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Nondual States Are Not a Thing: This Inspiring New Age Spiritual Idea is Neither Advaita Vedanta Nor Psychology (Editor's Introduction)

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International Journal of Transpersonal Studies

The term “nondual states” has gained some currency as applied to states of mind in which the sense of self is softened, expanded, or shifted from conventional experience. Nonduality is a metaphysical concept about the nature of reality, commonly associated with the Advaita Vedanta school of Indian religion. New Age religious thought has applied the term “nondual” to states of consciousness that are believed to contact or apprehend this speculated metaphysical ideal. However, this use is incompatible with lineage-based teachings of Advaita Vedanta, inadequately precise to serve as a psychological construct, and improper as an insertion of New Age metaphysical notions into a psychological context. The paper draws on the author’s personal engagement with doctrines of Advaita Vedanta received from a scholar and lineage-holding teacher, Carol Whitfield.

Keywords: *nondual philosophy, nondual states, nondual realization, awareness, Advaita Vedanta, atman, brahman, the Self, hermeneutics*

Some 20 years ago, I had the privilege of taking three semester-long courses from Carol Whitfield (e.g., 2009), a professor who was not only immersed in the intellectual concepts of Advaita Vedanta, but who earlier in life had spent 10 years living in India in a community under the tutelage of a traditional teacher in the lineage of Adi Śaṅkarācārya, more commonly known simply as Śaṅkara. This is my experience, and how I have come to reconcile it with scientific psychology in a way that gives full weight to the experience without importing metaphysical notions into psychology. It is also how I came to understand that the term nondual states (e.g., Fucci et al., 2018; Garland & Fredrickson, 2019; Josipovich, 2019; Wilber, 2000) has no logical functional meaning, either in psychology or the Advaita Vedanta tradition with which it is often associated. My position in this discussion is not as a teacher of or expert on Advaita Vedanta, but as a student with enough exposure to its lineage-based teachings to recognize notions that are wholly incompatible with the tradition.

I came to meditative experiences slowly and awkwardly, failing at each effort to learn meditation in a formal or spiritual context. I was so firmly planted in a state of mind situated in endless mental chatter that all I could do with instructions to “watch the breath,” or “let go of the thoughts” was to wonder how on earth these statements might lead to meditation, and question how they would make any difference in my experience. Needless to say, changing the subject of my mental chitchat to the topic of meditation instructions did little to quiet my mind or shift my inner state. By the time I sat in Carol’s classes, I had stumbled across a quite different way to shift rather quickly to a quiet and focused inner state. I was now keen to study a revered tradition as context for these experiences.

As I learned from Carol, Advaita Vedanta is a nondual philosophy articulated elegantly by Śaṅkara in the 8th century CE—a philosophy designed not to satisfy the curious intellect so much as to evoke a direct realization that after consciousness is separated from each and every

sense experience or object it might be conscious of, it is left with only the awareness of itself—what has been helpfully described as non-representational reflexivity (Josipovich, 2019). This, according to Śaṅkara, is *ātman*, the imperturbable core of oneself. This essence is not merely oneself, but *is identical with brahman, the only and ultimate reality, the consciousness out of which the material universe is born*. In Advaita Vedanta, nonduality describes the relationship between *ātman* and *brahman*, and between *brahman* and all of creation—they are indivisible, but not identical.

A nondual realization is a powerful event in which this lofty spiritual concept connects seamlessly with a personal experience, so that the spiritual vision elevates the significance of what is experienced in the mind, and that experience resonates with and give weight to the spiritual idea. For me it was a profound moment when my inner experience of silent, crystalline awareness dropped into deep resonance with the teaching that *this* consciousness at the heart of the personal “me” was not mine, but was one with the very source and essence of all reality. In that moment my mind was perfectly still, but I was not that stillness. The hair on my arms stood up in the reverence of the moment and uplifting sensations of awe swelled in my body, but I was not those sensations. I was this quiet awareness centered within me, and this awareness was not personal. Carol taught that whatever satisfaction I might seek in life would only be satisfied by this—by coming to realize what I already was at the core of my being; in that moment sensation and knowledge came together, and this teaching appeared wholly true. Today, writing these words, I can still touch into that experience and feel its impact.

