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NONDUAL PSYCHOTHERAPY: Letting go of the separate self contraction and embracing nondual being

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Summary

This article summarizes the pivotal task of moving into nondual awareness by seeing through the veil of the separate self. Formerly this nondual state was understood as the final stage in an arduous journey of

ego-transcendence; but nondual psychotherapists are now recognizing this nondual state as readily available to clients as part of the therapeutic process. The first author recounts his own journey of seeing through the illusion of the separate self and embracing nondual awareness. Following this, he presents a nondual psychotherapy case study describing the process of a client having an awakening experience – the letting go of her egoic separate self in the moment – and her subsequent realization that surrendering is not a one-time event but an ongoing process.

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Introduction: A Personal Account

I woke up suddenly gripped by terror. I could see myself desperately clinging to a self that was trying to survive forever. It was as if the self might struggle for an eternity to go on but perpetually exist in fear of its own extinction. It was a terrible sensation of abject terror to consider that the self could endlessly remain in utter fear. I could plainly comprehend there was nothing to grab onto; that nothing was available to save me. Seeing that eternal condition and the absolute hopelessness of the situation, I let go – or rather letting go happened of its own accord. And then abruptly there was just vast stillness and silence. (Author’s journal entry)

A Turn to Transpersonal Psychology

To understand and deal with the issue of ego death, separate self dissolution, and self-transcendence, one can turn to a strand of Western psychology that has developed over the last forty years to incorporate the full spectrum of psycho-spiritual development. Maslow (1968), one of the founding fathers of the transpersonal psychology movement, pointed out that religious experience is a higher or transcendent possibility occurring at the further reaches of human nature. In his view, this necessitated the development of a fourth psychology, one that is “transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interests, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like” (pp. iii-iv).

Extensive work has now been done in the area of self-transcendence in Western psychology (Almaas, 1996, 2008; Assagioli, 1971; Boorstein, 1996; Grof, 1985, 1988; Hixon, 1978; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980, 1993; Washburn, 1988, 1994). However, much of the pioneering work in transpersonal psychology has been conducted by Ken Wilber (1977, 1986, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2006) who, through his integral model, has created a spectrum of consciousness system by synthesizing psychology, philosophy, and religion from both Western and Eastern perspectives.

Wilber (1986) originally mapped out ten principal levels of psyche in a developmental, structural, holarchical, systems-oriented format. He synthesized the initial six stages from cognitive, ego, moral, and object relations lines of development of conventional psychology represented by such theorists as Piaget (1977), Loevinger (1976), and Kohlberg (1981). The final four transpersonal stages were developed from Eastern and Western sources of contemplative development such as Mahayana, Vedanta, Sufi, Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, Yoga, Aurobindo, and Zen.

Since his early conceptions (Wilber, 1986), Wilber (2000, 2006) has moved away from a simple stacking of contemplative stages atop conventional stages and, instead, introduced the Wilber-Combs Lattice in which structures or stages of consciousness (archaic, magic, mythic, rational, pluralistic, integral, super-integral) are placed on the vertical axis, and the major states are placed on the horizontal axis (gross, subtle, causal, nondual). Thus each structure can be experienced from a number of states. Similarly, each state can be experienced from a number of different structures. For Wilber (2006), this explained how two people can both be in a nondual state but interpret it from a different structure i.e., one using a rational structure and the other using an integral or super-integral structure. Nondual states, as well as the other states, may be experienced from a number of different structures of consciousness.

