

This contrast between the formless and form, between nondual consciousness and everyday life, can be expressed in these two understandings of what is important in life. One that affirms and values the life of the individual self and community, upholds these as "real" and values living a good and virtuous conventional life; while the other ultimately affirms the dissolution of the separation of the individual in favor of a deeper (or higher) realm. This prompts Almaas (1988) to ask the question: "... If the ultimate goal of the human being is the universal impersonal truths of

spirit, why is that all humans end up with an ego, with a self and a personality? Can it be just a mistake, a colossal mistake? And if it is, then why is it made so universally?" (p. 12)

So might it be the case that following a philosophy or ideology of nonduality can lead paradoxically to an inner division between the human and the spiritual that can be antithetical to realizing the very undividedness that is being sought? How is it possible to work with this dilemma, which is both a theoretical and practical problem for people trying to live the awakened life? What can Sadja Samadhi mean when the human aspect is taken into account and honored? Perhaps it is the case that a resolution is not possible from within nonduality alone. As long as spiritual truth is defined and indeed experienced as being distinct from duality and human life - and more desirable - it will encourage setting up as the goal of life the movement towards nonduality, and away from conventional life.

### **Wholeness and Spiritual Bypassing**

Arising out of their analysis of some of the pitfalls of setting up an ideal nondual state as the only real goal of spiritual life, and the consequent devaluation of everyday human life, Kramer and Alstad (1993) observe that this sets up a conflict between what they call the "goodself", that is, whatever fosters selflessness and nonduality, and the "badself" understood as various aspects of the



everyday “selfish” egotism of the separate self (p. 249). They observe that “once this division takes hold and the battle for inner control ensues, the sure outcome is a loss of self-trust. Once self-trust is lost, looking to an authority to guide us is inevitable” (p. 249). This authority can be a spiritual guru, school or teacher, or an internalized authority, a sort of spiritual superego, and “once the split is internalized, the goodself becomes the inner authoritarian trying to keep the devalued aspects submerged” (p. 250).

An ongoing experience of inner struggle such as this arguably strengthens the sense of individual self and separation, and is thus presumably inimical to nondual spiritual realization - but how to effectively deal with it? According to Kramer and Alstad (1993), this inner division can begin to be healed by understanding “the nature of the division in oneself, including how both sides need each other to exist” (p. 253), which in turn can “defuse the power of each. The inner battle depends on the dynamics between the two selves remaining unconscious, and so the more conscious one is of the split and its ramifications, the easier it is not to be mechanically driven by it” (p. 253). The approach suggested in short, is one of acceptance and self-trust, with a view to reestablishing a sense of wholeness rather than continuing the inner struggle that involves rejecting aspects of one’s own experience in favor of a more or less remote ideal state. As this state is

not perceived as being here now, who and where we are in the moment gets rejected, and as the present moment is the only “place” where we find a genuine sense of nondual presence, this can have a significant effect on spiritual progress. Once we begin to understand the nature of this inner struggle, the self-trust can begin to grow, and this process “...occurs not through effort, but rather as one stops doing what interferes with living” (p. 254).

Another analysis that also helps to shed light on this nondual dilemma, is that of John Welwood. He distinguishes between nonduality, dualism and duality:

Nonduality is the recognition that our consciousness and our being are not separate from all of reality. Dualism is a fixed state of separation between subject and object. Duality is more of a dynamic flow, a play between self and other. (Young, 2017, p. 5)

Welwood makes the observation that “You wouldn’t just want to hang out in the nondual all your life. You can’t, really” (Young, 2017, p. 6), and goes on to state:

We’re always coming back into duality. Duality is where we live, at least if we are householders living in the world. The nondual is the ultimate

ground. In that sense, it's the highest, the most ultimate. You can make a distinction between what's an *ultimate* realization and what's a *complete* life for human beings. The ultimate is the nondual, because it's the essence of consciousness. But it's not complete, in terms of a full human life. This is part of the problem with Westerners who try make the nondual the only focus of their life. They often focus on nondual realization, while neglecting their human embodiment. As a result, their lives can be rather colorless; they're not interested in being colorful human beings. They see the human realm as uninteresting somehow. I would say that the complete fruition of the nondual is to come back and play in duality. (Young, 2017, p. 6)