That experience did not make me an Advaitin, but it did afford me a deep appreciation for what motivates some to try to advance the notion that nondual awareness is a measurable psychological state. It is not. Based not only on my own experience, but also on Advaita Vedanta teachings and the phenomenological and neuroscientific study of states in which attention comes to focus on its own presence, “nondual state” seems a misnomer that applies inflated spiritual terminology to effective but straightforward states of mind and, when associated

with Advaita Vedanta, misrepresents the teachings of that tradition (though the term does appear in other schools of Indian religion with differences in meaning).

In such experiences the self is experienced as a *minimal self*, one that is “devoid of temporal extension” (Gallagher, 2000), limited perhaps to the sense that experience is being presented to an observer or witness (Albahari, 2011), however different that observer might be from the more conventional *narrative self* (Lindström et al., 2023). This may result in *self-boundarylessness*, a quality of experience in which the sense of bodily boundaries is diminished and the minimal self may be imperceptible to itself (Lindström et al., 2023, e.g., Table 4). Alternately, the minimal self may be aware that there is a located center to its experience, what Almaas has called *the pearl* or *personal essence* (Hunt, 2010), and what I would refer to as a focused egocenter (Hartelius et al., 2022) turning its attention onto itself, thereby resulting in an experience of non-representational reflexivity (Josipovich, 2019). Both experiences are consistent with the definition of a minimal self in that they exist only in the present moment, and are devoid of narrative (cf. Gallagher, 2000); the fact that both experiences can be *reported* is itself evidence that a minimal self is functionally present, even if not discernible.

When an experience of minimal self is coupled with the metaphysical interpretation offered by Advaita Vedanta, the result can be a deeply meaningful experience. However, the felt impact of such an experience does not validate the metaphysical vision with which it is associated—at least not beyond the horizon of one’s own beliefs. I rather like to imagine that the quiet awareness that I can become within my mind and body is somehow a distillation of the same generativity that drives the unfolding of life in the universe, and perhaps oddly, the fact that my scientific mind holds a different position does not detract from this meaning-value. However, just as I resist using a scientific frame to devalue this sort of meaningful experience, it is equally crucial that I not use my affection for that experience as motivation to somehow shoehorn “nondual states” and “nondual awareness” into

psychology—even, or perhaps especially, in a transpersonal psychology (Friedman, 2015, 2018; Hartelius, 2015a).

It is important here to remember that the *realization* of Advaita Vedanta is the "aha" of an experience of noticing consciousness, together with the spiritual belief that the presence of *this consciousness* is, for all intents and purposes, the presence of *brahman*, the source and essence of all reality. For this process of realization, the utility of a minimal self state is simply that the narrative self is not there to distract from noticing consciousness. To draw on a traditional Advaita Vedanta teaching example, if the water in a pail is disturbed, it cannot reflect the moon clearly; however, if the water in the pail becomes perfectly still, then one can gaze into the pail and see an undistorted image of the moon. Just so, when the narrative mind is stilled, one can obtain a clear experience of *ātman*, the consciousness that is held as identical with *brahman*.

But from an Advaitin perspective the consciousness at the heart of a distracted thinking state is no less *brahman* than the consciousness within a quiet state that is free from thought—it is just harder to notice. Therefore one state of mind is not "more nondual" than another. The mind is part of the creation, and as such has no reality of its own, regardless of what state it is in—but as part of the creation, the mind is also always not separate from *brahman*, regardless of what state it is in. Nonduality is a philosophical statement about the nature of reality, having nothing to do with the state of one's mind.

