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Letter in Response to Editor's Introduction, "Nonduality: Not One, Not Two, but Many"

Judith Blackstone
Woodstock, NY, USA

Dear Editor,

Thank you for including my writing in your introduction to the last issue of the journal. Since you single me out as representing those teachers who distort or misinterpret the teachings of Advaita Vedanta, I thought I would take this chance to address some of the issues that you raise. I think that it is a worthwhile discussion.

I have contributed some innovations to both the understanding and practice of nonduality as it is practiced today in the West. As far as I know, neither Advaita Vedanta nor Buddhist nondual teachings address as specifically as I attempt to do, the embodied experience of primary, unified consciousness. Nor are the traditional teachings concerned, as I am in the Realization Process, with the way we organize ourselves protectively in reaction to our childhood environment, by tightening the fascia throughout the body, or how this protective, bodily constriction can obscure our realization of primary, unified consciousness.

I believe that this is an important contribution to the field of nondual spiritual awakening. I have found that most people cannot realize the "not two" of self and other simply by understanding that this is our true nature or by interrupting their habitual thought patterns. The realization of nonduality is not just a cognitive shift but also requires an openness and contact with our entire body and being. The constrictions in our body bind us in our protective dualistic stance with our environment. In contrast to many traditional methods, I have found that we can tell ourselves that we are Brahman again and again, but we will not experience ourselves as Brahman (Atman, the immanent pure consciousness will not know itself as Brahman, the transcendent pure consciousness) until we can open to this substrate of pure consciousness throughout our whole body and being.

This, I believe, is why Shankara, the foremost proponent of Advaita Vedanta wrote, "Hearing of Brahman is good, but thinking is one hundred times better than hearing. Millions of times greater than this is meditation" (1991, p. 167). And yet, I have found that even meditation does not always suffice to remove the protective, constructed duality in our body and being. The long-held constrictions in the body often have to be specifically addressed and released.

I do not consider myself to be, or represent myself as an Advaita Vedanta teacher. I call my method the Realization Process in order to distinguish it from both Hindu and Buddhist nondual teachings. I do reference both Advaita Vedanta and Tibetan and Zen Buddhist nondual teachings in my writing and teaching as a way of contextualizing and validating the understanding and practices of the Realization Process. As nondual realization is necessarily a subjectively experienced way of being, there has always been some innovation among nondual teachers, just as there have always been those who defend what they believe are authentic, classical interpretations of the teachings. To me, this seems like a positive circumstance and not something to argue over.

I do not teach, as you claim, an "inter-connectedness of our embodied psyche with the world around us." Rather, I teach the uncovering of very subtle unified consciousness pervading not just the body, but the body and environment as a whole. I teach that we are not separate from the content of our experience, but that we are different from that content. When we know ourselves as the all-pervasive stillness of primary, unified consciousness, our thoughts, emotions, sensations and perceptions flow through that stillness without impediment. That means that we think, feel, sense and perceive clearly and deeply without being

fundamentally changed by that experience. The Advaita Vedanta teachings say that “we are not our thoughts, not our feelings, not our sensations” but this does not mean that we do not have thoughts, feelings and sensations. This mistake, prevalent in the spiritual field today, has produced too many well-meaning, aspiring zombies. This, I feel is worth arguing about.

You also wrote that “the notion of one’s nature as ‘all-pervasive space’ is foreign and antithetical to the teachings of Advaita Vedanta” as is the notion that we experience ourselves as not separate from the content of our experience.

However, Shankara wrote,

- “Now I am filled with the ever-blissful Atman. I see nothing, neither do I hear nor know anything that is separate from me.” (1991, p. 217).
- “So this body and all are nothing but consciousness, the one pure consciousness” (1991, p. 179).
- “I am the Supreme Brahman which is pure consciousness, always clearly manifest, unborn, one only, imperishable, unattached, and all-pervading and non-dual.” (1989, p. 111).
- “Like the space I fill all things inside and out” (1987, retrieved from internet, 2016).
- “He who has attained the supreme goal...dwells as the embodiment of infinite consciousness and bliss” (1989, p. 152).

And here is the revered 14th century Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Longchenpa, referring clearly to this space-like experience: “Within the spacious expanse, the spacious expanse, the spacious expanse, I Longchen Rabjam, for whom the lucid expanse of being is infinite, experience everything as embraced within a blissful expanse, a single nondual expanse” (Rabjam, 2001, p. 79).

Although scholars will find differences between the philosophies of Shankara and Longchenpa, their descriptions are similar enough, I believe, to be placed in the same category. They are both describing an experience of their own being and everything around them as pervaded by subtle, unified consciousness. In my view, the strict adherence to our personal experience is the best we can offer to people who want to learn from us. Our descriptions today will likely be influenced by our 21st century sensitivity to ourselves as psychological as well as spiritual beings. They will each be slightly different from each other, but probably similar enough

to be given the same label of “nonduality.” Because when we get right down it, apparently, we all find that same expanse of pure consciousness pervading everywhere and everything, including our own body.

