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Judith Blackstone

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## Ongoing Dialogue in Response to Editor's Introduction, “Nonduality: Not One, Not Two, but Many”

*Judith Blackstone*  
Woodstock, NY, USA

Dear Editor,

Thank you for your willingness to engage with me in this discussion.

I have drawn back—since the 2006 paper on which you are basing your assessment of my viewpoint—regarding the metaphysical or ontological status of a primary consciousness. I always teach it these days as an experience of primary consciousness. But this is the main point that I would like to contribute to this discussion. The Advaitic and Buddhist teachings are based primarily on experience. The people who first put forth the nondual teachings (whatever they called them at the time) were people who had realized primary consciousness and then described it so that others could realize it as well. They described it as clearly as they could, and what interests me is how similar these descriptions are across different traditions.

That said, you rightly point out the need to be careful about making inferences from ancient texts, as well as from personal experience. It is also true that in emphasizing the similarities between traditions, one can lose sight of important elements that make each distinct from the others.

I appreciate this opportunity to address some of the comments that you made about my work. I do not claim in my writing or teaching to understand either the nature of consciousness or the structure of reality. I do not teach a philosophy or a metaphysical system. In fact, this is often a source of disappointment to the people who come to work with me. And I know that I may not be experiencing the realization described in Buddhist and Hindu nondual texts. But it does resemble it. And for me, this points to the likelihood of a universally innate human potential. It is also interesting that although

descriptions of the experience are very similar across traditions, interpretations of what this consciousness actually is differ (e.g. the nature of our individual minds or the nature of the universe). We can realize primary consciousness without knowing what it is.

I do not believe that it is an “outsized claim” to say that I have realized primary unified consciousness and can pass on to others some methods that can help them realize it. I know that some of my fellow nondual teachers speak of their realization in extremely lofty, hyperbolic terms, and I believe I have avoided that. But I also feel that it is a mistake to deify the realization itself, as something that only ancient masters were able to achieve. The experience of primary consciousness is readily accessible within our own bodies.

I am also not claiming to be on a par with the great spiritual masters. It has been my experience that the realization of primary unified consciousness, once it occurs, continues to emerge. That once we have experienced an unmistakable shift to knowing ourselves as pervasive, unified consciousness, then we can continue to open to it throughout our whole body and being as we relinquish protective constrictions in our body-mind.

In my opinion, it is quite important that people know that the realization of what feels like a primary ground of being is accessible for them. For this experience is a basis of much greater openness to life, of deep, authentic contact with ourselves and others, and a source of ongoing, steady contentment.

You object to my description of the direct knowledge of oneself as consciousness having the properties of “all-pervasive space” because you say that the Advaitic Self has no spatial dimension. Here I see the disadvantage of a scholarly view when compared to the actual realization of oneself as consciousness. I am all for

skepticism when it leads to exploring the experience for yourself. But when scholars base their analysis on that of other scholars, the result may become increasingly abstract and even dogmatic. You reject my quotes from “unknown translators” who may not be authorized through lineage, who would appear to affirm the spatial, pervasive experience of primary consciousness. Here is a quote from Shankara, translated by Swami Jagadananda in the Ramakrishna lineage: “He who knows the Self to be the same everywhere like Vasudeva, who speaks of the same Self residing in the pipal tree and in his own body, is the best of the knowers of Brahman” (1989, p. 154). And this one, translated by Swami Nikhilananda, also in the Ramakrishna lineage: “The Supreme Brahman pervades the entire universe outwardly and inwardly and shines of Itself” (1947, p. 183).

It is true, as you say, that the word “space” is often used as a metaphor in the Advaitic writing. It is used to convey the pervasive spaciousness of this experience. Both Shankara and Lonchenpa (2001, p. 115) claimed that this consciousness is “self-knowing.” It is not an object because it knows itself. Knower and known are one. Shankara wrote “As a lighted lamp does not need another lamp to manifest its light, so Atman, being Consciousness itself, does not need another instrument of consciousness to illumine itself” (1947, p. 155). Ordinary spatial and temporal events appear to occur within, and to be pervaded by, this spacious expanse of consciousness.

As I hoped I had made clear in my last letter to the editor, I do not consider or present myself as a teacher of Advaita Vedanta. I call my teaching the Realization Process in order to distinguish it from both Buddhist and Hindu teachings. I teach from my own direct experience. And I make no attempt to transmit my own realization to others. Rather, I offer practices for others to attune in a deep, subtle way to themselves.

