

Why Do We Call It Nondual Wisdom?

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This essay is a slightly edited excerpt from my book:
Living the Paradox of Enlightenment

The word “nondual” means “not two” and we use it here because God and creation are seen as One Reality, not two. This is the deepest core idea pointed to by this wisdom and we say this because the unseen Creator *arises as* the creation we see all around us. This is very much like an actor arising as a character so let’s go into this metaphor a little more.

Let’s start by thinking of a Hollywood actor. Here it’s easy to see that the actor is the source of the character. Surely it’s not the other way around. The character is not the source of the actor. Furthermore, the character cannot go on the stage without the actor. And yet, the actor can drop the role of the character at any time. Because of this, it is wise to make a distinction between the *transcendent source* (the actor) and the *dependent construction* (the character).

And yet *when* the actor comes forward as the character, they are one. If you are standing in front of the character and you want to find the actor, you do not need to dig into a deeper and deeper layer. No. When you look into the eyes of the character, you are looking directly into the eyes of the actor. They are one.

Every single quality or aspect of the character is truly a quality or aspect that is being exhibited by the actor, and every single action that appears to be done by the character is really done by the actor. What appears to be the will and power of the character are really the will and power of the actor. The character is not the source of anything and has no substance of its own.

Of course you see how this metaphor is being used. God is the one *invisible* Actor who is coming forward as each and every *visible* character, as each and every *visible* person. All of creation is a spontaneous emanation that comes about when formless Source-Awareness (God) miraculously and paradoxically appears as the form that makes up not only our own physical world, but also all of our spiritual worlds. Ice doesn’t just come *from* the water, it *is* the water, and so it is with God and creation. God is infinitely intimate with all of creation.

While God fully permeates creation in a way that makes them One, we also recognize that we should make a distinction between the transcendent source (God) and the dependent construction (creation). So we see that the words “one” and “two” each reveal important aspects of the reality at hand but neither word works well enough by itself. This is why a new word was created: “nondual.”

Duality

Now let’s consider the concept of duality, which brings to mind examples such as male and female, hot and cold, and the two sides of one coin. These are examples of the three ways that duality can be expressed in our world. The coin has two sides and both sides must be present at all times. Gender, on the other hand, shows up for each person as either a male body or a female

body, so this is quite different from the coin. And hot and cold show us a third type of dualistic expression. With hot and cold, the one quality of temperature arises anywhere in-between two opposite polarities.

These three examples all exist in our physical world but there are also emotional dualistic pairs, such as happiness and sadness, and frustration and satisfaction. And there are also dualistic concepts such as up and down, and open and closed. Yet no matter what, duality is always expressed in one of these three ways: as one thing with two inseparable parts, as two complementary aspects seen one at a time, and as something in-between two polarities. The ancient nondual texts call all of this “the play of the opposites.”

In our experience, hot and cold are obviously real and different so it is wise to heed this experiential reality. Indeed, all dualistic expressions are experientially real and different so don't fall into any misunderstandings about this.

For example, I sometimes hear that the complementary aspects of a dualistic expression are actually the same thing. Well, they are both the arising of the One Divine Essence, but this doesn't mean we should overlook the fact that in our world of form, they arise in ways that are experientially different. A similar misunderstanding is that the philosophy of nonduality holds that duality in general does not exist or is not valid. But dualistic expressions are valid precisely because they are experientially real.

Are tree and “non-tree” a dualistic pair?

I prefer to say that our world contains many dualistic expressions rather than saying that the world itself is dualistic or that everything in our world has a dualistic complement. For example, I don't think it's helpful to wonder what the dualistic complement of a tree could be, although some people do pursue this. They suggest that it is “non-tree” but I don't see how this completes a dualistic pair. Let's look into this a bit more.

First, consider the three examples given earlier: coins with their two sides, male and female bodies, and hot and cold objects. All of these can be found in our physical world. Now let's consider a tree. It is also an object that exists in our physical world. But “non-tree” does not exist in the physical world. It is a concept and as such, it is experientially real as a thought in our minds. This is why I don't think tree and non-tree make a dualistic pair. This does not mean that the idea of “not this tree” is not helpful. Someone could ask you which trees you want pruned and your answer could include the phrase “not this tree.” But even still, I don't think tree and non-tree are a dualistic pair. But of course, it's fine if you do, just keep in mind that one is experientially real as a physical thing and the other is experientially real as a concept you witness in your mind.

