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**Intersubjectivity and Nonduality in the Psychotherapeutic
Relationship**

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ABSTRACT: This essay argues for the potential of human beings to experience an unconstructed, nondual dimension of consciousness, and describes how this experience may affect the psychotherapeutic relationship and facilitate the psychotherapeutic process. It examines the problems of subjectivity and transference—the shaping of experience by invariant organizing principles—from the perspectives of psychoanalytic Intersubjectivity Theory, and Asian descriptions of nondual realization. It also describes the relational field, particularly in the psychotherapeutic relationship, as both intersubjective and nondual, and argues that nondual properties of the intersubjective field are revealed as both the therapist and the client relinquish invariant organizations of experience. In conclusion, it looks at how nondual realization can facilitate the psychotherapeutic process by deepening the therapist’s ability for empathy and attention to the specificity of each moment, and by increasing the contact, spontaneity, and equality of the psychotherapeutic relationship.

Introduction

This essay discusses the potential for experiencing a nondual realm of consciousness, and the relevance of this experience for the psychotherapeutic process. One of the pivotal issues of this discussion is the relationship between the personal, subjective dimension of experience that is the arena of both individual differences and human suffering, and the transcendent dimension of nondual consciousness. If nondual consciousness is impersonal, as it is sometimes described, then it has little direct relevance to the psychotherapeutic project of personal development and emotional well-being. But if, as I propose, nondual consciousness is the essence and ground of personal subjective experience, then opening to this dimension can be understood as the direction of human maturity.

Intersubjectivity Theory

As my representative of the psychotherapeutic process in this discussion, I have chosen Intersubjectivity Theory, a relational model of psychoanalysis developed by Robert Stolorow and his collaborators. My main concern in this essay is not to compare nonduality and Intersubjectivity

Theory, per se. I am using this particular therapeutic model because its clear articulation of the mutuality of the therapeutic relationship and the co-creation of subjective experience provides an effective basis of comparison with the nondual experience of self/other oneness described in mystical traditions. Many contemporary forms of psychotherapy, such as Object-Relations, Gestalt and Self Psychology, to name just a few, could be described as intersubjective. Like Intersubjectivity Theory, they recognize that human development is both nurtured and thwarted within social contexts and that the therapist/client relationship has a significant influence on the therapeutic process. Intersubjectivity Theory offers a more radical assertion of intersubjectivity than most other therapeutic forms, in its placement of the therapeutic relationship at the very center of the therapeutic process and in its view of psychological healing as specifically the achievement of new ways of relating with other people. Stolorow and Atwood write, “More generally, it is the formation of new organizing principles within an intersubjective system that constitutes the essence of developmental change throughout the life cycle” (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, p.25).

Intersubjectivity Theory sees human identity as an emergent property of the relational field itself. It is a systems theory “in which experiential worlds and intersubjective fields are seen as equiprimordial, mutually constituting one another in circular fashion” (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002, pp. 95-96). Although not explicitly stated in the Intersubjectivity Theory literature, this suggests, or at least draws near to the idea of an underlying unity, a single system or field, which gives rise to human experience and behavior. It begins to explore the hard question of the relationship between individual perspective and fundamental unity.

As a systems theory, Intersubjectivity Theory resembles most nondual

philosophies in its denial of the existence of the individual self as an “existentially independent entity” (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992). Arguing against an intrinsically separate mind-body entity, Stolorow and Atwood write, “This we contrast with the *experience* of psychological distinctness, a structuralization of self-awareness that is wholly embedded in formative and sustaining intersubjective contexts” (p. 10). Asian nondual philosophies view the goal of nondual spiritual practices to be the realization--that is, the *experience*--of the unity of self and other, or subject and object.

I also chose to focus on Intersubjectivity Theory because it speaks clearly for the prevailing contemporary philosophical perspective in the West: social constructivism. Although Intersubjectivity Theory espouses a hermeneutic “perspectival realism” (Orange, 1995), its view that “the principle components of subjectivity...are the organizing principles, whether automatic and rigid, or reflective and flexible” (Orange, Atwood & Stolorow, 1997, p. 7) aligns it with the post-modern constructivist viewpoint. It thus evokes a clearly drawn argument between the constructivist understanding that all experience is interpreted or “organized” and the claim of an unconstructed, essential dimension of experience, which is one of the defining aspects of nondual consciousness. It is this conflict that we must try to reconcile in order to understand the relevance of nondual realization for personal healing and development. I will attempt to show that the intersubjective, co-created relational field and the nondual relational field are two views of the same relational field. Nondual realization is a subtler attunement and greater openness to the intersubjective relational field. As I will explain, nondual realization does not eradicate intersubjectivity; rather it encompasses and illuminates it.