It is important to note here that Welwood agrees it is necessary to go beyond the fixed dualism and discover nonduality, before it becomes possible to “play in duality” (Young, 2017, p. 5). In other words, the spiritual work that can lead to an experience of nonduality does not necessarily mean that an ongoing experience of oneness is the necessary, or only desirable goal of practice. Rather, it can also be used to loosen up the exclusive and thus rigid identification of the individual with their individual sense of self; the end result

can then be a more flexible movement and choice of movement between various modes of being, depending on the circumstances. Once it is understood that there is no necessity for identification in a rigid, exclusive way with the ego identity, other possibilities of truth and identity may appear.

Welwood also points out another possible consequence of setting up a spiritual ideal such as nonduality, what he calls “spiritual bypassing.”

When we are spiritually bypassing, we often use the goal of awakening or liberation to rationalize what I call *premature transcendence*: trying to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it. And then we tend to use absolute truth to disparage or dismiss relative human needs, feelings, psychological problems, relational difficulties, and developmental deficits. (Young, 2017, p. 1)

He regards this as a potentially “dangerous” development, as “It sets up a debilitating split between the Buddha and the human within us. And it leads to a conceptual, one-sided kind of spirituality where one pole of life is elevated at the expense of its opposite” (Young, 2017, p. 1). This is very much in agreement with Kramer & Alstad and Almaas, and reinforces one of the

central themes of this paper, that pursuing a rigid doctrine of nonduality can unwittingly make it more difficult for the spiritual seeker to realize nonduality. The new “duality” can reinforce, and perhaps make worse, psychological divisions that engender inner conflict and thus strengthen ego identity.

### **The way out of the nondual impasse: Ferrar and Almaas considered**

This paper has made the claim that while experiences of oneness are widespread and for the most part highly desirable, a corresponding belief in a philosophy of oneness, such as Advaita, may create unexpected difficulties for the spiritual seeker. In other words, there is a kind of contradiction “built in” to Advaita as it has come down to us, both theoretically and as a matter of practice, which could be called “the duality of nonduality and duality.” Though his aim is the wider target of Transpersonal theory itself, the work of Jorge Ferrar reflects many of the concerns set forth herein. His critique is mounted on many fronts, and of particular interest to us is his critique of perennialism.

He regards the whole field of Transpersonal theory to have essentially been in thrall, historically, to a version of perennialism that looks very much like the philosophy of Advaita, especially the Samkara version:

In spite of their insistence on the ineffable and unquantifiable

nature of the Ground, perennialists consistently characterize it As Nondual, the One, or the Absolute. The perennialist Ground of Being, that is, strikingly resembles the Neoplatonic Godhead or the Advaitan Brahman. As Schuon (1981) states, “The perspective of Sankara is one of the most adequate expressions possible of the *philosophia perennis* or sapiential esoterism.” (Ferrar, 2002, p.59)

Ferrar’s (2002) basic criticism of this form of perennialism, is that what he calls “intuitive knowledge” (referred to herein as the experience of oneness) does not of itself necessarily “reveal” a perennialist metaphysic (the philosophy of oneness), which he describes as a “self-serving move that cannot escape its own circularity.” (p. 87). He also alludes to logical problems in the system of Advaita reconciling the multiplicity of phenomena, such as we have also described:

Apart from the aforementioned exclusive intuitionism, the arguments offered by perennial thinkers for this single Absolute are both a priori and circular. For example, perennialists often assert that, since multiplicity implies relativity, a plurality of absolutes is both a logical and metaphysical absurdity. (2002, p. 89):

There are many consequences to this rigidity, including a tendency towards “dogmatism and intolerance” (Ferrar, 2002, p. 92), which can lead more generally to “the danger of spiritual narcissism and the failure to integrate spiritual experience into (their) everyday life,” (p. 15), a concern which has been of special interest in this paper. In the place of this narrow perennialism, Ferrar (2002) puts forward an alternative and more inclusive conception of the spiritual life that he terms “Participatory Spirituality” which shall be outlined shortly.