I do refer, in my writing and teaching, to descriptions that occur in both Hindu and Buddhist spiritual literature that appear to match my own realization. I do this as a way of pointing to the interesting appearance of the universality of this experience. It should be noted that we have many universally recognizable, unconstructed (so we might say essential) experiences. We can recognize love, for example, in the eyes and voice and touch of people from other cultures, and even in other species. If this makes me a perennialist, in the sense that, in my view,

the experience that I am pointing to appears to keep on popping up across traditions and ages, then I accept the label.

Warm regards,

*Judith Blackstone*  
Nonduality Institute  
Woodstock, New York

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## Editor's Response

The point of raising concerns regarding perennialism is not so that individuals can be labelled, but so that the arguments underlying various approaches can be accurately discerned and evaluated. The challenge of understanding differences and similarities between various spiritual traditions is one that has considerable import for understanding the larger phenomenon of human spirituality, which has long been a topic of interest for transpersonal scholars. If only differences are considered, then these traditions might be mere social constructions based on a wish for protection and guidance from imaginary agencies. If one looks at only the similarities, then it is logical to postulate some unchanging metaphysical ultimate that is the hidden source of all traditions, as perennialism does. The first option trivializes spirituality; the second has multiple problems that have been noted earlier in this dialogue. It may in fact be necessary to consider both the similarities and the differences in a transpersonal approach to spiritual phenomena, which is what a participatory frame attempts.

The challenge of comparing qualitative descriptions of one person's experience with those from another person, or with descriptions from ancient texts, is a complex and difficult one. Word choice and connotation of qualitative expressions may vary between

individuals, and textual sources set in ancient Eastern cultures may use words that seem familiar in translation, yet the usage may be metaphorical, imaginal, symbolic, or esoteric, or may represent some perceived intersection between two or more of these types of meaning. For example, the traditional symbols for the chakras—postulated subtle centers of energy in or near the body—are illustrated in locations relative to the body that seem to be literal, yet also contain Sanskrit letters representing associated mantras, as well as colors, archetypal symbols such as the crescent moon, and various numbers of petals, and each of these elements may have multiple significances.

One might adopt the language from a textual source if it seems to have pragmatic value in describing a particular state for a contemporary audience, but claims about what ancient authors from very different cultural contexts actually meant by their descriptions deserve to be much more conservative. Even if one were certain that descriptions of a particular state were phenomenological, the fact that there is as yet no clear and consistent way for describing states of consciousness (cf. Hartelius, 2015) makes it challenging to ensure the reliability of interpretations of such descriptions. These difficulties should not prevent sustained efforts in descriptive and comparative phenomenology, but it should inform this work.

With that said, your current letter is a helpful addendum to your 2006 paper, and I am grateful for the opportunity to publish these qualifications to your earlier claims. For example, you indicate you have stepped back from making metaphysical or ontological claims about the experience that is the focus of your paper. You note that both ancient accounts and your teaching are based on experience, and represent efforts to describe that experience in words so others may have the opportunity to experience something similar. You acknowledge that you are not a teacher of Advaita Vedanta, that you do not know or claim to understand the nature of consciousness or the structure of reality, and that you do not know whether your experience is the same as that to which you have compared it within ancient traditions; you note that your comparison of your own experience to that in various traditions is based on seeming similarities. All of this clarification is appreciated, and seems to reflect a more considered position.

This does not entirely resolve the issues concerning claims of realizing primary unified

consciousness as all-pervasive space. What a tradition such as Advaita Vedanta does—and this is perfectly normal and expected for a religious tradition to do—is that it begins with a phenomenal experience, and then merges it with a metaphysical concept. Advaita invites a process in which the mind is drawn to notice all of the objects of its attention—things, people, sense impressions, thoughts, feelings. As one observes that even intimate sensations are objects of awareness, it becomes possible to notice that the awareness itself is not these things. The “I” that experiences is the awareness, and it is not any of its objects.

This experience of being awareness is then taken to mean a direct realization of a Vedantic notion: that Atman, the personal consciousness, is identical with Brahman, the source of all consciousness and of the creation. This is the merging of a phenomenal experience with an abstract metaphysical concept—a choice to understand a particular raw experience through the lens of an abstract concept, so that the experience is accepted as evidence that the constructed, philosophical notion is true. When a person in Advaita Vedanta tradition has the experience of being awareness, and not being any of the things that they can be aware of, this experience is interpreted to mean that they have had a direct realization that Atman is Brahman. From personal experience I can attest that this is a powerful and moving realization within the context of Advaita Vedanta teachings.

I think you might agree that very similar phenomenal experiences can be and are constructed in rather different ways in various spiritual and other traditions. That is, an experience that might be quite similar in pre-reflective terms is taken to be and mean different things in different contexts. By pre-reflective, I mean how the experience occurs sensately, in the moment of experience, rather than any of the things it can be taken to mean when thinking back on it. How this experience is constructed into meaning typically reflects the particular philosophy or metaphysical beliefs of the context; the pre-reflective experience does not mean any of those things in and of itself.