Defining Nonduality

The experience of oneness—that the essence of one’s individual being is the same as, or unified with, or dissolved in the essence of the cosmos—has been described throughout the world’s spiritual literature, including the Jewish teachings of Kabala, Islamic Sufism, and the writing of Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart. Many of the Asian spiritual teachings focus specifically on this experience, usually referring to it as *nonduality* (Sanskrit: *Advaita*).

Perhaps because it has been a major focus of spiritual aspiration in the East, several different perspectives on nondual realization have developed there. They vary from the view, found in Advaita Vedanta, that only consciousness is real and phenomena are illusory, to the view, found in Madhyamika Buddhism, Taoism, and some schools of Zen Buddhism, that only the constantly changing flux of phenomena are real and there is no such “thing” as unified consciousness. David Loy (1998) makes the point that the various Asian nondual teachings are mainly differences in the philosophical interpretation of nonduality or in the methodological approach to nondual realization; the descriptions of the experience itself are markedly similar across different traditions.

Loy divides nondual experience into nondual perception, nondual thinking, and nondual action. Nondual teachings that emphasize nondual perception describe a shift from dualistic subject/object perception to direct or “bare” perception, in which the perceptible world becomes vivid and immediate, unmediated by conceptual elaboration. Since there is no conceptual lag in one’s perception, there is no discernible distinction between the subject and object of perception.

The same dropping away of conceptual veils enables nondual thinking, the spontaneous flow of thoughts associated with creativity and intuition.

Nondual action is spontaneous, un-self-conscious responsiveness to life. It is the ability to play, to interact with one's environment freely, without hesitation. Stephen Batchelor (2000) writes, "The awakened mind of a Buddha is nothing other than the pristine awareness animating one's ordinary mind at every moment" (p. 41). And, "By systematically stripping away any behavior that inhibits the spontaneous play of pristine awareness, one uncovers a freedom that is a dynamic response to each and every circumstance of life" (p. 43).

Indian Vedantic teachings also describe nondual experience as the dissolution of conceptual veils. Here is a description from Berthold Thompson (2002) of his experience with the Indian teacher Poonja: "Papaji's words were heard but there was no one left to whom he could address them. The speaking and the hearing were occurring as one single, impersonal event" (p. 29). Notice how the dropping away of conceptual elaboration is described here as "impersonal." We will return to this important issue shortly.

The description of nondual experience that I am concerned with in this essay includes the immediacy of non-conceptual perception, thought and action, but adds another dimension. This is the experience of a subtle, all-pervasive expanse of consciousness pervading one's internal and external experience as a unified whole. The Asian teachings that describe this type of nondual experience consider this subtle consciousness to be the essence of being. Tibetan Buddhist philosopher Longchen Rabjam (2001a) writes "Within the essence of being...lies the spacious expanse of the ground of being" (p. 145). Vedantic scholar, Eliot Deutsch (1969), referring to nondual consciousness as Brahman, writes, "Everything has its being in Spirit: everything, in its true being, is Brahman" (p. 110). And, "In the immediate, intuitive experience of non-duality, Brahman presents itself as the fullness of

being, as self-luminous consciousness, and as infinite bliss (*saccidananda*)” (p. 28).

According to the Indian teachings, this subtle consciousness can be experienced without sensory objects, in deep meditative states (Forman, 1998). However, it can also be experienced along with the appearance of phenomena. The simultaneous experience of nondual consciousness and phenomena is most commonly described in the Mahamudra and Dzog-chen schools of Tibetan Buddhism, but is also found in some schools of Zen Buddhism and in Indian Advaita Vedanta and Kashmiri Shaivism. In this experience, phenomena appear to be transparent or permeable, as if made of consciousness. Even one’s own body is experienced as completely permeable (or open), all the way through, and made of consciousness.