Wilber (2000, 2006) has made clear that the transpersonal states beyond normal, waking, gross consciousness are available to each one of us in day-to-day life. Wilber (1990) described the subtle state as one which “is marked by transmental illumination, intuition, and beginning gnosis, which brings a profound insight into the fundamental or archetypal forms of being and existence itself” (p.92). In certain traditions, such as Gnosticism and Hinduism, this is the state of direct phenomenological apprehension of personal deity-form (Wilber, 1986). The causal state is the realization of the unmanifest source or transcendental ground of existence. In various different traditions, it is referred to as the abyss (Gnosticism), the void (Mahayana), and the formless (Vedanta) (Adi Da, 1973; Goleman, 1988; Wilber, 1986). Here, all manifest forms are radically transcended so that they no longer need to appear or arise in consciousness. Thus, there is transcendence and release into boundless radiance and formless consciousness where there are no subjects and objects apart from consciousness as such. The final state is the nondual, which is an integration of form and formlessness where “the center of formlessness is shown to be not other than the entire world of form” (Wilber, 1990, p.99). In this state of consciousness, the extraordinary and the ordinary, the supernatural and the mundane are precisely one and the same. At this level of complete integration of formlessness and form, as well as at all prior levels as they arise, the ‘suchness’ of all levels is enjoyed and the attachment to manifest existence is lost (Wilber, 1986).

Letting Go of the Separate Self Contraction

Wilber (1986) pointed to Adi Da and Ramana Maharshi as examples of mystical teachers who pointed out the importance in the transformational journey of releasing the contraction that constitutes the separate self sense. Seeing this contraction usually entails some sort of overt or covert inquiry into the separate self sense. Others (Carse, 2006; Renz, 2004; Tolle; 1996) have described experiences in which the sense of separate self is lost, for some on a permanent basis. Tolle (1996) described such an experience when he was approximately 30 years old as he confronted the excruciating misery of his day-to-day experience:

I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words “resist nothing,” as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly, there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void. (p. 4)

He later wrote about his understanding of that experience:

I understood that the intense pressure of suffering that night must have forced my consciousness to withdraw from its identification with the unhappy and deeply fearful self, which is ultimately a fiction of the mind. This withdrawal must have been so complete that this false, suffering self immediately collapsed, just as if a plug had been pulled out of an inflatable toy. What was left then was my true nature as the ever-present I am;

consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form. (p.5)

Renz (2004) also described waking up in terror; in fear of extinction of the self. It was only after accepting his extinction in a huge, black pool of energy that the energy changed and he fell into a wondrous blissful state. Similarly, Carse (2006) described having to deal with an ominous fear of imminent death in the jungle, and his experience of coming to a place of accepting his death in the immediate, present moment. He reported:

And I completely let go and relaxed into this new awareness that for this body to die here and now was a very good, appropriate thing, that this was why I was here. This was not resignation to something unwanted, but whole-hearted acceptance and surrender in joy into what was known to be right and perfect. In mere moments the entire thought and feeling and physical symptoms of extreme fear for my life dissolved and gave way to pure joyful acceptance which even the certainty of death could not take away. (p.45)

It is evident that each person must deal with the issue of his or her own death in the transformational journey. It is not enough to merely witness the cosmos, as that involves some sort of subtle withdrawal from existence and subtle separate self contraction (Bodian, 2008). One must see through the illusion of the separate self.

My Journey into the Death of the Separate Self

After completing law school, I was spellbound by transpersonal psychology and the early works of Ken Wilber and Eastern gurus like Trungpa, Krishnamurti, and Rajneesh. I completed graduate degrees in psychology and spent years meditating, going to workshops, reading, seeking, and experiencing increasingly refined, blissful states, yet always chasing some sort of grand enlightenment. After a number of years however, my seeking had lost its lure and had become more of a feeling of intense misery, suffering, and absolute hopelessness. I had become exhausted with my seeking. Similar to what Bonder (1998) described, I had lost my hope in freedom, love and enlightenment. Bonder stated:

The passage beyond hypermasculine dissociation and idealistic seeking really begins with the Rotting away of everything you have ever been able to do to better yourself, to succeed, to get what you want, to get free. More precisely; it begins with your fundamental loss of ultimate hope in all such things. ... at the center of the whole great symphony of your own life, you begin to notice and helplessly endure a stunned, stark silence, an emptiness, a despair....The person who is authentically involved in the Rot is falling steadily and most often helplessly, out of the idealistic, dissociative, anxious mode of superimposed and formulaic seeking, and into the realistic, naturally associative, and more and more peaceful mode of participation in what is in his or her life. (pp. 49-51)

