

Chapter 1: What is Non-dualism?

From *Non-Dualism: Eastern Enlightenment in the World of Western Enlightenment*, by Philip Renad

To begin let me go into what non-dualism actually is. As the term indicates, it describes a way of thinking and being that is not dualistic. By dualistic we mean that our day to day functioning which needs to use opposites – such as heavy and light, dark and light, male and female, open and closed – is interpreted as being based on a *real* opposition, that is also true beyond mere functioning. Of course, it is useful for our functioning in the world to be able to differentiate between certain things, but this proves nothing about the ultimate reality of ourselves and the world as it appears to us. On further enquiry into the true nature of all that happens, we notice that we can only speak about something happening because we *experience* it. This experiencing or knowing is possible due to consciousness. When experiencing stops, everything stops. Whether we experience dark or light, a pleasant experience or a nasty one, it is experienced, it is perceived. By allowing all attention to go to experiencing-*in-itself*, you can notice that there is no multiplicity or separation. The impressions of multiplicity or separation occur *within* something that is ‘not two’. This is non-duality. ‘Non-dualism’ is the term for the approaches that emphasize non-duality.

If this were to remain an abstract philosophy, just one of the many possible interpretations of life, then as far as I am concerned, it would not be necessary to make it the focus of attention. It deserves attention it because due to its radical nature it is the only thing that truly exposes the *root* of all division and conflict, and because recognizing this root shows the way to bring an end to division and conflict. What I mean by non-dualism is therefore not a philosophy but actually a way of liberation. Liberation from dissatisfaction with existence, with the present moment, with the present thought.

The self-tormenting voice

Man’s basic-problem, as I see it, is splitting oneself in two, into ‘someone’ who behaves and has thoughts, and ‘someone’ who provides critical commentary on this behaviour and these thoughts. No matter how you try to be one with yourself, that critical voice continues to make itself heard. You appear to identify with both aspects

and the combination of these two can be called the ‘ego’, or simply ‘I’. The critical voice constantly gives commands, which are usually of a considerable ill-natured sort. It seems impossible to avoid.

I believe the whole phenomenon of spiritual seeking is an attempt to escape the wrath of these commands. People start the search because they are tormented. They are tormented by themselves. You could say that ‘happiness’ or ‘peace’, or at least what everyone seeks, exists in the moments that the self-tormenting voice stops for a while. Experiencing an orgasm is an example of such a moment. For a moment you are *completely* one with yourself. The total absence of commands, of inner conflict – at least briefly. It can be a sigh of relief: ‘Ahhh’. I think that every adult knows this experience. In a speech about the male-female relationship Bapak Subuh, the Javanese founder of the spiritual movement Subud, said the following in referring to the significance of sexual intercourse: “It is also, in truth, a repetition to bring about unity of man and woman, so that they may come to that state where there is neither male nor female (...) It is a repetition of receiving and experiencing the state of man before and at the moment when he was created.”¹

The bliss of sexual experience is a good comparison to the state beyond duality. Despite the disadvantage that this comparison may give rise to the conclusion that non-duality is about experience and pleasure (and that liberation is thus some kind of Eternal Orgasm), the advantage is that everyone knows this experience, and therefore the existence of the ‘non-dual state’ cannot be dismissed as just a theory.

The absence of our self-tormenting voice during orgasm provides us with a taste of what it is like to be truly human: an undivided being in Reality, true peace, beyond all opposites and conflict. I think that this is what all seekers really are looking for.²

But now the problem with all this seeking is that it actually works *via* the described commands. All resources at your disposal in the search appear to speak to you, advise you and impregnate you. Subsequently the part that is already so very busy giving commands is enormously strengthened; even the very best advice is internally transformed into forever more subtle new commands, demands and potential for failure. Thus, searching actually *increases* the energy that is already invested in this split-

in-two life, instead of reducing it. For this reason despair and confusion are often part of the search.