This all-pervasive, nondual consciousness is described as “self-knowing” because it experiences itself. The Zen philosopher Hisamatsu writes, “The nature of Awareness beyond differentiation is that it directly knows Itself, in and through Itself” (cited in Stambaugh, 1999, p. 74). Rabjam writes, “The instant the bond between body and mind is loosened, self-knowing awareness—*dharmakaya* as original purity—merges with and becomes indistinguishable from supreme space—*dharmakaya* as the ground of being” (2001a, p. 186).

This is not just an experience of immediate sensory phenomena, and not just a shift in one’s thinking or behavior. It is a clear-through openness and refinement of one’s entire being. Not only one’s mental awareness, but rather one’s whole being is experienced as an expanse of subtle consciousness, pervading everywhere. Since this consciousness pervades one’s internal and external experience as a unified whole, it transcends the boundary of the individual self. *However, since this consciousness pervades*

the internal space of one's own body, it is experienced as deep inward contact with oneself, at the same time as it is experienced as transcending oneself.

Rabjam refers, in the citation above, to the “instant” the bond between body and mind is loosened. Although, theoretically, it is simply our beliefs that keep the body and mind entangled, in practice, that entanglement is usually so secure and complex that for most human beings, no single cognitive shift will undo it completely. One's first entryway into the nondual dimension may be experienced as a sudden, dramatic change from one's usual dualistically fragmented state, but this is only the beginning of a gradual process of uncovering or opening to the nondual ground of being.

In Buddhism, the subtle essence of being is also referred to as Buddha nature. Tibetan teacher, Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche (Gyamtso, 2001) writes, “...beings go through a process of purification from which the purified Buddha nature emerges” (p. 69). This understanding of nondual realization as a process does not mean that nondual consciousness is something that we create or develop. It arises spontaneously and effortlessly, once we have reached a degree of openness, and continues to become a more full, complete realization as we become increasingly open and refined. Gyamtso writes, “If the true nature of beings were not the *tathagatagarbha* (purified Buddha nature) they could never become Buddhas in the same way that a rock that did not contain gold could never yield gold however much it were to be refined” (p. 69).

The Integration of Subject and Object

I have chosen to focus on this type of nondual experience for several reasons. I am interested in how psychotherapy can contribute to the type of transformation required for it, and also how this transformation is related to psychological health and maturity. I am also interested in how the experience

of all-pervasive consciousness can enhance therapeutic skills, such as subtle perception and empathy.

I have observed that nondual teachings emphasizing only perceptual, cognitive, or behavioral shifts may lead to a particular type of confusion that is detrimental to psychological health. The methodologies of these teachings often present nonduality as a state in which one attends without distraction to the present moment, or understands that one does not really exist as a subject (as in the phrase “thoughts without a thinker”). Although I do not doubt that these approaches have brought some measure of relaxation and clarity to many people, they may also exacerbate one’s fragmentation between subject and object (e.g. thinker and thoughts), rather than producing the wholeness that the term nonduality implies.

Sometimes it is taught that we cannot know that we are enlightened because there is “no one there” to know. This can be effective as a pedagogical strategy to help the novice practitioner (momentarily) shift from a dualistic self/object state to the openness of nonduality, but it can also be misleading, for students who will try to dissociate from themselves as the knowing subject.

If we actually could not know that we were enlightened, we would not have the many descriptions of it available in the world’s spiritual literature. For example, Longchen Rabjam clearly and gleefully describes his experience of nondual realization as, “Within the spacious expanse, the spacious expanse, the spacious vast 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” (2001b, p. 79).

In the type of nondual experience in which one realizes one’s own nature as all-pervasive space, the subject (as nondual consciousness) does not

vanish. It becomes one with the object of experience. In this type of realization, we can have any kind of experience without disturbing our realization of the stillness and pervasiveness of nondual consciousness. Nondual realization does not eradicate our “lesser” mental functions, such as the ability to reflect on, learn from or enjoy our experience, to have preferences, or to remember past events.

Spiritual teachings that train one’s focus on the content of experience, especially on the sensory world outside of one’s body, or that claim that nondual consciousness has nothing to do with personal experience (e.g. that is “impersonal”) may contribute to the common psychological problem of dissociation. Rather than experiencing the integration of subject and object, the subject is simply negated, and the practitioner becomes fixated on the object. This is a manipulation of experience that obstructs both the wholeness and the fluidity of nonduality. It censors our participation in life, placing us in the mode of observer, rather than experiencer.

