

Nonduality Past and Present

To talk about nonduality we must begin with duality: ‘not two’ denying that two things we have thought of as separate are actually dependent on each other; as ordinary language philosopher JLL Austen would say, duality ‘wears the trousers. So always ask: which duality? Eg, nonduality of antithetical concepts, eg pure/impure, good/evil. Many others would be interesting to look into: in Bst tradition, nonduality of samsara/nirvana [Nag] or nonduality of means/ends, practice/awakening [Dogen]. But I focus on nonduality of self and other, subject and object.

Very strange, counterintuitive! But **essential to many religious Asian traditions**, such as I’ll talk about: as Advaita [lit. Nondual] Vedanta [p26 Taittiriya Upanishad] Buddhism [esp Mahayana, eg. Yasutani p33] and Taoism [mind-fasting/there is no self]. But also found in Abrahamic, esp. Sufism [Rumi poem] and Ibn Arabi [“Then when you see what is around you as not other-than-you, and all and everything as the existence of the One; when you do not see anything else with Him or in Him; but see Him in everything as yourself and at the same time as the nonexistence of yourself; then what you see is the Truth.” [from “The One Alone”]]

Also European [Plotinus 6th Ennead section 9: “There were not two; beholder was one with beheld; it was not a vision compassed but a unity apprehended.” Meister Eckhart “the eye that I see God with is the same eye that God sees me with” and many others: Jakob Boehme, Wm Blake, and of course important philosophers: perhaps most recently/importantly Heidegger.

Can’t assume that their assertions of nonduality are making the same point [eg, Eckhart and God], but very suggestive to realize that **the basic categories of Advaita Vedanta and early Buddhism are mirror-images** of each other: all-self vs. no self, no attributes vs. only-attributes, permanence vs. impermanence, no-causality vs. all-causality, etc. So are their diff conceptual systems diff ways of trying to point to a similar non-dual experience? whether the self expands to swallow the whole universe, or shrinks to nothing and disappears, amounts to the same thing – duality overcome. The diff between them being that Advaita is more metaphysical, an ‘outside view’ as it were, Buddhism more phenomenological—a true ‘oneness’, with nothing outside it, would be experienced as a ‘nothing’.

Makes sense if we understand in contemporary terms: sense of self apart from rest of world a **construction** that can be deconstructed and reconstructed. For Buddhism that separation is source of *dukkha* suffering in broad sense [anxiety, dissatisfaction], because inherently insecure, hence we often try to secure ourselves in ways that just make things worse. Bst solution [and not only Buddhist] contemplative practices to ‘let go’ of all the habitual ways of thinking, etc. that compose self/work together to maintain it – Dogen ‘to study the self.’ and his description afterwards, quoting a Ch. master: ‘I came to realize clearly...’ Important: does not mean this world is mere illusion [don’t walk in front of illusory truck!] but a construction/manifestation, two truths; the problem is that we are normally aware of ‘lower truth’ this phenomenal world [a collection of separate self-existing things ‘in’ objective space/time], miss this other side, higher truth, the nonduality that everything is a manifestation of everything else, how it all comes together: that I am not ‘inside’ behind eyes but one of countless ways all the causes and conditions of the universe come together.

Sounds too strange? In fact, I think many or most of us have some taste, and I’ll illustrate with 3 example, all from music altho could give many more:

1st, **nondual perception**: listening to music TS Eliot: ‘music heard so deeply that there is no music but you are the music while it lasts.’

2nd, **nondual action**: *wei-wu-wei* in Taoism, action of non-action, not doing nothing but how action is expd when sense of self disappears, eg, athletes in the groove; Zen friend running marathon; and playing. Mihaly Csikszentmihali, *The Evolving Self*: xiv ‘We forget ourselves and become lost in the activity.... Often we feel a sense of transcendence, as if the boundaries of the self had been expanded.’

3rd, **nondual thinking**: – sounds strange, but creativity: “I never think – my thoughts think for me.” (Lamartine) “We never come to thoughts. They come to us.” (Heidegger) many ex, esp. musical: **Beethoven** [because deaf, could hear nondual music better?], **Brahms**, Puccini, Stravinsky.

Mozart: "Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts successively, I hear them all at once. What a delight this is! All this inventing, this producing, takes place in a pleasing, lively dream."

Beethoven: Once when the **violinist** Ignaz Schuppanzigh ... him: “I can't think about **your miserable violin** when I am speaking to my **God**.”

While the ideas were flowing in upon me – the entire musical, measure by measure ... I was definitely conscious of being aided by more than an earthly Power. (Richard Strauss)

The music of this opera [*Madame Butterfly*] was dictated to me by God: I was merely instrumental in putting it on paper and communicating it to the public. (Puccini)

When I feel the urge I begin by appealing directly to my Maker ... I immediately feel vibrations which thrill my whole being ... then I feel capable of drawing inspiration from above as Beethoven did.... Those vibrations assume the form of distinct mental images.... Straightaway the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God, and not only do I see distinct themes in the mind's eye, but they are clothed in the right forms, harmonies, and orchestration. Measure by measure the finished product is revealed to me when I am in those rare, inspired moods. (Brahms, in Abell, *Conversations with Great Composers*)

I heard, and I wrote what I heard. I am the vessel through which *The Rite of Spring* passed. (Stravinsky)

Csikszentmihali quoting 'well-known composer': “You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist. I have experienced this time and again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit there watching it in a state of awe and wonderment. And [the music] just flows out by itself.”

So what about the ‘present’ in the title of my talk?

This conception of nonduality esp. important today, because our culture is so opposite: very dualistic, individualistic, narcissistic, most of us starved for community; even our basic story built on asserting separation and working for my own benefit/well-being now understood as apart from yours – eg, social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer [who coined ‘survival of the fittest’] and its contemporary versions – eg, Ayn Rand so beloved by so many of our politicians and Supreme Court justices. Economic and ecological crisis the result – economically we see the split as the wealthy have bought the govt., use it for their own purposes; and ecologically we continue to destroy the earth. Irony in both cases, because cannot really separate one's own well-being in that way – karma comes back, destroys society for everyone, and if the earth dies we certainly will too. So we need not only the personal experience of nonduality, but needs to be integrated into the new story that we need today and what the world is, and who we are in relation to it, including our role in it.

Same problem collectively in our relationship with the earth.

Rumi: **THE WORM'S WAKING**

This is how a human being can change:

there's a worm addicted to eating grape leaves. Suddenly he wakes up,

call it grace, whatever, something

wakes him, and he's no longer a worm.

He's the entire vineyard,

and the orchard too, the fruit, the trunks,

a growing wisdom and joy that doesn't need to devour.

Everything is Waiting for You

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. [[As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions.]] To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity....
[[The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.]]

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into
the conversation. The kettle is singing
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots
have left their arrogant aloofness and
seen the good in you at last. All the birds
and creatures of the world are unutterably
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

--David Whyte