Experiencing the rot is a profound opportunity. I came to a point where I realized that all this effort and grasping for enlightenment had been nothing more than the egoic seeking of the separate self. The whole approach had been wrong from the very beginning. It has been a crazy game and it all had to go. Up to this point, I hadn't really surrendered even though I used terms like ego-transcendence, awakening, and enlightenment. I was still intensely in my separate self seeking and suffering. This put me in a profound state of hopelessness as I could do nothing to move forward. And in this swamp of hopelessness I sat. No experience or doing could help as this would just reinforce my separate self. Finally, one night, waking up in the wee hours of the dark night, I came to a pivotal realization:

I woke up suddenly gripped by terror. I could see myself desperately clinging to a self that was trying to

survive forever. It was as if the self might struggle for an eternity to go on but perpetually exist in fear of its own extinction. It was a terrible sensation of abject terror to consider that the self could endlessly remain in utter fear. I could plainly comprehend there was nothing to grab onto; that nothing was available to save me. Seeing that eternal condition and the absolute hopelessness of the situation, I let go – or rather letting go happened of its own accord. And then abruptly there was just vast stillness and silence.

An understanding was borne upon me that my quest for enlightenment was futile, as it was based on the fantasies and grasping of the separate self ego. After many years of meditation and dedicated pursuit, I saw that my efforts were driven by the separate self ego and through these “efforts” I had successfully circumvented the death of the separate self ego. And now, seeing there was nothing to do, I gave up trying to save myself and relaxed into the death of self. All of my seeking had been a miserable failure: I now understood there was nothing to hold on to. My own experience was reflected in the words of Osho (1980):

You have known only miseries; you are a bundle of miseries and dreams and hopes and frustrations and expectations — you are a bundle of all these things. Let this bundle be drowned... My work here consists of taking all those imaginations away from you, slowly slowly, one by one. All toys have to be destroyed, so one day you can see the fact there is nothing to hold on to. Only then will you relax and allow this drowning. Only then will you relax and die. (pp. 234-235)

Similarly, Carse (2006) wrote, “the surrender is of one’s entire individual existence” (p.47). I had to let go of my entire existence, or as McKenna (2002) described: the dream character is totally annihilated. And so I gave it all up. I let go of my separate self dream existence. As this happened, the paradox was that in reality, in the stillness of the moment, there is nobody to surrender and nobody to die. Knowing that I am not is surrender (Osho, 1978). It is comprehending the person as the prison. As Osho (1994) explained the moment you come out of the prison, you also are not. There is pure sky, pure space. Further Osho (1980) reminded us that there is not a thing to be done, as you are already that which you want to become. Anything one does creates a trap. The empty sky of consciousness is there and there is nothing to be done.

Nondual Psychotherapy and Working Through the Separate Self Contraction

Many therapists have awakened to similar insights as mine: they have moved beyond the illusion of the separate self. Hence, there has been a swelling growth of nondual therapists practicing nondual psychotherapy in which the illusion of the separate self existence is challenged as a pivotal part of therapy. Prendergast (2003) pointed to transpersonal psychologists who mapped out nondual awareness as a rarely experienced state at the pinnacle of self-realization. However, a new generation of clinicians and teachers are beginning to see how accessible nondual awareness is in psychotherapeutic work with clients. Nondual awareness is at the heart of countless pathways to enlightenment through disciplines including Hindu Vedanta, most schools of Buddhism and Taoism, mystical Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It refers to the understanding and direct experience of fundamental consciousness that underlies the apparent distinction between perceiver and perceived. Transpersonal therapists embracing the nondual tradition can simply rest in presence as Prendergast (2003) made clear:

They realize, at least to some degree, that they are not limited to being a “therapist” (although they may function in that role), or even a “person.” Their locus of identity is either resting in or moving toward unconditioned awareness, or Presence. The result is the emergence of a natural simplicity, transparency,

clarity, and warm acceptance of whatever arises within themselves and their clients. Since they increasingly do not take themselves as some “thing,” they also do not take their clients as objects separate from themselves. They understand that there is no separate mirror and someone mirrored; there is only mirroring. (p. 3)