I have found that many spiritual practitioners attune to awareness outside of their bodies, rather than experiencing consciousness pervading their body and environment at the same time. In my observation, when nondual consciousness pervades the whole body, even the quality of the pervasive space changes. Instead of simply empty, it has an intrinsic radiance, as well as a quality that might be described as the quality of “being.” Hisamatsu writes, “For the nothingness of Zen is not lifeless like emptiness, but, on the contrary, is something quite lively (*lebendig*). It is not only lively, but also has heart and moreover, is aware of itself” (cited in Stambaugh, 1999, p. 79).

Some degree of dissociation is, in my view, typical of the human condition. Defensive patterns, developed in childhood to protect against ordinary occurrences of emotional or sensory abrasion, produce a degree of

numbness and fragmentation even in high functioning adults. This manifests as a general diminishment or lack of development in one's capacities for contact with oneself and others, including one's capacity for understanding, emotional responsiveness, physical sensation, and sensory perception.

As we will see, the type of nondual experience that reveals nondual consciousness as the essence of one's being actually heals dissociation. Nondual consciousness is experienced as the basis of contact, the most intimate contact one can have, with oneself and others.

Intersubjectivity and Nonduality

Intersubjectivity Theory, as I have said, specifically rejects any claim of a realm of experience that is beyond the subjective organizations of experience, and the shifting contexts of intersubjective dialogue. In this outlook, as in the prevailing Western constructivist viewpoint, all experience is subjectively created. In sharp contrast, nondual consciousness is considered, in the above-mentioned Asian philosophies, to be uncreated, arising spontaneously as mental elaborations and body/mind entanglements are relinquished. Moreover, a defining characteristic of nondual experience is that our perceptions, thoughts and actions appear to function spontaneously, without conceptual mediation.

These two perspectives seem completely opposed. Yet, if we explore them more closely, we see that both Intersubjectivity Theory and nondual spiritual practices are aimed at the same goal: healing the fragmented, constricted relational field. As a therapy, Intersubjectivity Theory focuses on the "structural invariants of the patient's psychological organization" (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1987, p. 13) and "limiting world horizons...which reflect patterns or organizing activity formed and maintained within living, intersubjective systems" (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002,

pp. 49-50). Nondual practices seek to dissolve the rigid, habitual patterns of experience that obscure nondual consciousness. I suggest that these two disciplines both facilitate the same single process of human development, towards inward contact with oneself, and openness to one's environment.

In order to understand this, we need to look at how nondual consciousness is related to one's personal subjectivity. Nondual consciousness is often called "impersonal" as we saw in Thompson's description above, but to what exactly does this word "impersonal" refer? Thompson had the feeling that there "was nobody there," that the words of his teacher were simply occurring without anyone there to hear them. However, he obviously did hear them, and was able to reflect on the experience afterwards. So, although he felt that he was not there, he actually was. He experienced a radical shift in how he was there, in that he had no reflexive awareness of himself as being there, but he was still there.

For me, this is one of the great mysteries of nondual experience, which is often hidden behind the term "impersonal." We can feel that we are as much the tree or the lamp or the person facing us as we are our own self, but at the same time, we are always our own self, our own personal subjectivity. For example, we cannot perceive the room from the perspective of the other person, or get up and leave the room as that other person. As nondual consciousness, we do not sense ourselves as separate from our experience, we are suffused in the stimuli of the present moment, and yet we are still experiencing and knowing. We experience ourselves as transparent, dissolved in empty space, and yet it is our own subjectivity that experiences this.

Zen philosopher Nishitani (1982) writes, "The existence of things is seen to be at one with the existence of the subject itself by the subject that has

become its original subjectivity” (pp. 109-110). Explaining the Vedantic teacher, Ramana Maharshi’s teaching, Godman (1992) writes, “You must distinguish between the ‘I,’ pure in itself, and the ‘I’-thought. The latter, being merely a thought, sees subject and object...But the pure ‘I’ is the pure being, eternal existence, free from ignorance and thought-illusion” (p. 49). As our habitual, created representations of ourselves and our environment dissolve, we discover our original, uncreated dimension of subjectivity. In this view, subjectivity is inextricably personal (the core of one’s own being), and at the same time, it is the essential nature of the self/other field.

