

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 it’s used here because God and creation are seen as One Reality, not two. 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.

As we did with the actor and the character, we should again make a distinction between the transcendent source (God) and the dependent construction (creation). And yet God fully permeates creation in a way that paradoxically makes them One. 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 we use a new word: “nondual.”

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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 different ways that duality is expressed in our world. The coin has two sides and both sides must be

present at all times. Gender, on the other hand, usually exhibits only one aspect of its dualistic nature physically in one person at a time, so this is quite different from the coin. And hot and cold show us yet a third way that duality can be expressed. With hot and cold, the one quality of temperature arises anywhere in-between two opposite polarities. Other examples like this are light and dark, wet and dry, happiness and sadness, and good and evil.

So duality is expressed in these three ways: as one thing with two inseparable parts, as one of two complementary aspects, and as something in-between two polarities. The ancient nondual texts call all of this the “play of the opposites,” and here’s a very important point: when properly understood, none of this is seen in any way to be a problem. I mention this because it seems to me that many nondual study groups have one or more of the following misunderstandings:

- 1) They see all dualistic expressions as unreal; they completely deny their existence
- 2) They reject the validity of the concept of duality and only focus on “oneness”
- 3) They deny the usefulness of assessing something as good or evil (just to give one example)

In my opinion, the correct understanding sees all apparent dualistic expressions as nonproblematic precisely because they are all a profound expression of the One Divine Essence. And, just like all divine expressions, they are seen as divine gifts that can be safely received in full. So dualistic expressions themselves are not the cause of any dissatisfaction or trouble. Yet some dissatisfaction can arise when their unifying Divine Essence is overlooked or there is some emotional rejection of these expressions.

When these dualistic expressions are correctly understood, they are not a problem that you need to solve, overcome or deny the dualistic nature of.

In our experience, hot and cold are obviously real and different so it is wise to heed this experiential reality. In our world of form, this quality of temperature is an expression of this formless Divine Source, no matter how it arises. So it is with all qualities that arise in the play of the opposites. They are all real and different so don’t fall into any misunderstanding about that.

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 our nondual wisdom does not in any way support evil even though we accept it as an expression of the Divine Will. As much as possible, in our own way, we always work for the good.

By the way, 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 opposite or complement. I don’t think it’s helpful to wonder what the dualistic opposite of a tree really is, for example, although some people do pursue this. When it comes to things such as trees and people, they are all unique so the concept of multiplicity, rather than duality, is much more applicable.

Rather than me and not me, you and not you, him and not him, her and not her, I find it much more practical to talk about you, me, him, her and all of the objects around us.

Obviously, to function in the world in a practical way, 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 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, "We are all one; everything is God; oatmeal is sawdust." Not much help, eh? That's because the last statement is false while the first two are true. In our ordinary world of form, all things are different.

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 (connected or disconnected) or branch off like the branches of a tree. This Awareness never has any division or parts and yet, through the mystery of creation, this One Formless Reality 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 in Source-Awareness, we allow the balance that opens up our loving hearts to everyOne. It is only through the many that we can share the One Love of God. When you look into the eyes of another, you are looking directly into the eyes 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.

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:

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