With his concept of “Total Being” A. H. Almaas (2017a) has taken the critiques of the ideology of nonduality and perennialism set forth herein, and articulated an alternative orientation that both includes and transcends the experience and philosophy of nonduality. In his article “Which of the Ultimates is Ultimate?” Almaas points out that human spiritual history is replete with different notions of what constitutes ultimate reality, including different versions of nonduality:

Advaita Vedanta, for instance, thinks of liberation as the realization of pure consciousness. Advaita Vedanta has many sub schools. Some believe this pure consciousness is Satchitananda, truth/being-consciousness/awareness-bliss/happiness, all facets of the

same ultimate ground. Some think of it as Brahman, a silent witness beyond the world and uninvolved with it. Most of these schools, such as that of Shankara, view the world as illusion or illusory, and the individual soul as a convenient fiction that the ultimate requires for it to experience enlightenment. But some schools of Vedanta, as that of Jnanadeva, think of the world not as an illusion, but as the expression of the love of the absolute..It is true there might be only small differences between these, but it is possible to recognize that they are experientially different, with a different feel, unique attitudes and various degrees of value and development of heart. (p. 1)

He goes on to point out that this variety of approaches is found not only within Advaita, but similar debates exist within Buddhism (Blackstone, 2012), even though early Theravada Buddhism in particular famously disavowed the whole idea of an eternal Self or Atman. There are also schools of nondual Hinduism such as Kashmir Shaivism that address in other ways some of the issues raised in this paper. Kashmir Shaivism deals differently than Advaita with the central issue regarding the relationship of the multiplicity with the one nature, especially with respect to our humanness. Shaivism does not regard

the existence of duality as an illusion to be explained away, it is accorded reality in its own terms that are not entirely reducible to the larger nature. Instead what Kashmir Shaivism suggests is that it is only the very notion of separateness itself which is ultimately an illusion; in fact, the various so-called tantric practices that arise out of this tradition actually use the energies of everyday human life as the entryway and focus of the spiritual life:

In Vedanta, the individual is largely ignored... (in Kashmir Shaivism) The world is not an illusion. Rather everything we see is God...Shaivism, with its compassionate view of human personality, is closer to the modern spirit. This is not simply 'something for everyone', but a respect for human differences, even a relishing of them as a manifestation of the variety-within-unity that adds savour to life. Such an approach fosters and demands self-acceptance. (Shankarananda, 2003, Kindle Location 892)

Taking into consideration this wider perspective which includes different formulations of nonduality (not just the Samkarian version) allows the discussion of the nature of awakening and nonduality to be opened up quite considerably; but where does this leave the aspirant in terms of practice, how should she work with a world of such apparently related, but at the same time

significantly differing, experiential spiritual matrices? One response to this question is to simply pick a tradition, perhaps the one a person has been born into, and follow it to the end; if it is Advaita, ideally some version of Sahja Samadhi, permanently abiding in the fullness of the Self as Ramana Maharshi (2000) exemplified, or if Buddhists, abiding in the freedom of Emptiness.

Almaas's (2017b) approach of "Total Being" acknowledges that reality is much more complex and mysterious than one such concept or another of the ultimate, as profound and true as each of these may be. In discussing his own spiritual path, he says this:

Seeking had ceased at stages, each realization or awakening coming to a deeper and more complete ceasing of search or need. What became clear at some point in this path is that Reality does not posit itself as one ultimate that all will agree upon. It does reveal itself as one ultimate or another, each absolutely true and liberating, but it does not have to continue revealing itself as this ultimate....From such streams of realizations there emerged a view that does not have to subscribe to the view of any of these ultimates, but able to express itself through any of them. I termed it the view of totality. I mean that it a

realization that can accommodate any of the views or realizations, or several at the same time, without having to adhere to any as definitive. (p. 1)

Ferrar (2002) also uses similar language in describing the goal of his work:

Roughly, I argue that there are different spiritual liberations (i.e. different ways to overcome limiting self-centeredness and fully participate in the Mystery from which everything arises), and that spiritual traditions cultivate, enact, and express, in interaction with a dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power, potentially overlapping but independent spiritual ultimates. (p.4)