Interestingly, nondual realization does not eliminate the shifting contexts that characterize human discourse. Just as the laying bare of nondual consciousness does not eliminate the movement of one’s emotions, thoughts, sensations and perceptions, but rather frees and illuminates that movement, it does not eliminate the dynamic exchange and reciprocal influence of culturally and psychologically shaped responses within a relational dyad. The richness of human dialogue, which depends upon differing contexts of personal memories, education, culture, gender, and so forth, is not eliminated, but revealed more clearly in the openness and spaciousness of nondual consciousness.

The only types of context that are considered problematic in the Asian nondual teachings are those habitual or invariant modes of subjective organization that defensively bifurcate subject and object, or that reify, through mental elaboration, either subject or object. In other words, those organizations of experience that limit one’s experience of the present moment. I am not speaking here just of perceptual limitations, but also of limitations in our capacity for thought, emotion and physical sensation. These rigid or repetitive patterns of experience that obscure nonduality are the same

subjective organizations that are considered problematic in most forms of psychotherapy, including Intersubjectivity Theory, where they are called “transference” phenomena.

Stolorow, Brandchaft and Atwood (1987) define transference as invariant or repetitive organizations of subjective experience based on “archaically rooted configurations of self and object” (p. 36), and as the “assimilation of the analytic relationship into the thematic structures of the patient’s personal subjective world” (p. 45). In other words, certain types of subjective organization can cause us to experience our idea of the present moment, based on our memories and interpretations of past events, rather than the moment itself. The more we assimilate others into our own thematic structures, the more isolated we are in our own hermetically constructed world, and the less we can participate in the mutuality of the relational field that concerns both Intersubjectivity Theory and nondual teachings.

The view held by Intersubjectivity Theory, that all experience is subjectively organized, means that it does not consider the psychotherapeutic process as moving towards the dissolution of organizations. Stolorow and Atwood (1992) write, “Successful psychoanalytic treatment, in our view, does not produce therapeutic change by altering or eliminating the patient’s invariant organizing principles. Rather...it facilitates the establishment and consolidation of alternative principles and thereby enlarges the patient’s experiential repertoire” (p. 25). However, the authors of Intersubjectivity Theory also write, “The rigidity that we associate with various kinds of psychopathology can be grasped as a kind of freezing of one’s experiential horizons so that other perspectives remain unavailable” (Orange, 2000, p. 489).

As rigid organizations of experience are recognized in the

psychotherapeutic process, an openness or availability to experience emerges. Nondual realization, as we have seen in Batchelor's description quoted above, signifies a high degree of flexibility and spontaneity of responsiveness. I believe this flexibility is experientially (if not philosophically) similar to the unfreezing of experiential horizons and expansion of experiential possibilities described in Intersubjectivity Theory.

Nondual realization, as I have said, is a gradual process. Although we may enter into it abruptly, we can then spend the rest of our lives continuing to open to the pervasive space of nondual consciousness. Thus, the claim, by Intersubjectivity Theory, that experience is always to some extent organized, is for practical purposes, true. However, nondual consciousness emerges as "limiting world horizons" and "structural invariants" of psychological organization are relinquished. In this sense, the major difference between the perspectives of Intersubjectivity Theory and Asian nondual philosophies is in the greater reach of the latter's vision into the more advanced phases of human development.

The spaciousness of nondual consciousness is experienced as vast stillness, within which all of the movements of life--our perceptions, thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and actions--occur. As our realization of nonduality progresses, all of these dynamic aspects of our experience gain their optimal fluidity and freedom. In other words, we are able to allow experiences, such as emotion, thoughts or perceptions, to occur, or to flow, without impeding them. Examples of this unimpeded experience are an increased subtlety and vividness of perception, a greater depth of emotional responsiveness, as well as greater emotional resiliency, and a more spontaneous flow of creativity. For this reason, nondual realization is often referred to as freedom. It is freedom from our own constraints upon

ourselves, from our rigid organizations of experience.

Nonduality and Individuality

The founders of Intersubjectivity Theory present their systems perspective as an antidote to Cartesian fragmentation. They write, “Descarte’s philosophy not only segregated inner from outer and subject from object; it also severed mind from body and cognition (reason) from affect” (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002, p.10). In my view, this anti-Cartesian project of Intersubjectivity Theory is in complete accord with, and can be facilitated by nondual realization.

