

TAMING THE DRAGON

By Zeb Lancaster, PhD

Excluding the material dimension from nondual awareness by becoming a detached witness (*vipassana*) or by maintaining a one-pointed focus (*ekagrata*) is a valuable initial way to gain control of the rampant mind and body experience that can hold us hostage. But when we find our wholeness and freedom via separation from and indifference to life events, we often adopt a limited view or disregard for our experiences (sensation, emotion, thoughts) and consider them irrelevant or a hinderance to our realization of nondual consciousness.

If we discount experience as less valuable and elevate only pure consciousness it naturally creates a polarity in the attempt to find unity. Furthermore, relegating our sensory experiences to a secondary status potentially exacerbates those dissociative and depersonalization habits of mind and body so common to injury and trauma. This exclusive orientation finds a complementary completion when we add the compatible yet more inclusive meditation practices found most clearly in the Asian nondual spiritual traditions of Kashmiri Shaivism and aspects Buddhism such as Mahamudra and Dzogchen. An expression of this integral approach to nondual consciousness can also be found in a modern day method called the Realization Process®.

Through Realization Process® body based meditations the founder Judith Blackstone presents a series of simple practices for realizing ourselves as nondual experience in a way that allows us to apply it to the mundane aspects of everyday life. She calls this very subtle dimension or unchanging ground of being, “fundamental consciousness.” This is an body experience of nonduality that is not common in popular understandings of nondual consciousness, and it gives us certain advantages that are not widely recognized.

Much like how Western culture and psychology has a long tradition of denying the importance our body plays in mental health, the most popular Asian spiritual traditions have discounted the role the material plane plays in realizing nondual awareness. This disregard for the material plane, which includes the body and its experiences, such as sensation, emotion, thought, is reflected in Asian spiritual metaphysics. On a practical level it determines why and how practitioners meditate.

One of the first things we come to understand about Asian nondual spiritual traditions is that they all agree the true nature of existence is unified. Yet existence has two different fundamental dimensions of consciousness: the “one,” referred to as nonduality (*purusa*), and the “many,” called duality (*prakriti*). In recognition of this the Advaita Vedanta school of thought considers the material plane of the world and all its many expressions (sensation, emotion, thought) as an illusion (*maya*). Around 300 C.E., during the era of Classical Yoga, Patanjali added to this when he described yoga as a process of restricting the activity of the mind (*citta-vritti-nirodha*) (sutra 1.2). This means that when we meditate, we do not simply restrict the thinking verbal mind that dwells on “these are my beliefs.” Patanjali suggests that we hold in check our entire conditional personality to the point where it attains a state of balance and transparency.

The reason for this restrictive approach is that the thoughts and behaviors that are based on the set notion of “these are my beliefs,” or “this is me” are always out of date. This is because our beliefs and our perception of our identity is always changing. Thus they are based on past, karmically derived, conditioned beliefs rather than a deeper reality grounded in the present moment. While this understanding is true, it seems to have been brought to an unnecessary exclusive extreme. A common interpretation of Patanjali’s aphorism, “To the discerning person

everything is suffering" (2:15), is that there is no ultimate salvation in Nature (emotions, thoughts, sensations). In practice the general response to this aphorism has been to transcend Nature by accessing progressively higher levels of unchanging reality. Transcending the nature of what we experience can bring us liberation from our outdated habits of mind and body that accompany our injuries. This reasoning is backed up by the fact that all pleasures (*sukha*) and pains (*duhkha*) that we feel can potentially result in suffering.

Buddhism also generally has an understanding of nondual experience that excludes the material dimension of existence. One of the ways Buddhism describes nondualism that has become quite popular in the West is the doctrine of "no-self" (*anatta/anatman*). The Buddha grew up in a Hindu tradition that held the belief that all things contain an indwelling essence or soul (*atman*). The Buddha had the awakened insight that this essence of self did not actually exist but rather was a composite of several experiential components. He called this no-self belief "anatta." Like with Jyana yoga (Advaita Vedanta) and Raja yoga (Patanjali's Classical yoga), with "no-self" the experiential aspect of life becomes irrelevant.

Where Buddhism eliminates the subject (self), Advaita Vedanta gets rid of the object (other) in claiming all things are simply an expression of the one Self (*purusa*). As the principle investigator of the Nonduality Institute, Zoran Josipovic (2013) explains that either of these solutions tend to create reductionist or deconstructive strategies. They collapse experience into one or the other pole of nonduality/duality, devalue the other pole, and even eliminate both poles in kind of a non-conscious void (Josipovic, 2013). The end result is virtually the same.

Excluding the material dimension (Nature) from awareness is a valuable preliminary way to gain control of the overwhelming experiences that accompany suffering and trauma. Yet in making exclusion of changing reality the ultimate goal, we potentially inhibit nondual wholeness of being. This is like how Joseph Campbell's (1949) "Hero" on his path to finding his own maturity slays the "dragon." The dragon is a symbol of the material plane of our habit bound everyday experiential, duality-based consciousness.