Prendergast (2003) further observed that embracing nondual awareness adds a depth dimension to existing schools of psychology. Psychotherapy typically involves working within the horizontal dimension; the evolution of phenomenal life in time and space. Nondual awareness refers to what is formless and exists outside of time and space thereby adding a vertical dimension. In addition, Prendergast (2003) observed that it is not so much that nondual therapists integrate being but instead are absorbed by it, and thus presence is enhanced, the effects of which can be contagious, “When we are in the Presence of an individual who has awakened from the dream of “me”, we can sense an unpretentiousness, lucidity, transparency, joy, and ease of being” (p. 5).

While the effects of the flowering of presence are contagious, there are also a number of secondary effects invoked by the nondual awakened position of the therapist. The therapist freed of role identity can be more authentic, transparent, available, and creative in the moment, as he or she is no longer a problem solver working with problem holders. As Prendergast (2003) described, problems are unpacked and clients discover a “profound sense of emptiness that has been fiercely defended against. They discover that their problems were all outcomes from and compensatory expressions of this defense against what at first appears to be annihilation and in time reveals itself as unconditional love” (p.7). Everything is accepted and embraced simply as it is and “As awakening deepens, the judging mind loses its grip and attention becomes increasingly innocent, intimate, and impersonally affectionate” (p. 8).

Through the therapeutic process, the core of the client’s separate self contraction is touched and the empathic resonance between the client and therapist helps heal the pain of separation. The therapist, who has let go of the attachment to the separate self, knows the peace and freedom of living without attachment to any story of how things are or should be. This is especially true of the separate self story, which is otherwise embraced and unquestioned by all conventional psychotherapies (Prendergast, 2003). We will now further explore the issue of the letting go of the separate self contraction using a clinical case example of nondual therapy.

Case Study: Linda’s Grasping for Self

The following case study shows how the issue of a person’s separate self contraction can be worked on in a psychotherapeutic setting. Linda, in her late 20’s, was involved in one of the first author’s transpersonal psychotherapy groups over the past year and had made substantial progress in embracing what is and moving into beingness. She had initially been drawn to transpersonal psychotherapy after experiences with altered states of consciousness as well as intense chakra-like energy movements. A graduate of English, Linda was now pursuing a second degree in counseling. She had been impressed by the teachings of Almaas and Jung. However, it was not until reading Ken Wilber’s (1977) approach, the “spectrum of consciousness”, that life as she knew it began to crumble away. Linda found these teachings shook the very foundations of her understanding of life. During a session of group process, while absorbing the teachings, she began to experience a deep wave of energy coursing through her that she resisted. She wrote of this time:

I began to sense and visualize a dark wave rolling and turning like a tide inside of me. Since the wave can feel initially like a subtle discomfort in the lower belly for me, I confused its presence, deserviced myself and labeled this feeling as discomfort and ascribed it to the mental construct of anxiousness. Like fitting a square

through a circle my efforts to attend were futile, and if anything intensified it. As it began to rise from the background into the forefront of my awareness I had a deepening feeling that to resist this wave and what it pulls away and brings to the surface would only give me more years of battle, and I had had it with battling.

The feeling of the disorienting wave intensified following a group meditation exercise in which the people were instructed to be like a hollow bamboo. An image appeared in front of her, which she wrote about in her journal:

My teacher uttered the word, “drop”. I literally felt a drop inside of me and everything inside my mind’s eye changed. I slowly saw that something was changing on the sheet of paper. Like puffs of ink in a jar of water, colour slowly began to seep onto the sheet and was forming an image. Staring at the image, I began to see that it was a self portrait of the figure watching, but she wasn’t painting it, since no one was, it was happening slowly all on its own. The image kept coming, and I suddenly realized that all the colour was the colour and identity drained from the figure. It was as if my inner thoughts were a narrative voice for this script where the figure was the actress. Like a cue, she, upon this realization, chillingly turned her head towards me. She had no face. Nothing. Devoid of expression, devoid of character, devoid of personality and devoid of identity, her face was nothing. It was utter horror because it was only then that I knew the figure was me. “Who the hell was watching this? I thought, if that’s me?” The face obviously didn’t say anything, not even telepathically. It just looked at me, whoever “me” was. Things started to get really intense. I thought I was an undetected watcher, I did not know she knew I was watching, and it was as if she was relaying this to me with that eerie gesture of turning to face me as nothing. I began to wonder then, who was really the watcher? My teacher began to take us back into the room. I came back with the realization I had been somewhat weeping during the whole thing and I was breathing really fast and heavy.