Non-duality is what remains when the seeking stops, when there is ‘finding’. This happens when the inner struggle is realized as being not based on reality, and in this realization the whole body-mind relaxes. *I am not two.*

But it could be said in retort to this that it looks more like an ‘end-state’. This sounds like wishful thinking! In other words, in this way something or other is indeed being missed.

Yes, that is indeed the danger. This is certainly an important issue within non-dualism: how can I prevent avoiding or skipping something? Precisely by coming in contact with the ultimate conclusion of being not-two it is very tempting to overlook or avoid all sorts of matters. Therefore, in this book I will attempt to clarify the relationship between on the one side the truth that man really is one and undivided, and on the other the observation of still arising and therefore apparently real doubt and dilemma, at least in most people. Writing about this feels a bit like a zigzag movement: both sides are in a certain way true and happening at the same time. However, as writing takes place over time they need to be described one after another. Thoughts, including doubts and confusion also occur over time – the awareness of being not-two however, is independent of time.

The direct way

Here we come across something that in my opinion is the essence of non-dualism, which, as was mentioned in the Introduction, is also sometimes referred to as the ‘direct way’. This essential element is the awareness that despite the above-mentioned risk that all sorts of things are ignored, denied or skipped, it simply *cannot be otherwise* than that ultimate Truth is at once transmitted in its purest form now, directly. Hence, the invitation to *first* recognize your essential nature, and then everything else. Any other approach (a more step-by-step approach, possibly through therapy or some method of ‘individuation’) is not only a postponement but also an obscuration of the main point, which can then stay out of reach forever. Not until the main point is realized *as own experience*, is there a trustworthy ground present to deal with potential

personal obstacles – this prevents an unnecessarily long and loveless journey lost in the labyrinth of identification with the person that you think you are.³

In non-dualism the highest or ultimate stage is available immediately, simply because Reality can never be the case *later*, after having firstly fulfilled certain conditions. Reality or Truth is not dependent on any single condition. The assumption that a long path should be travelled first, with much purification and transformation, can best be compared with the proverbial donkey and carrot. No matter how fast the donkey runs, the carrot remains at a distance.

The point is that on a gradual path you assume that you are a born entity, a mortal ego or perhaps a re-incarnated ‘soul’ or ‘higher self’, whilst the direct way confronts you with the fact that you still do not know what ‘I’ is, and you are encouraged to investigate what or who ‘I’ is before doing anything else.

If right now for instance you momentarily interrupt reading and ask yourself: ‘who am I?’, then you may notice that there is no mental answer possible to this question; it is as though all capability to interpret disappears for a moment. And yet this disappearing contains exactly the answer, an answer not coming from the mind. The mind falls away, resolved. For a moment there is no-thing, just the absence of any shape or form. In this moment you may see that you are timeless, dimensionless *presence* (to give it a name). It is true that in this presence all sorts of opinions and feelings can arise and take your attention for a moment, but with careful observation you can see that these temporary forms are not the answer to the question asked. You are not the temporarily arising thought forms with their ‘I’-structure, you are the *permanently present* capacity to observe these thought forms.

Non-separateness

In the non-dualistic traditions it is said that this permanent presence is nothing other than the Supreme Principle. Hence, you *are* this Supreme – you might call it ‘God’, as long as this is not interpreted as an objectified Person or Creator. If someone exclaims ‘I am God’, in non-dualism this means nothing more than that there exists no Principle outside or above you, but that in fact everything is lived and thought *through* this Principle.

All of this has to do with seeing the difference between the real Subject, that this Principle is (self-luminously illuminating the current experience), and the *so-called* subject (the 'I' as person), that in reality is only an object recurring for very short moments *within* the timeless Subject. Twentieth-century Advaita teachers such as Atmananda and Ramana Maharshi emphasized this real Subject in their teachings. They referred to this respectively as 'I-Principle' and 'I-I', the uninterrupted self-luminous Self.

Non-duality means not only non-separation of yourself and the Supreme Principle but also non-separation of subject and object, non-separation of yourself and the phenomena that appear to you.