Warm regards,

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Editor’s Response

The matter that Judith Blackstone addresses in her thoughtful response to my essay in Vol. 34(1-2) of this journal is of considerable importance for the transpersonal field, as well as within the domain of popular spirituality. I am grateful for the opportunity to further the dialogue on this topic. As acknowledged in my essay, there is undoubtedly considerable value in the type of state that Blackstone (2006) has described. Furthermore, her work to articulate states in clear detail that includes reference to the spatial dimensions of subtle qualities is in line with what I have described as *somatic phenomenology* (Hartelius, 2007, 2015a). This has been developed into a research method and tested on the somatic phenomenology of the flow state (Marolt-Sender, 2014), which may be able to take the sorts of descriptions offered by Blackstone and test them in intersubjective contexts.

In providing descriptions and teaching such a state, Blackstone likely offers a valuable service, and every respect should be accorded to work that has real value in human lives. Furthermore, any work that promotes the understanding of such states deserves attention.

The critique is not of the state Blackstone offers, its potential benefit, or the possible value of a novel approach to state description, but its characterization in her letter as “primary, unified consciousness,” and in her paper as “an unconstructed, nondual dimension of consciousness” (Blackstone, 2006, p. 25). These are very large claims that deserve careful examination, for they imply authoritative understanding of the nature of consciousness and the structure of reality based on ancient spiritual knowledge. Considering the role that nonduality plays in popular spirituality movements, as well as the real potential for outsized claims offered to a public that is generally not well educated in this domain, it is the role of a field such as transpersonal psychology to bring a consideration that is both sympathetic and critical.

In her paper, Blackstone (2006) used the term, nondual, in a context that not only specifically named the nonduality of Advaita Vedanta, but also defined nonduality as a singular unitary phenomenon, an experience of oneness that “has been described throughout the world’s spiritual literature” (Blackstone, 2006, pp. 26-27). She then specifically referred to Judaism, Islamic Sufism, Christian mysticism, and “many of the Asian spiritual teachings” (p. 27) including “Advaita Vedanta, ... Madhyamika Buddhism, Taoism, and some schools of Zen Buddhism” (p. 27). This suggests, first, that she considered the state she teaches to be identical with the offerings of Advaita Vedanta, and second, it situates her thought within a perennialist metaphysic—an approach with numerous shortcomings.

While the evolving perennialist models of Ken Wilber (e.g., 1975, 2000, 2006) held sway during the first decades of the transpersonal field, sharp critiques from outside (e.g., Ellis & Yeager, 1989) and inside the field (e.g., Rothberg & Kelly, 1998) and the development of alternate models that do not rely on metaphysical assumptions (e.g., Ferrer, 2002, 2009; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Hartelius, 2015b) have lessened the reliance on an approach that has legitimately been characterized as more like a religion than a psychology.

Without going into an extensive critique of perennialism here, it is possible simply to note that

conglomerating quite different spiritual traditions through the application of a questionable philosophical frame does not in any way establish the claim that there is a “nondual ground of being” (Blackstone, 2006, p. 28), or that some state of consciousness might be capable of accessing this ground. In other words, the context within which Blackstone made her claims regarding the state she described is itself vulnerable to considerable critique that any experiential value of the state does not redeem.

In fact, much of the “field of nondual spiritual awakening” that Blackstone’s letter names is largely reliant on just this sort of uncritical perennialist model that has been popularized by the writings of Ken Wilber and others. As noted in the original editorial, Blackstone’s work stands out favorably among these in that it actually offers a rather more sophisticated phenomenal description of a particular and likely valuable state of consciousness—a fact for which she should be acknowledged. While outsized claims to some primary dimension of consciousness or reality are not uncommon in the marketplace, it is more questionable to advance such claims in a scholarly journal.

No issue is taken here with transpersonal scholars who hold a personal or religious belief in a nondual ultimate, or some divine source that may be beyond human understanding; indeed, Advaita Vedanta itself offers a nondual ultimate. Many religions are constructed around some such assertion or set of assumptions about “how it really is.” Furthermore, a transpersonal approach is able and willing to consider carefully and sympathetically what religious and spiritual traditions have to offer as specific instances of a human capacity for spirituality, not merely from a rational cognitive stance such as might be employed in a psychology of religion, but also from the stances of the experiential states to which participation in these communities of practice may lead. This is what may allow for a more insightful glimpse into human spirituality—and thereby who we are as individuals and societies—than can be offered by many other current approaches.

What is insupportable is the notion that a theory or philosophy is somehow confirmed by a conviction that a particular phenomenal experience, however powerful, *is intrinsically sufficient to validate that theory or philosophy*, absent other independent evidence. Such an experience has validity in its own right, and deserves to be studied as a phenomenon—something that conventional, rationally based cognitive approaches

have at times been reluctant to allow. But the power and validity of the phenomenon does not automatically confer veracity onto the conceptual frame with which a particular individual or community chooses to pair it. It is this balance of affirming the intrinsic validity of the phenomenon while also retaining a critical stance toward any given conceptual context that is at times missing within transpersonal approaches.