When we realize nondual consciousness, we experience that it pervades the whole internal space of our body at once. This is not body sensing in the ordinary sense; it is not simply an internal sensation. Rather, it is an experience of internal transparency, as if one were made of space. This experience requires no volitional action, as does body sensing. It appears spontaneously as part of the spontaneous arising of nondual consciousness, when we reach a degree of openness or sensitivity. This internal space is completely empty, and at the same time, it is suffused with a very subtle quality of being. We feel as if we have no boundary between ourselves and our environment, because we are made of the same space that pervades the environment as well.

In order to experience this subtle clear-through space, we need to inhabit our body all the way through to a subtle channel that runs through the vertical core of our being. This channel is called *Sushumna* in Indian Yoga and the “central channel” in Buddhism. If we inhabit our body without reaching this core, (if we inhabit only the surface of ourselves) we do not enter into the subtle, pervasive essence of our being. Above I quoted Longchen Rabjam as saying that the bond between the body and mind is

loosened in nondual realization. In the subtle core of the body we become disentangled from the material body as nondual consciousness. This does not mean that we are separate from the material body. It means that, as nondual consciousness, we pervade the body (and all phenomena) without interruption.

The subtle core of our being is thus our entranceway into the transcendent space of nondual consciousness. However, it is also, at the same time, the source of the qualitative, cohesive experience of our individual being. According to Asian spiritual teachings, the essential (uncreated) qualities of our being, such as awareness, love, power and sexuality, and the subtle vibrations, or energies, associated with each of them, emanate from points (called *chakras*) along the subtle core of the body.

In this subtle dimension of ourselves, the internal space of our body is directly correlated with our essential qualities and functions. If we inhabit our head as nondual consciousness, we experience the quality of mental clarity, and we can also think more clearly. If we inhabit our chest as nondual consciousness, we experience the quality of love, and we can feel all emotions more deeply. If we inhabit our pelvis as nondual consciousness, we experience the quality of physical sensation, and we can experience physical sensations more intensely.

As our realization of nondual consciousness gradually progresses, it pervades more of our body at once. This develops an internal coherence. We can feel, think and sense at the same time. We experience that we are coming alive within our own skin, not as an idea of ourselves, but as a qualitative being. Thus, nondual realization is the basis not only of subject/object unity, but of mind/body unity and cognition/affect unity as well.

This quality-rich internal coherence provides a felt sense of one's own existence. Especially for people who feel overwhelmed or displaced by their

environment, the experience of internal wholeness provides the basis of genuine boundaries; that is, boundaries that are not maintained by the defensive limitation of one's participation in life.

Nonduality and the Therapeutic Relationship

I will end this essay with a brief description of how nondual realization can enhance therapeutic skills and the therapeutic relationship (for a fuller account, see Blackstone, 2007, in press). One aspect of nondual realization that has not been explored in the Asian literature is the relational. Nondual realization changes the way we experience and relate with other people and this affects the psychotherapeutic relationship in several ways.

For example, nondual realization deepens our capacity for contact. We experience nondual consciousness pervading everything in our environment, including other people. This means that we are able to encounter people not just on their surfaces but also within the internal depths of their being. This gives us a qualitative, felt sense of the other person. In the therapeutic relationship, it can help clients feel seen and met in a dimension of basic human kinship, beyond the narrative aspect and shifting dynamics of the encounter.

One of the main tenets of Intersubjectivity Theory is the collaborative nature of psychotherapy. In keeping with postmodern thought, Intersubjectivity Theory seeks to dismantle the prevailing power structure, particularly within classical psychoanalysis, in which the analyst is considered to be an authority on the patient's psychological life. The authors of Intersubjectivity Theory reason that since there is no truly objective view of reality, and no position that can separate the observer from the observed, the interpretation of events or behaviors by the analyst cannot be assumed to be more valid than the patient's. They write, "The analyst's frame of reference

must not be elevated to the status of objective fact” (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1987, p. 6). Nondual realization provides the therapist with a felt sense of equality with the client, because the defensive boundary between self and other has been dissolved. Rigidly organized attitudes, including the attitude of authority, have been dismantled. The therapist who has realized nonduality experiences that the essence of his or her own being is unified or continuous with the essence of the client.