How can it be that I am not separate from phenomena? They are there and I am here, isn't it? It seems obvious that there is 'separation'! The answer lies in the true nature of consciousness, or Consciousness, which is none other than the true Subject just mentioned. Consciousness is that which sheds light on all that appears. Then again that which you call 'yourself' appears, then again an object of the senses, then a mental or emotional object. All the time the substance that constitutes the subject ('yourself') as well as the object remains unchanged. Consciousness itself cannot be changed. The non-separateness that is indicated here means that Consciousness cannot manifest in any other way than *as* form and content (in other words, *in the form of* everything that presents itself in Consciousness, all phenomena). The American teacher Da Free John expressed this as follows:

“It [Real life] does not experience objects in themselves and moments one by one. It does not know and act and feel itself as a separate, functional consciousness and experiential identity. It constantly and only knows Reality, *whose living form is unqualified relationship, or non-separation*. It is not qualified by experience or existence. Moment to moment, it enjoys the knowledge and experience of Reality *as* whatever the content of the moment. Basically, it has only one, unqualified Experience, which is a profound state of Awareness of Reality. It is free of the fascination and repetition of experience.”⁴

The two levels of truth

Stemming from the understanding that it is not correct to talk exclusively from the position of being non-separate (because physical and emotional pain, however temporary they may be, require and deserve attention) the classical non-dualistic schools have always sought for a way to describe the coexistence of the understanding of non-separateness and the experience of being separate (and possibly feeling 'bound'). For this they used the concept of 'two levels of truth': the first level, of non-separation, they called Absolute Truth (*Paramârtha Satya*), and the second, of multiplicity and possibly of separation, they called relative or conventional truth (*samvriti satya*). On the first level everything is just as it is, with no relationship or comparison to anything else. Thinking can do no more here, there is nothing left to classify or separate. On the second level everything is dependent on all sorts of factors, including the way something is looked at. Nothing exists independently. Nagarjuna, the great second-century Buddhist teacher who developed the idea of the two truths, expressed the importance of the view on it as:

“Those who do not know the distinction between the two truths cannot understand the profound nature of the Buddha’s teaching.

Without relying on everyday common practices (i.e. relative truths), the absolute truth cannot be expressed. Without approaching the absolute truth, *nirvâna* cannot be attained.”⁵

The Buddhist concept of the two levels was later adopted by the teachers of Advaita Vedanta, who linked it to the concept of the two levels in the Upanishads: higher knowledge and lower knowledge.⁶ Shankara, the eighth-century founder of the Advaita school, described Reality (the first level) as that which *always* is. Something can only be called 'real' when it is never absent, never 'not real'. Something that comes and goes, that is present only occasionally (the second level), Shankara referred to as *mâyâ*: illusion or suggestion. Through ignorance (*a-jñâna*) of the truth that you are always, uninterruptedly one with Reality, you start to suggest a separate existence whereby you continuously project with the mind all sorts of things onto the world. Things stored in memory are held in front of your eyes like a slide show whilst you

are looking at some current object. In this way you shall never know an object as it really is. Shankara did not assert that the

world does not *exist*, but that it is in itself not the ultimate Reality. Thanks to Shankara and his disciples as well as subsequent commentators, the term *mâyâ* has had great influence on the whole of Indian philosophy.

The shuffle of the two levels

The problem of the coexistence of an awareness of the Absolute while encountering all kinds of difficulties is of course one of all cultures and times. In Dutch literature this is illustrated in a poem by J.C. van Schagen:

“You loved God and the world but then your braces snapped
you opened your arms wide to embrace the All
but wasn’t there a sudden resentment on your face whilst your neighbour’s
phonograph began to wail? ”⁷

This is the situation. You may wish that whatever is happening right now would go away but it just keeps on happening. So what do we do about this?