An experience of interconnectedness with everything, with something greater, or with the universe, is not relevant to an Advaita Vedanta understanding of nonduality. This lineage holds a precise technical meaning of "reality": only that which is unchanging is real (Whitfield, 2009). A traditional example is a clay pot, which in the past was clay in a riverbank, and one day in the future will be shards of broken pottery; therefore, by the definition of reality developed by Advaita Vedanta, the clay pot has no inherent reality. Similarly, all of creation arises out of the Self (*brahman*), is constantly changing, and one day will be resorbed back into the Self. Therefore, any sense of connection with all the universe, for example, is merely connection with an

appearance that has no reality of its own. Moreover, because the quality of interconnectedness is an object of consciousness rather than consciousness itself, it too has no independent reality.

From this it should be clear that the notion of "nondual states" has no basis in the teachings of Advaita Vedanta. While some meditative states such as mindfulness also result in a minimal self experience—with *śamatha* providing a focused version and *vipaśyanā* a more diffuse version (Hartelius, 2015b; Hartelius et al., 2023)—a term such as self-boundarylessness is more accurate than "nondual state." Nondual implies identity between two things, which in this case are left wholly undefined. While this vagueness disqualifies it as a psychological term, it conveniently allows for a belief that self-boundarylessness somehow represents spiritual attainment—that the experiencer who is unable to distinguish a boundary demarcating a located self is somehow closer to the source of all reality.

The latter notion comes not from Advaita Vedanta or Buddhism or any other Eastern spiritual tradition, but from syncretic constructions such as those in Ken Wilber's (e.g., 2000) contributions to New Age spiritual thought (Hartelius, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). In Wilber's model, the source of all reality is *the nondual*, a notion amalgamated from aspects of various Eastern schools of thought and praxis (cf. Hammer, 2001). The idea of "nondual states" conflates the experience of self-boundarylessness with proximity to this metaphysical notion of ultimate reality.

As Carol noted over and over in her discourses on Advaita Vedanta, there are any number of contemporary neo-Advaitins—spiritual teachers who, rather than receiving the teachings from a lineage holder of the tradition of Advaita Vedanta stretching back to Śaṅkara himself, have read and interpreted Advaita Vedanta texts for themselves—cryptic writings that are easily misunderstood and intended only for disclosure and explanation by a lineage-holding teacher. The result is various modern notions that claim the heritage of Śaṅkara, but that lack fidelity to his teachings. For this reason, and at the risk of excessive repetition, it should be clear "nondual states" have no relevance to the tradition from which they typically claim their status.

To be fair, offering seekers the prospect that they can experience a state that directly apprehends an ultimate spiritual reality can be of considerable meaning value—and the notion of "nondual states" provides this in a way that is somewhat analogous to Advaita Vedanta's nondual realization. However, this equation of a mental state of self-boundarilessness with proximity to a spiritual ultimate *is a novel construction of New Age spiritual thought* that is in sharp contrast with lineage-based Advaita Vedanta teachings, and that is incompatible with scientific psychology—even, or perhaps especially, with a transpersonal psychology that considers the human capacity for spirituality as a dimension of the whole person.

The use of terms connoting nonduality in Buddhism are different, but no less problematic for the notion that "nondual states" reliably indicate spiritual encounter or attainment. In Buddhism, nonduality is used in a variety of different and closely-defined ways, each within a specific context (Berkhin & Hartelius, 2011). Some of these references are doctrinal, such as the nondual relationship between relative and absolute truth, or the quite different nonduality of five wisdoms and eight consciousnesses in higher tantras; others refer to various states of mind that span all the way from transient states of the deluded mind to states that are beneficial; none refer to a shared universal consciousness (Berkhin & Hartelius, 2011). The term nonduality has been used to describe the prereflective irreducibility of consciousness (e.g., Capriles, 2010; Krägeloh, 2018), which, as with an experience of minimal self, applies to the consciousness inhering to any mental state. As is the case with Advaita Vedanta, Buddhist teachings do not support the notion that states in which differentiation between subject and object is reduced or absent are in and of themselves necessarily noteworthy markers of spiritual attainment.