But when we slay the dragon, we go too far. By taming the dragon we increasingly realize the changing duality-dynamics of our life within unchanging nonduality. We learn to experience our injuries and outdated habits of mind and body that accompany them without losing our sense of an underlying essential nondual unity. This allows for spontaneous expressions of authenticity that seem to arise out of the pervasive space of unified consciousness. When we strive to eliminate experience and our duality-based consciousness altogether, we are left with pure consciousness only (*purusa*). While it might be blissful on some level and awaken unity, if we discount a whole category of life as less valuable because it changes, (this is pretty much all our experience of the world including our emotions and feelings) it naturally leads to patterns of restriction that are ultimately self-defeating.

When the goal is only pure consciousness, we create an unnecessarily rigid system. It either divides our experience into an opposing self (as a unity/*purusa*) versus other (as a plurality/*prakriti*) duality, or eliminates self altogether. Attempting to meditate in order to suppress, control, or simply regard experience as irrelevant is a significantly effortful practice and takes a very long time to master. Plus, when nondual consciousness is completely separate from body experience we are more prone to function from an ideal that leads us to either over-manage, ignore, or fail to support more adaptive responses that can help us overcome our mind

and body habits of self-sabotage. It leaves us feeling unified, but what we experience becomes a meaningless object.

If we are struggling with habits that keep disrupting our well-being, and we are psychologically fragmented, seeking only pure consciousness may perpetuate a mentality of in-group versus out-group, or valuable versus not valuable, in regards to our experiences of emotion, thought, and sensation. This oppositional view eliminates a dialogue or relationship between the two realms and ultimately creates a duality.

In Realization Process, Blackstone's meditation practices guide us to experience the "One" (*purusa*) and the "Many" (*prakriti*) together in a perfectly balanced nondual unity where both co-exist as an experience arising spontaneously inside the body. We come to recognize this as "fundamental consciousness," the authentic, uncreated ground of our own being and also the world around us at the same time. We also increasingly feel life happens without disturbing our attunement to our embodied nondual experience. Seeking nonduality via nondual yoga practices such as the Realization Process, the goal of meditation is no longer an idealized state that becomes available only in a very distant future, but instead is felt to be already present and complete within oneself. Our wholeness is there to be uncovered.

The subtle experience of fundamental consciousness changes our sense of identity from the Western notion of being a separate, physically bound person, to a person that is made of consciousness with a transparency that includes complete openness to our environment and our whole body at once. As we embody our nondual experience in meditation, the objects around us appear to be made of this transparent, permeable consciousness. Even though we can't see through objects, we have a sense that everything we experience is permeable because we experience this very fine consciousness pervading our self and everything else. Therefore, it is felt as both the basis of our individual authentic wholeness and our oneness with everything else. It provides our individuality and the transcendence of our individuality.

The implications of this embodied nondual experience can be profoundly transformative. Fundamental consciousness is a way to organically "tame the dragon," offering a means of overcoming the outdated habits of mind and body that lead to suffering. Rather than holding to a one-pointed focus that supports dispassion (*ekagrata*) or indifferent witnessing (*sakshi*), an embodied nondual experience of the most subtle dimension of our own being allows us to be profoundly touched by the drama of life and feel the full depth of meaning. Our window of tolerance (Siegel) for intensity of experience increases.

When we embody fundamental consciousness, we can be deeply moved and feel great compassion with another's suffering. We make available the depths of our own heart without losing our nondual experience. We feel and experience the most subtle nuances of our life even while we stay connected to a deeper unchanging essence of our being. We experientially recognize that everything we behold is a part of a bigger, broader perspective based on a dialogue between the two realms, the one and the many, creating an ultimate nondual unity.

We no longer need to spend years, or even decades, disconnecting from or disinterested in our difficult or passionate experiences that may be in part due to out of date memories. Instead, Realization Process guides us to include experience even as we remain settled in our whole body as a nondual presence. In this sacred union, our habits of mind and body naturally dissolve and allow for a deeper spontaneous authenticity to arise. We come to recognize this presence as an unbroken, uninjured essence of our self and our environment that is directly accessible as a

pervasive body experience rather than an idealized advanced meditative state attainable only in a distant future through extraordinary practice. In this way, the goal of nondual consciousness itself directly becomes the method of healing and spiritual awakening, here and now.

Realization Process guides us to uncover the most subtle dimensions of our wholeness. This embodied nonduality, fundamental consciousness, helps us tame the dragon, rather than slay it. We can experience the transparency and bliss of nonduality while remaining present and awake to all of our senses, our thoughts, feelings and sensations. This allows for a communion or sacred embrace between the two realms that results in a true nonduality where unity (*purusa*) and experience (*prakriti*) become one wholeness pervading our body and everything around us at the same time.