Becoming familiar with the possibility to reduce everything that happens on the relative level to ‘illusion’ (especially in the wake of the teachers of Advaita Vedanta), has tempted many seekers to use this as a method to cover their difficulties. An already present tendency to deny all sorts of inconvenient matters is now supported and strengthened with a philosophical foundation whereby the denial is given an added air of justness. Simply coming into contact with the idea of an ever-present Reality can have the effect that difficulties in life, though indeed *experienced* as difficult, are dismissed under the motto ‘oh, it’s just illusion’ – in other words, nothing to bother yourself about. In fact, this is usually the result of shuffling the two levels which happens quite often within circles of spiritual seekers. Purely on the level of Ultimate Reality personal aspects such as relational problems, diseases, tension etcetera are indeed without an independent reality of its own: on that level these become as it were ‘outshone’ whereby everything is recognized as light.⁸ However, this does not mean that on the second level, that of relative reality, these do not make

up an actual part of daily life, this implies that these personal complications indeed require attention and care.

The Indian master Poonjaji once told a good example of this. During a stay with his master Ramana Maharshi, during the bloody separation of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Maharshi once pointed out to him that his family, living in the western part of the Punjab that was assigned to Islamic Pakistan, was in serious danger and really needed Poonja's help, to which Poonja answered: "Oh, that life was but a dream. I dreamed that I had a wife and a family. When I met you, my dream ended." The Maharshi replied to this: "But if you know that your family is a dream, what difference does it make if you stay in the dream and complete your task there? Why should you be afraid to go there if it is but a dream?"⁹

The confusion or shuffle of levels comes down to projecting a quality of the Absolute onto the relative.¹⁰ One of the most frequently projected qualities is that of *perfection*. The ever-present Absolute is perfect, but it is not manifest and therefore is not observable. This inherently present (and intuitively felt) perfection is then desired in manifest form and so all sorts of misplaced interpretations occur such as 'holy' (read: cramped) behaviour, sexlessness, suppression of feelings, pretentiousness and arrogance.

Another quality that is often unconsciously transferred from the Absolute to the relative level is *amorality*. This is more or less the opposite of the projection of perfection: you could describe this amorality as strategically embracing the *imperfect*. On the highest level of non-duality every difference is resolved, hence also between good and evil. Regretfully however, the intellectual understanding of this penetrating truth sometimes leads people to misconduct, their misconduct condoned by referring to the 'non-existence' of evil. Also in much lighter forms, where you can hardly speak of 'evil', comparable confusion may ensue. For example someone with whom you have an appointment at ten o'clock, arriving after eleven could make a comment such as: 'Oh, time – that doesn't even exist!' Whatever form the confusion has, it seems very difficult to confront those who have fallen into 'the pitfall of the Absolute' on this point. I think that this aspect, this pitfall, is one of the most difficult points on the direct way of liberation. For this reason I will go into this further in a separate chapter (see chapter 11, 'Maturity'). In Dzogchen, one of the most radical forms of

Tibetan Buddhism, a very practical and helpful approach to the two levels is offered. Kennard Lipman, an American translator of Dzogchen texts wrote the following:

“To begin with, an individual who has realized this reality must directly introduce you to your natural state. In Dzogchen the introduction to the natural state could be compared to a light being suddenly turned on to reveal our entire being – both its absolute and relative aspects. With the light on we can clearly see our natural state and how it manifests, as well as the temporary obstacles to its total manifestation. (...) But turning on the light does not automatically eliminate the obstacles inherent in our relative condition: our health; childhood development; unproductive patterns of thought, feeling, and behaviour; financial status and position in society; whatever we think we are and do. If not attended to, all these can create obstacles in any phase of the way. (...) In Dzogchen this knowledge is a means for becoming more certain about the natural state through learning how to work with the difficulties of our relative being.”¹¹

Only by truly recognizing your natural state (*sabhaja*) can you become convinced that in fact all objects are empty (‘empty’ as term for absence from own independent existence) and therefore all obstacles are empty too. So you are able to look at the obstacles one by one without being devoured by a belief that they are ultimately real. In the sequence as set out in Dzogchen the direct way is not a way of avoidance, and attention for the obstacles is not a diversion from the way itself.