Multiplicity

Now when it comes to trees, they are all unique so the concept of multiplicity, rather than duality, is much more applicable. The same thing can be said about virtually all things – cars, houses, rivers, mountains and so forth. People are certainly unique so the concept of multiplicity is very helpful in this regard, too. I find it very practical to talk about you, me, him, her and all of the objects around us. Obviously to function in the world, we need to distinguish between the

qualities and conditions of all people and things. In form, we find an almost endless display of differences, but in the essence of all things, we find the One Substance, the One Divine Essence.

Here's a very short story that shows why I think it's so important to heed the experiential reality of our ordinary world. Imagine that you go out for breakfast and order some oatmeal. Minutes later your food arrives but instead of oatmeal, you have a bowl of sawdust. You give the waiter a puzzled look and ask, "Hey, where's my oatmeal?" He just laughs and says, "Everything is God; oatmeal is sawdust." Not much help, eh? In our ordinary world of form, all things are different.

So I think our world contains both dualistic expressions and expressions of multiplicity.

Good and bad, and good and evil

Now let's talk about good and bad, and good and evil. Good and bad come about when we add our own desires or preferences to what we experience. Good and evil come about when we add our own personal moral code to what we see being done in the world.

This subject is certainly more complicated than I can fully cover right now but I will still touch on a few points. First notice that you cannot directly experience the events and things in the world as either good or bad. You can only directly experience them as they are and in that sense, everything is neutral. It is only when you add to the mix your desires or preferences that an additional emotional experience may arise. I think it is certainly okay to have desires and preferences and I also think it is okay to evaluate things in terms of being good or bad.

For example, it is not a problem to say that dinner was good since you are just talking about how pleasing it was. But even if the dinner was bad – burnt or overcooked, for example – saying so would not necessarily imply that you are not at peace with it. Saying the dinner was bad can be done with a strong judgmental charge or it can be done in an emotionally neutral way. The way with the emotional charge is the one that overlooks the peace that is available.

When these dualistic expressions are correctly understood, you see that they are not a problem that you need to solve or overcome. But even so, you still might want to work on certain things to bring about what you prefer in a unselfish way.

In my opinion, the correct understanding sees all dualistic expressions as nonproblematic precisely because they are all a profound expression of the One Divine Essence. Dualistic expressions themselves are not the cause of any trouble or dissatisfaction. Yet some dissatisfaction can arise when this unifying Divine Essence is overlooked and there is some emotional rejection of the conditions at hand.

Good and evil are the two polarities of the one quality of morality. Of course people have forever debated the moral code, but even without settling that question in a way that will satisfy everyone, nondual mystics are motivated in their own unique and wholesome way to do good things and work for a "better" world, as seen from the perspective of our ordinary world. They are fully engaged in life, offering loving kindness and compassion to everyone, without being entangled by selfishness or self-centered desires. They are in the world but not trapped by it.

So paradoxically, even though our nondual wisdom accepts evil as an expression of the Divine Will, this does not in any way give us permission, so to speak, to harm others. As much as possible, in our own unique way, we always work for the good.

I also want to mention that it is perfectly fine to speak from the perspective of our ordinary world and say things such as “I love you.” Yet some people protest loudly that this statement presents a dualistic understanding and therefore should be thrown into the trash can. But that is just a simple misunderstanding. It is fine to speak from the perspective of either the One or the many. Can you imagine a philosophy that prevents you from expressing your love for another person? What does your intuition say about that? The full nondual wisdom holds that the One Divine Essence arises as everyOne and in this case, the One is expressing loving feelings for someOne via the person who is speaking. How beautiful.

By the way, when we speak of the One Source-Awareness, we are emphasizing the idea that this Awareness is always whole. It cannot be broken into pieces, either disconnected or connected, or branch off like the branches of a tree. This Awareness never has any divisions or parts and yet, through the mystery of creation, this One Formless Source-Awareness comes forth in our world of form as that which appears to be the many. How magnificent!

It is God who is arising as everyOne and it is God who is doing everything.

When we celebrate both our divine uniqueness in form and our divine unity as Source-Awareness, we find the deepest inspiration that opens up our loving hearts to everyOne. It is only through the many that we can share the One Love of God.

The play of the opposites – where one quality arises dualistically – hints at the bigger picture of One Source emanating as all of creation. Since God is completely invisible, it looks like creation stands alone without any Creator at all. And yet, the Creator and the created are One! This is what our ancient nondual wisdom points to.

Nonduality: God and creation are One Reality, not two.

Thanks for reading my essay! You can learn more about this fascinating topic by visiting my website. In truth, I honor your divine nature.

All my best,
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This essay is a slightly edited excerpt from the first chapter of my book:

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My mentor is Timothy Conway. His website is here:

enlightened-spirituality.org

There are over 75 hours of completely free audio recordings of some of his satsangs here:

[Free Satsang Audio Recordings](#)