It will not be possible to do justice to the depth and subtlety of Ferrar's (2002) view of Participatory Spirituality here, but he summarizes it thus:

Briefly, I want to propose that transpersonal phenomena can be more adequately understood as multilocal participatory events (i.e. emergence of transpersonal being that can occur not only in the locus of an individual, but also in a relationship, a community, a collective identity or a place). (p.116)

Here several points should be noted. Ferrar (2002) deemphasizes the epistemological significance of individual experience, and instead - like Almaas, Kramer & Alstad and Welwood - brings back in the significance of a wider view of the human, emphasizing being embedded in communities, especially faith or spiritual communities. This does not mean that he has fully taken the view of the constructionists, however:

With perennialism, then, I believe that most genuine spiritual paths involve a gradual transformation from narrow self-centeredness towards a fuller participation in the Mystery of existence...Nevertheless, and here is where I depart from perennialism, I maintain that there is a multiplicity of transpersonal disclosures of reality. (p.145)

We might interpret the teaching of both Ferrar and Almaas as a kind of postmodern spirituality that includes but does not give preeminence to nonduality: why should Samkara's "Consciousness" be "privileged" over Nargajuna's "Emptiness," or the Sufi's "Beloved", or even everyday conventional duality? Indeed, why should reality be viewed as hierarchical at all? Might duality, for example, be considered as simply one way in which reality manifests, with its own

characteristics and value, rather than an illusory or otherwise substandard version of nonduality? In fact, in the same way that a dogmatic adherence to the experience of nonduality can become an obstacle in itself, the lack of hierarchy or an ultimate goal, can have the opposite, liberating effect, by freeing "...enlightenment itself to discover further kinds of enlightenment" (Almaas, 2018, p. 60).

Almaas (2017b) believes that really opening to and exploring this view can lead to:

...a new kind of freedom. It is not the freedom from self, not the freedom of being pure consciousness or awareness, not the freedom of ripening and completeness, but the freedom from having to be anything. It is the realization of not being anything, where "anything" includes all possible forms and formlessness. Life becomes the freedom of Being to manifest whichever realization - ultimate or completeness - that addresses the moment most optimally. Life is a continual discovery of reality and its secrets. It is not a seeking and not a looking after anything. It is like the creative dynamism of being is liberated totally so Being is free to manifest its truths in endless ways. It is absolutely nonsectarian, and totally inclusive. It celebrates the

differences between the traditions and teachings, for they all express it purely and genuinely. (p. 1)

The realization of Total Being is thus basically an understanding of the non-exclusivity of identity. As much as the aim of much spiritual life is to find the unchanging deepest and truest layer of reality and abide there, Total Being remains always fluid and elusive: "neither a thing nor a being, but rather a liberating indeterminacy" (Almaas, 2016, p. 101). Once we have had the experience of oneness and have come to an experiential understanding of nonduality - that our identity is not fixed and limited in the conventional way - then it becomes possible to move between identities, from a sense of separateness and 'personalness' when interacting with a loved one, for example, to a more expansive experiences of selflessness and boundlessness, or to no identity at all, and free to play in duality as Welwood has suggested.

This might also be a more inclusive way of looking at Sahja Samadhi, bringing the transcendent nondual into life but not in a way that excludes the human, not presupposing that there is only one true goal of the spiritual life and awakening - but through practicing to remain open to whatever Being might have in mind for us in that moment, including the "messiness" of everyday human life, if that is what is actually occurring, then

this is not thereby something to be automatically dismissed.

As touched on previously, this might also be a way of reconciling the debate between the perennialists and the constructivists. Both Ferrar and Almaas would agree with the constructivists that not all “ultimate” spiritual or mystical experiences can be reduced to one – there are many “ultimates” - but both would agree with the perennialists that these differences are not thereby reducible *only* to cultural and individual conditioning; according to both Almaas and Ferrar, such ultimate realities can be independently true and real in themselves (Almaas, 2016), and none exhaust what Being is capable of.