In the natural state it becomes evident that ‘bondage’ does not really exist, and that the temporary appearance of the suggestion of it may well be looked at from awareness of the natural state. Only in this way can both pitfalls be overcome: denial of the lower level on the one hand, and denial of the Light that I *am*, with the conclusion that I still have a long way to go, on the other. True non-dualism, undivided *being in itself*, indeed turns out to be a way to avoid nothing and to deny nothing.

Is this the same as mysticism or monism?

In many western spiritual scriptures the condition in which all opposites are dissolved and in which undivided *being* remains, is referred to as ‘mysticism’. As this term is simpler and better known, isn’t it a better term for the topic of this book?

Yes, to a certain extent the term ‘mysticism’ does cover what I here refer to as ‘non-dualism’. All forms of mysticism contain in its nucleus some element of non-dualism. However, ‘mysticism’ is a very broad term. ‘Non-dualism’ is more precise. Mysticism is known in all cultures and times; it can be found in all religions, with wonderful examples of the expression of truth. But it is noticeable that in many schools of mysticism a *yearning* for unification is emphasized, whilst in radical non-dualism non-separation is the *basic-premise* of existence, the inherent element of it – hence the expression ‘the natural state’. The New Oxford Dictionary defines mysticism as: “Belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender.” Non-dualism is not a belief in the achievement of something, but the immediate awareness of being not separate right now. Moreover, in mysticism there is often talk of ‘mystical experiences’. Experiences have a beginning and an end and therefore in non-dualism there is not so much importance attached to experiences. Emphasis instead is on recognition of That in which all experiences occur.

I still think the term ‘non-dualism’ is the best term for expressing this being not separate, despite its length and weightiness. The negative formulation aptly indicates that what you appear to be encumbered with is an inevitable fact of life, namely ‘dualism’,¹² with the prefix ‘non’ indicating that this fact is not true. ‘Non-dualism’ is a literal translation of the Sanskrit word *a-dvaya* (and its relative *a-dvaita*), from *a-* ‘not-’ and *dvi*, ‘two’. The negative formulation seems to be the only way to indicate that it cannot really be defined: in any case it is not two, not a multiple, not a division, and yet it does not define what it actually is.

Often the term ‘monism’ is used for what is referred to here as ‘non-dualism’.¹³ The New Oxford Dictionary, which does not define non-dualism, defines ‘monism’ as: “The doctrine that only one supreme being exists.” Indeed, also in non-dualism it is said that there is only one supreme being: be it Consciousness or Knowledge itself. But because this ‘being’ has no object-value it is not possible to consider this as ‘existing’, and also not as ‘one’. ‘One’ can again be assumed in a more subtle way as being an object, a ‘One’ – and that is, rightly so I believe, exactly the critique of the Mahayana Buddhists on the usage of the term ‘the One’ in the Hinduistic Vedanta.

‘The One’ is often perceived as ‘High’ or ‘the All Good’, through which a certain *quality* is linked to the Quality-less – and this is exactly what is ultimately dualistic. The characteristic of That which can never be objectified, which is indescribable, is exactly that it is not a definable quality.

An example of the misunderstanding about the emphasis on the term ‘monism’ is to be found in a statement from American psychologist William James: “It is hard to see how it is possible that evil is grounded in God while God is all good.”¹⁴ Indeed he was talking here about monism (also referring to it as ‘pantheism’), though it seems more like a statement about monotheism. Reference to ‘One’ quickly seems to create associations of an objectifiable Something or Someone. The term ‘non-dualism’ reflects that it is simply impossible to describe what Reality is and therefore a positive formulation really is not appropriate. Monism indicates that all is ‘one’ – as though you know what that *is*. The awareness of having no knowledge of the Unknowable demands the use of a negative term. For this reason you could also refer to non-dualistic as ‘non-conceptual’, not to be grasped in any concept. This was expressed in the eighth century BC by a certain Yajñavalkya (speaking of the Self) with the words “*neti neti*”: “it is not this and it is not that.”¹⁵ Some teachers, for example Nisargadatta Maharaj, find the expression non-dualism itself still too restrictive, saying that Reality is beyond both dualism and non-dualism. As far as I am concerned, non-dualism indicates the end of *all* -isms: you could also call this then ‘non-ism’.