While it is misleading, inflationary, and psychologically imprecise to refer to states of mind as nondual, this does not in any way lessen the value of practices such as mindfulness in which the sense of a boundaried self is softened, expanded, or separated from mental chatter. It may be meaningful to use such terminology within the framework of a New Age religion, and while

such systems deserve the same respect afforded to any religion, this religious usage should not be imported into the contexts of psychology, any more than hermeneutical constructs from Buddhism or Christianity (cf. Friedman, 2009; Hartelius, 2017b). For example, self-report scales that purport to measure nonduality, such as the Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment (NADA; Hanley et al., 2018), can be no more substantive than the theory that supports the scale items (Neal et al., 2019)—which in this case is somewhat lacking.

As Banerji (2018) has noted, Indian cosmologies provide meaningful context to support dedication to practice, so that practitioners may come to their own direct realizations, and are not intended as literal models of the empirical universe. It was the hellenized thinking of early Christian Church Fathers that transformed the metaphors of Hebrew poetry into literal events, such as winged beings who pulled open great shutters somewhere above the earth and emptied barrels of rainwater through them to nourish human food crops. It would be ill advised to apply the same literalized Western thinking to the many and varied spiritual literatures of the East.

At the same time, scientific inquiry into states of consciousness—how to define them, measure them, and discern their cognitive mechanisms—may facilitate these skills and demonstrate their benefits in ways that traditional cultures have not done, and perhaps in ways more suited to contemporary life. Much of human genius comes from novel applications of existing ideas: when the ancient technology of printing on paper was combined with the more recent but well-established techniques of photography, photocopiers forever changed paperwork.

Key to collaborations between spiritual traditions and psychological science is mutual respect: psychologists and neuroscientists who do not dismiss the value of experiences they may not understand, and spiritual practitioners who do not attempt to give their inspiring hermeneutics the same status as scientific facts. This does not preclude the possibility that some hermeneutical systems may represent empirical processes in metaphorical form, which if unpacked might be of practical use in scientific study (e.g., Lancaster, 2004). Moving forward in this way, with curiosity and openmindedness on all

sides (Friedman, 2015; Hartelius, 2021), there may be unexpected benefits both for psychology and those who practice within the contexts of traditional teachings.

In this process, care and accuracy matter. Mixing concepts from vastly different traditions into a novel syncretic system is spiritually innovative (Lahood, 2010), and has resulted in new traditions such as Sikhism and Bahá'í. However, misrepresenting traditions and then appealing to their status to support inventive interpretations that are at odds with their closely-conserved teachings is simply improper. To propose that the results of this amalgamation should be incorporated as a psychological construct is unhelpful at best, and more consistent with New Age religion masquerading as psychology,

In This Issue

Our general section paper is by Harry Hunt, a follow-up to his series of papers on developments of spirituality in the Western psyche in the late modern and postmodern eras, and "Intimations of a Spiritual New Age" (Hunt, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020, 2021)—where the term *New Age* is used in a somewhat broader sense than Hanegraff's (1996) descriptions of New Age religions. Hunt calls us to communion with all sentient life, while also maintaining that humanity has a specific moral and planetary responsibility for responding to the crises our species has created. It is a paper that deserves to be read and re-read.

Having shepherded this journal forward since 2007, with guidance from Harris Friedman and wonderful support from Marie Thouin-Savard and Courtenay Crouch, it is gratifying to see its growth and development. Papers from *IJTS* are now downloaded more than 100,000 times per year by a total readership of over 50,000, spread over 182 of the world's 195 self-governing nations and 33 of its 47 territories and dependencies. It is also heartening to see an increase in the number of submissions from locations beyond North America, in keeping with the journal's aspiration to represent transpersonal studies internationally.

Glenn Hartelius, Editor-in-Chief
International Journal of Transpersonal Studies

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About the Journal

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