The unique approach of transpersonal scholarship based in multiple states of consciousness deserves to be accompanied by a philosophical stance that does not discredit itself by unnecessarily invoking hidden causes or relying on flawed or naïve versions of evidence. It also demands a careful consideration of distinctions between spiritual traditions, including between the Self of Advaita Vedanta and the spiritual goals of other communities. While technical and rational analyses of religions certainly can seem to eliminate the very vitality that spirituality seeks to cultivate, it seems unproductive to remedy this deficit by obviating the need for precision with a loosely-held assumption that all traditions must be doing the same thing. A perennialist alternative is therefore not a solution that measures up to the potential contribution of a transpersonal approach. Indeed, it is incongruent with the careful way in which Blackstone has approached the phenomenology of a state of consciousness.

In addition to a problematic philosophical frame, it may be useful to consider the specific ways in which Blackstone's account of the state that she teaches do not accord with Advaita Vedanta. She notes in her letter that, "I have found that we can tell ourselves that we are Brahman again and again, but we will not experience ourselves as Brahman (Atman, the immanent pure consciousness will not know itself as Brahman, the transcendent pure consciousness) until we can open to this substrate of pure consciousness throughout our whole body and being." Her distinction between conceptual knowledge and embodied experience is well taken. However, the traditional method of transmitting the teachings of Advaita Vedanta does not consist of merely telling oneself again and again that they are Brahman. Instead, the traditional teacher combines stories and metaphors and teachings in such a way that the student is gradually led to a direct experience of the self that cannot be an object of awareness.

The direct experience that one is this consciousness, and that this consciousness is Brahman, does not have the properties of all-pervasive space, because

space is an object of awareness and the Self cannot be an object of awareness, and because the Vedantic Self does not have any spatial dimension (Whitfield, 2009). The citations of translations of Shankara's writings do not counter this point, first, because these are out-of-context quotations provided by an unknown translator who may or may not hold the teaching lineage; second, because the single reference to a word that can be translated as *space* (also as *sky* or *atmosphere*, or a subtle *etherial fluid*) appears from this translation to be used metaphorically rather than literally; and third, because the teachings of Advaita Vedanta are designed to be transmitted by a lineage-based teacher, not riffed on by modern innovators who feel they have sufficient understanding of teachings they in some cases have not actually received.

Blackstone is to some degree correct in her letter when she notes that "there has always been some innovation among nondual teachers, just as there have always been those who defend what they believe are authentic, classical interpretations of the teachings." However, nondual teachers as a generic category are a modern Western creation, and while traditional teachers of various paths often had and have differences of opinion and interpretation, these are disputes between individuals who *have actually received lineage-based transmission of teachings*, not those who lived in vastly distant and different cultures who then read a variety of scriptures in translation and assumed they were correct in their understanding of all of these. Nor does the account of a 14th century teacher of Tibetan Buddhism necessarily have any relevance for the interpretation of Advaita Vedanta—and the assumption that it should is an example of the uncritical practices that a perennialist model engenders.

Shifting back to Blackstone's letter, she protests that "I do not teach, as you claim, an 'interconnectedness of our embodied psyche with the world around us.' Rather, I teach the uncovering of very subtle unified consciousness pervading not just the body, but the body and environment as a whole." I did not claim that Blackstone taught this, but offered it as perhaps a more grounded characterization of the state in question than the perennialist-inspired view that was advanced. However, if Blackstone wishes to argue instead for a consciousness that pervades body and environment, it compounds her problems by suggesting that consciousness is a sort of vitalistic essence, a claim that is just as unsupportable as perennialism.

Blackstone further noted, with some justification, that “the Advaita Vedanta teachings say that ‘we are not our thoughts, not our feelings, not our sensations’ but this does not mean that we do not have thoughts, feelings and sensations. This mistake, prevalent in the spiritual field today, has produced too many well-meaning, aspiring zombies.” Blackstone’s observation is cogent in that there are certainly versions of religion that teach dissociation from thoughts, feelings, and sensations, but Advaita Vedanta is not one of these. Shortcomings among some communities does not justify the sorts of mischaracterizations of Advaita Vedanta that Blackstone (2006) has offered, nor does it validate the uncritical confluences typical of popular nonduality teachers in general, whether they are perennialist or the newer breed of post-metaphysical teachers who simply conceal their perennialist ideas in layers of paradoxical obscurity.

In my living room I have a nice couch. I like it. It is reasonably stylish and comfortable. If I were to claim that this is the very couch upon which Elvis Presley met with President Nixon, my friends would greet this claim with well-deserved skepticism. However, the exaggeration of my claim would not make the couch any less comfortable, or any less suitable for my living room. I can still sit on it just fine. Both in my essay and again here, I have attempted to carefully and thoughtfully acknowledge the value and virtue of the work that Blackstone has described, while also pointing out that characterizing this state as an unconstructed, nondual state of consciousness appears to be an uncritical perennialist notion that deserves considerable skepticism; that this state represents a nonduality taught by Advaita Vedanta is simply not in line with the clear, specific tenets of the tradition’s teachings.

Glenn Hartelius, Main Editor
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