In this experience, Linda was left shocked with the gap of no-self opening up inside of her and her mind’s inability to understand what was going on. She felt a loss of orientation and centeredness in which she could not recognize herself. She felt like she was losing her mind. A few days after this group session, Linda joined me for an individual session. The previous night she had a powerful dream of losing all of her teeth that seemed to symbolize the change she was going through:

I saw what I’d look like without teeth. There was no blood, I was in no pain. It was almost as if I were ready for this loss. I was not in shock, or upset that my teeth had fallen out. There was just this image of my mouth with holes in the gums. I woke up. Upon pondering this dream, I knew change was occurring as I took into account that wild moment of transcending and losing my mind merely days ago. I knew I was still very disorientated with myself as I thought I knew it as well as everything else around me. I had an odd sense that I was coming ‘undone’ after this dream, like a ball of yarn unwinding. I knew I had no control of this, or rather my mind knew not what to do.

On the day of our first individual session, we sat in our chairs together, and Linda recounted her recent intense opening up experiences and accompanying dream. She reported that she felt her self terrified by the black awesome oceanic abyss that was opening up inside of her. It felt like a death for her as she faced a sense of annihilation in the moment. As we processed this, I could literally see a surge of energy emanating through Linda and a look of terror on her face as she seemed to panic and fight the abyss. I wanted her to see that there was nothing she could do as the abyss is who she was. In the session, I encouraged her to give up the self’s struggle to survive and to simply let go, surrender to the abyss. Linda seemed to at least partially comprehend. She described her total befuddlement of having the sense of a lost self and not knowing who she was anymore. I suggested she get a sense of how that was experienced in her body. As she relaxed into her belly, she described herself as suspended over a black abyss. The abyss did not have the presence of a soft loving holding energy, but seemed to her to be almost a wall. She stated she felt like she had contracted upon

herself and was now suspended over this abyss. If she were to let go she felt she could really crash into that solid mass of blackness and hurt herself.

I encouraged her to stay with the awareness in her belly but also to release any judgment of the situation. As Sosan (Osho, 1994) stated, she was to have no choice or preferences, just be at one with the situation. Relating to Linda as Krishnamurti (1969) might, I encouraged Linda to accept what is instead of trying frantically to save herself or draw herself up by the bootstraps in some manner. I invited Linda to simply “give up,” to stop trying to save herself, and to surrender to existence. Linda needed to relinquish the whole gig of her separate self existence as struggle created nothing but suffering for her. As we sat in our chairs, she felt herself clinging and contracting on herself over the black abyss, feeling she could be smashed by its murky bottom. I asked her to relax into the abyss, explaining the deep emptiness was just her own energy. It was what Almaas (1996) has called the loving black chasm of being:

When the student finally settles into this experience of deficient emptiness, allowing it without judgment, rejection or reaction, she sees that it is a state of no self, or, more specifically, no identity. When we fully experience this state of no identified self, it transforms naturally and spontaneously into a luminous vastness, a deep spaciousness, a peaceful emptiness. (p. 336)

As Linda sat there, it was clear by a relaxing of her energy that she was letting go. She described herself as feeling like she had broken through a crusty bottom of blackness, and now she was falling in spacious blackness. Strangely for her, this terrifying abyss was transforming. She reported that she was feeling held. We sat there in the meditative stillness of the moment and then Linda described this new experience by saying, “It’s like an inner spaciousness has opened up for me.” Linda also expressed surprise that surrender could happen instantaneously, all in one moment. I responded that true surrender occurs in the intensity of the now. We sat there in our chairs and I invited her to see that she could approach the world from this sense of inner spaciousness; that she did not need to cling to her separate self ego.