The realization of nondual consciousness refines the therapist’s ability to experience and respond to the specificity of each moment, without manipulating or obscuring those moments with therapeutic strategies. A therapist who lives in the nondual dimension brings a receptive stillness and silence to the clinical setting, out of which “news from the self” (Bollas, 1987, p. 236) can emerge spontaneously for both the client and the therapist. Although the therapist’s responses are still informed by contexts of belief and knowledge based on education, experiences with other clients, memories of his or her own developmental process and so on, these contexts become transparent. The therapist can see through them, to remain open to the stimuli arising in each moment of the therapeutic dialogue. In other words, he or she will not be bound in rigidly fixed patterns of understanding or response, or mistake his or her own historical influences for objective reality. The therapist’s ability to be present and immersed in each moment, to be involved and affected by the therapeutic dialogue, means that the therapeutic process is co-created, or even “trans” created. Healing emerges from the relational field, affecting both the client and the therapist.

Nondual realization also deepens the therapist’s ability for empathy. Just as one’s own body is experienced as transparent, permeable consciousness, the bodies of other people also appear as clear-through

transparent forms. Within this transparency, the fluidity of a person's responses, and the qualities of their being, can be seen and felt. Instead of observing just the surface of the client's body, such as their facial expression and bodily posture, the therapist can, to some extent, see through to the movement of thoughts, feelings and sensations that occurs within the client's body. This enhances the therapist's ability to know what it feels like to be the client, and how the events that the client is relating have affected them.

Since nondual realization is experienced pervading the therapist's and client's body equally, it allows the therapist to maintain inward contact with himself or herself at the same time as experiencing unity with the client. Since the therapist has not energetically left his or her own body and entered the body of the client, this is not experienced by either party as a merging, nor as an energetic invasion of one person into the other. The therapist can maintain clear boundaries at the same time as he or she refines attunement to the client.

The Transubjective Field

If both the therapist and the client know about the potential for nondual realization, the therapeutic process can be experienced as a progression towards uncovering the unfragmented, nondual relational field. When we realize nonduality, everything appears to be made of the same one consciousness. This is why some Asian philosophies have concluded that in fact everything actually is made of a single consciousness, a single Self that can be realized, or uncovered, in each individual being. At this point we have no way of knowing whether the experience of unity is an ontological or a phenomenological reality. However, when two people both experience nondual consciousness together, they have a vivid experience that the same one consciousness pervades them both. They experience that their

consciousness is unified, or continuous, with each other's consciousness (Blackstone, 2002). We might call this mutual space of subject/subject unity a "transsubjective field."

This does not mean that two people can think or feel as proxies for one another, or that they lose their individual agency in any way. The nondual field of consciousness retains its paradoxical nature of being individual and transcendent at the same time. But they experience that they are both made of the same fundamental ground of being. Since they have both reached the subtle core of themselves, they experience deep inward contact with themselves and unity with each other, at the same time.

As nondual consciousness, two people can connect with each other from within the internal space of their separate bodies. This produces a vibrational resonance between their essential qualities. For example, the love that they experience within their own body resonates with the love in the other person's body. The mutual stimulation of this resonance is healing in itself. Wherever one person is more open in their own being than the other, it will help dissolve the rigid organizations of the other person. Thus the nondual encounter facilitates each person's realization of nondual consciousness. There is a discernible shift in the depth and quality of contact and in the spontaneity of dialogue, whenever the subjective organizations of either person give way to the mutuality of the nondual field.

Clinical Illustration

Background

I have developed a method, called Realization Process, for helping people experience nondual consciousness in the clinical setting. This is a series of exercises that attune directly to the pervasive expanse of nondual consciousness, and to the subtle core of the body as an entranceway into this

dimension. Particular emphasis is placed on attuning to nondual consciousness in the whole body, and on experiencing nondual consciousness while in relation with other people.

These exercises are not nondual realization itself, which is an effortless, self-arising state. Rather, they can gradually help the client become open enough for nondual consciousness to appear. The exercises also serve as diagnostic tools for both the client and therapist to discern whatever holding patterns in the body are obstructing this openness.

The following clinical vignette describes a session with a woman named Terry, about four months into our work together. Terry had been a meditation practitioner for ten years. She came to work with me because she was experiencing anxiety and loneliness. She felt awkward in social situations and could not bring herself to pursue friendships. She was an extremely sensitive woman and described herself as feeling “rattled” after being with other people.

Terry described her father as emotionally remote, and her mother as often either depressed or frantic. She had spent much of her childhood trying to avoid her mother’s emotional turmoil by spending long hours in her own room, reading and daydreaming.