Ferrar (2015) has commented on Almaas’s concept of Total Being, and while he agrees that this idea contains much that is compatible with and complementary to the Participatory model, he is concerned that Total Being may be another perennialist attempt to smuggle in an ultimate that is superior to all others:

Although Almaas rejected both pre-given and final goals in spiritual inquiry, one wonders how this “total/totality” (however open and dynamic it might be) does not ultimately function in the Diamond Approach—and will be taken by his students—as the final spiritual endpoint or highest goal for spiritual aspiration. In any

event, Almaas’s total/totality catapults the Diamond Approach back to perennialist, inclusivist stances (which posit a supra-ultimate that can include all other ultimates, but not vice versa (p.258).

This is a valid objection, that there can surely be no honoring of the various “ultimates” (as this paper has also suggested), if one view of the ultimate is implicitly privileged over others, one spiritual experience or system over others. If the idea of Total Being as it has been laid out in this paper, is to be retained, how should this critique be addressed?

If the concept is understood as a conceptual convention that can be used as a pointer and orientation to spiritual practice, rather than describing an actual spiritual reality that somehow includes and supersedes all the other ones, then perhaps it can be helpful to guiding the spiritual aspirant.

The work of the British philosopher Derek Parfit (1984) may be of assistance in shedding some light on how to evaluate the concept of Total Being. In his discussion of the nature of the personal self, Parfit makes several arguments for the claim that there is no self in the sense of an entity existing apart from brain, body and the various mental and physical processes associated with that body. As an example of the way he feels the notion



of self should be viewed, he asks us to consider the idea of a nation state. The United States, for example, can be looked at as comprising its citizens, territory, flag, history, constitution, and so on, but there is no further thing or entity in addition to these observable features that is “America.” Rather, these various constituents taken together form the useful designation “The United States.” As Parfit puts it, nations exist of course, but are nothing more than “the existence of its citizens, living together in certain ways, on its territory” (1984, p. 211), they do not otherwise have some sort of inherent existence.

Perhaps “Total Being” can be looked at in the same way, as comprising the various ‘ultimates’ as discussed by both Almaas (and arguably also the “Mystery” as described by Ferrar) – indeed all of reality, including duality - while honoring the truly nonhierarchical character of the Participatory approach without creating a further (and allegedly superior) spiritual category. There is no claim that this view is what Almaas means by his term - only that this interpretation is more in line with the argument being made in this paper and the inherent compatibility of Total Being and Participatory spirituality.

In closing it can be asked, does acceptance of Total Being then mean the end of spiritual practice?

Many people believe that realization signals the end of

practice, the end of doing the work. We might think, “When I am realized, I won’t need to practice any longer; I can simply be.” When we are not realized, the situation appears that way. But from the perspective of realization, living is a matter of continual practice and continual engagement...Rather than the end of practice, living our realization reveals a continual practice...So practice is not simply the specific activity with which we are engaged. It also includes the orientation, the intention, the motivation, and the attitude of devotion to practice...So in some sense, many of us are already practicing continually... The stage of living our realization is epitomized by a classic expression from one of the most celebrated Zen masters, Dogen Zenji. He said, “Practice is realization and realization is practice.” (Almaas, 2016, p. 15)

The corollary to this model of indeterminacy then, is that there is no final goal, no final resting place where a person has spiritually arrived. This may not be what the ego has longed for, some sort of ultimate safety and understanding, an eternal perch on which to sit. But in return for giving up this “security” there is the reward of the infinite creativity and intelligence of Being, as it is freed to go where it wishes

with no (apparently) preconceived purpose or objective.

While Total Being may not mean the end of practice, it does mean a new orientation to practice, one that becomes more about being exactly where one is, whether dual or nondual, the actual presentation of Being in that moment. It becomes possible to surrender and trust the wisdom of Being in the moment as being well beyond anything could be conceived by the limited human imagination, from the precious uniqueness and unrepeatability of each moment, to the magnificence and transcendence of the boundless dimensions.

From the perspective of nonhierarchy and the view of Totality, we can see the wisdom of this practice:

Wherever we are, wherever we happen to find ourselves, is a manifestation of true nature and contains all of reality. There is no point in striving to be anywhere else. So even if this shift in the teaching seems inaccessible, even if it seems improbable or outlandish, from the perspective of totality, all you need to do is be where you are. (Almaas, 2017c, p. 72)

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