To drive the point home, I gave her as homework reading an article entitled “The Transformational Opportunity of Absolute Hopelessness” (Nixon, 2001), which I had penned a number of years earlier. In the article is a story of a client who had gone on a ten-year seeking journey, only to eventually find himself totally exhausted and hopeless from all his efforts. I wrote how I had encouraged him to embrace the hopelessness, to “let it all go”, and he had an awakening experience in that moment. Similarly, by giving Linda this article, I presented an opportunity for her to say “screw it all”, to abandon her attempts to save herself, to just let it all go, and to allow herself to merely rest in the intensity of the now.

Linda took that article home and later that night, after working on a graduate paper, she settled down to read it in earnest. She e-mailed me the following account of what happened:

When I got to the part about the dark night of the soul, things started to heat up for me. Then I got to the part where the client was talking about how he said fuck everything, it is all so meaningless, EVERYTHING... and then words like “pregnant fullness of the moment”, and “this is it” and the DEPTH of the moment really stood out for me. All of a sudden I found myself weeping in the blankets. And it was relief, joy, gratefulness, vastness... everything, my full self consciousness like it always has been but in the shadow of the ego. Like I feel like I am and have been coming back to me. I felt this deep love and appreciation for myself, my journey to here in the moment, and existence. I reflected on where I have been in my life and how hopelessness was different then from what it is now, and my heart ached with love and gratitude. I felt it so intensely that the tears were just affects of this intensity.

This was a profound moment for Linda, as in that moment, she had said “screw it all”. She had done it on her own.

When we met again a week later, she talked about how moved she had been and how wonderful the moment felt. She then asked me the classic question: “How can I keep this state going?” I suggested she review how that clinging to the separate self had occurred once again because she was now trying to permanently hold this wonderful state. “Really” I said, “there is nothing you can do. You have to just keep surrendering all of yourself in each moment.” Linda was shocked that there couldn’t simply be one final moment of surrender and that would be it.

A few months later, Linda e-mailed me this “check-in” on how she was doing. She returned to this theme of moment-to-moment surrender:

Time since this moment of intense hopelessness has been quite interesting. My life has become increasingly soaked with this sense of meaninglessness while simultaneously saturated and enriched. I fall deeper and deeper into moments and the intensity of this sometimes is so raw I can forget what I am doing. Literally, and sometimes my ego finds it to be quite embarrassing. Nevertheless, beauty feels heavy and is everywhere in everything. The one thing I have realized about transpersonal experiences and various levels of awareness over the past few years is its impermanence. That is, the inevitability of surrendering to what is with unshakable trust in existence time and time again.

In essence, Linda had an intense experience of surrendering to the beauty of what is in the moment, but she was also beginning to apprehend the process as a moment-to-moment practice.

Conclusion

Papaji (Poonja, 2000), a pivotal, nondual teacher in India who many Westerners flocked to see in the 1990’s, commented that there was no final surrender for him but he was in fact surrendering in each moment until his physical body dies. Ray (2008), a Buddhist meditation teacher, commented that even the Buddha had to discover there is no final reality, and that surrender entailed opening up to the relative reality of the moment, and surrendering to the wisdom it embodies. And so, similarly, Linda had experienced the state of nondual awareness and the letting go of her separate self, but now she had to learn to embrace and let go in the relative reality of each and every moment. Following her experience of surrender, she asked the typical, well-worn question: How can I hold onto this experience? Paradoxically, it is evident that existence must be re-discovered in each moment anew. The challenge for Linda, as it is with many, was to let go of the separate self in each moment. Nondual Zen teacher Adyashanti (2004) described working with people where many of them had profound awakening experiences but embodying that awakening in day-to-day life was a far more difficult challenge. Our human tendency to slide back to typical patterns of separate self grasping can be monumental. There is no conclusive, permanent refuge, however the invitation beckons us to let go in each moment ... and again, in the next moment.

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