In the first four months of our sessions, we had explored her childhood background and also practiced the beginning of the main Realization Process exercise, in which the client inhabits her body, first part by part, and then all at once, also attuning to the essential qualities of being, within the body. I use the analogy that the body is the temple, and the person can be inside of the temple. This is practiced with the eyes closed, and then with the eyes open. It was most difficult for Terry to feel that she was still “inside her own temple” with her eyes open. She became energetically diffuse with her eyes open, as if

she were being absorbed into the environment. Terry described this as being “pulled” out of herself. I suggested that she practice purposely leaving her body in this way, and this helped her recognize that it was something she did herself so that she would not feel overwhelmed by the environment.

It is important to note that nondual realization is not an energetic expansion, or an internal vacancy. As I have said, we need to inhabit the body through to the subtle core, in order to arrive at the pervasive stillness of nondual consciousness.

Gradually, this exercise helped Terry experience that she had internal depth. This shift is visible to a sensitive observer; it looks like a ripening inward, a deepening of a person’s presence. She said that it was a relief to feel that she was not “right up against the world.” As she had begun to feel more comfortable in her body, I suggested that we might go on to the next part of the exercise in which the client attunes to nondual space pervading her body and the environment equally.

Vignette

Terry seemed particularly anxious as the session began. Her eyes were unfocused and diffuse and I had the sense that she was floating up above herself.

T – “I wanted to go on to the next part of the exercise today, but I feel very nervous about it.”

As I nodded and waited for her to go on, I could feel her settle more deeply into her lower body. This calmed her a little, but she seemed to be very reluctant to tell me what was upsetting her. Finally, she spoke.

T – “I’m afraid about what I might see if the space pervades us both.”

J – “What might you see?”

T – “Your pain.”

J – “What would it mean if you see my pain?”

T – “I don’t know.”

Terry agreed to try the exercise. After she inhabited her whole body at once, I asked her to find the space outside of her body, and then to experience that the space inside and outside of her body was the same, continuous space. Then, she practiced this same process with the eyes open. I then asked her to experience that the space that pervaded her also pervaded me. At first she energetically came towards me in order to pervade my body. I said, “Try to stay in your own body as you experience the space pervading us both. You do not have to move at all from your own body; it is as if you are attuning to the space that is already present, pervading us both.”

T- “I don’t think I can do that. I don’t know what you mean.’

J- “Okay, then just feel again (as in the first part of the exercise) that you are inhabiting the internal space of your chest.”

She did this easily.

J- “Now find the space inside your own chest and inside my chest at the same time.”

Terry did that for an instant, and then felt fear.

J- “Are you afraid to do this?”

T – “Yes. I’m afraid that I’m going to feel your pain.”

J – “What might happen if you feel my pain?”

Terry sat with this question for a moment.

T – “I will have to fix it. I will be responsible for fixing it.”

She sat a while longer, attuning to the space inside her own chest, and then inside both of our chests. Suddenly, I could feel intense grief inside Terry’s chest.

J – “She was very sad.”

In general, I do not think it is helpful to tell a client what I see regarding her own feelings, let alone her mother's feelings, unless it is in the form of a question. But this response welled up in me as part of the spontaneous flow of our exchange. Terry began to cry very deeply. T – “She was so sad. And there was nothing I could do. I was just a child. I could never fix it.” Then she paused, and looked at me with surprise. She said, “I’ve never felt compassion for her before. I only wanted to get away from her.”

After this release, Terry was easily able to find the space inside her chest and my chest at the same time. When she did this, love flowed between us spontaneously. At first she seemed embarrassed by this, but then she said, “Oh, I see, I’m in my own body, so it’s okay. It feels safe.” Her eyes focused and for the first time in our relationship, she made eye contact with me.

She then practiced experiencing the space pervading her whole body and my whole body at the same time. As she did this, the internal space of her body seemed to become more subtle and “clear-through.”

Comments

This vignette illustrates how attunement to nondual consciousness can help us open to other people, and also recognize the psychological patterns that obstruct that openness. It requires some sensitivity to be able to experience the subtle expanse of nondual consciousness. However, this attunement is particularly helpful for sensitive people who have difficulty tolerating the emotional and perceptual stimuli in the environment. They find that, even though they have become even more sensitive, they no longer feel overwhelmed by stimuli because they have made deep contact with the essence of their being. With practice, one no longer has to “attune” to nondual consciousness, but simply finds that the luminous transparency of this

subtle dimension is everywhere.

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