As noted in earlier responses, I have appreciation for the qualitative descriptions of the experience that you have referenced. However—and this speaks to my initial concern with your 2006 paper—when one makes the claim that this particular experience is primary unified consciousness, you have made it mean something. You have merged a phenomenal experience with an

abstract concept that makes a claim about the nature of consciousness and the structure of reality. This statement invokes philosophical and metaphysical concepts, even as you disavow these.

I take no issue with the notion that, given the genetic similarity of the entire human population, our nervous systems likely have quite similar potentials (e.g., Laughlin & Rock, 2013). Given the spectrum of human psychological and temperamental diversity I am reluctant to claim that this is a universal innate potential, but certainly can agree that there appear to be some cross-cultural similarities in the descriptions of various states of consciousness that seem promising and that deserve careful inquiry.

However, when this similarity is explained as access to primary unified consciousness, this leaves out the nervous system and whatever similarities it may share across populations, and posits instead that it is possible to have an unconstructed experience of some objectively-existing primary unified consciousness that pervades the universe. This explanation necessarily implies a claim about the nature of consciousness, and the structure of reality; it is a metaphysical claim in the sense that it appears to assert consciousness as first cause (primary unified), and in the sense that it makes a claim that cannot be verified or disproven empirically—that is, with public evidence. As such, it is the merging of a phenomenal experience with a very particular metaphysical concept. While as noted this practice is perfectly acceptable in religions, transpersonal and integral approaches will correctly be considered New Age religions, and not psychologies, if they make or accept such claims.

This problematic merging of phenomenal descriptions of pre-reflective experience with metaphysical claims is central to the objection I have raised regarding your claim that “the direct knowledge of oneself as consciousness” has “the properties of ‘all-pervasive space.’” I have no interest in discounting your account of your experience; indeed, I regularly have experiences that could be described quite similarly. The objection is to the acceptance of that experience as representing unconstructed access to a foundational property of consciousness or the universe.

This is not only a concern with the (necessarily) metaphysical notion of a foundational property of reality, but also to the notion that any experience can be unconstructed—which you seem to accept. This suggests that the person having the experience is

somehow separate from it, contributes nothing to it, and that no aspect of what is experienced is created or changed by mental and perceptual systems. The only way this can make sense is if one has already accepted the metaphysical notion that consciousness is a primary pervading essence of the universe, and so the notion of unconstructed experience seems to be an extension of this same metaphysical claim.

One final point remains. You seemed to imply that my perspective was scholarly only, and that unlike you, I have not had an actual realization of myself as consciousness. I have in the past studied with a lineage-holding Advaita Vedanta teacher who spent 10 years in India receiving the tradition, and who offers the rare opportunity to experience those teachings in English (e.g., Whitfield, 2009; it is on this basis that I have objected to equating realization with a qualitative experience of space, which as a quality, can be an object of awareness). During that time I had experiences that did, indeed, arrive as a realization of myself as consciousness.

However, as a scholar wishing to contribute to the broadening of psychology, I find it necessary to discern between the phenomenal experience itself, the phenomenal experience as constructed in the context of Advaita Vedanta teachings, and the phenomenal experience as constructed in a psychology context—even if that psychology is transpersonal. When I construct this experience in a conventional psychology context I find that the meaning of the experience is largely discounted. When I construct it in an Advaita Vedanta context, the experience has great meaning, but it is largely incompatible with psychology and at odds with my desire to find touchpoints between psychology and spirituality. I am not convinced that simply attempting to import metaphysical claims into psychology—whether explicit or implicit—will do anything other than gratify a small audience that wishes this were possible. It will not broaden psychology, nor retain credibility outside of narrow bands of scholars and readers.

The question remains, how then can a field such as transpersonal psychology make progress on this sort of project? I find solid agreement with you regarding the importance of phenomenological descriptions of lived experience. I also have some optimism that it may be possible to connect more precise phenomenological descriptions with neural measurement, and thereby develop measurable definitions of states of consciousness (e.g., Hartelius, 2015). This might enable the cross-

cultural comparison of states without the need to invoke metaphysical concepts.

Whatever the way forward, as a field transpersonal psychology needs to develop and maintain critical discernment regarding its methods and assumptions. The transpersonal field is one where various approaches need to be attempted, reported, critiqued, and attempted again. Thank you for participating in this dialogue as part of such a process.

***Glenn Hartelius, Main Editor***  
**California Institute of Integral Studies**

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