The term ‘non-dualism’ was not introduced in the West until the mid-nineteenth century, and then exclusively at translating Advaita Vedanta texts.¹⁶ It was not known then that non-dualism also existed within Buddhism. In the 1890’s Swami Vivekananda used the term in his lectures to show the distinction from the dualistic Vedanta-schools, whilst before that time almost everyone else referred to Advaita with the term ‘monism’. The understanding that non-dualism also exists in Mahayana Buddhism only started to filter through to the West in the course of the twentieth century, partly due to the work of D.T. Suzuki. The Anglo-American writer Alan Watts has repeatedly explained the distinction between non-dualism and monism, and probably has hereby become one of the major sources responsible for ‘non-dualism’ becoming the generally accepted term.¹⁷

Notes

1. Muhammad Subuh, *Subud and the Active Life*. [Without location:] The Subud Brotherhood in England, 1961. Second edition (1967), p. 162.
2. Atmananda (Krishna Menon) repeatedly said this concerns everybody, the so called non-searchers included; for instance: “We find that peace is the real goal of man’s desire.” *Notes on Spiritual Discourses of Sree Atmananda* (Trivandrum: Reddiar Press, 1963); p. 4. As a matter of fact Atmananda did contribute a lot by often translating *ânanda* by ‘peace’ instead of the usual term ‘bliss’.
3. In chapter 10 this theme of sequence is elaborated.
4. Da Avabhasa [Da Free John], *The Knee of Listening*. Clearlake, CA: Dawn Horse Press, 1992 (‘New Standard Edition’; in the original edition, of 1972, this passage is missing); p. 230. Italics are mine, PhR.
5. *Mûla-madhyamaka Kârikâ*, XXIV. 9 and 10. Translation by Kenneth Inada, *Nâgârjuna*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1970; p. 146.
6. This occurs for instance in *Mundaka Upanishad*, I. 1. 4: *Parâ vidyâ* en *aparâ vidyâ* respectively. Shankara called the two levels *Paramârtha* and *vyavahâra*; the second term concerns our daily life, the actual happenings as well as the imagined ones.
7. J.C. van Schagen, *Ik ga maar en ben*. Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1972; p. 11 (oorspronkelijk in *Narrenwijsheid*; 1925).
8. *Atma Nirvriti* (Trivandrum: Vedanta Publishers, 1952); p. 4: “He is great who sees light (consciousness) alone in the manifestation of all objects.”
9. David Godman, *Nothing Ever Happened*. Vol. One. Boulder, CO: Avadhuta, 1998; p. 158-159.

10. The Absolute does not have any quality or characteristic. Here the word 'quality' is used because otherwise that which is being projected cannot be indicated.

11. Kennard Lipman, Commentary in *You Are the Eyes of the World*. Novato, CA: Lotsawa, 1987; p. 59.

12. Maybe it is in fact more proper to speak here of 'duality'. Ramesh Balsekar differentiates the terms like this: "Duality is the basis on which this manifestation takes place. So if duality is understood as duality, as merely polaric opposites, that one cannot exist without the other, that is understanding. (...) And that realization raises the dualism back to the level of duality" (*Consciousness Speaks*. Redondo Beach, CA: Advaita Press, 1992; p. 70).

13. The term 'monism' is originating from eighteenth-century German philosopher Christian Wolff.

14. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; 1902.

15. In separate words: *Na iti, na iti*. In *Brihad-âranyaka Upanishad*, III. 9. 26, and some other places in the same Upanishad. For English translation see Bibliography.

16. See on this chapter 9, section 5, 'Buddha and Lao-tzu (1837)'.

17. Alan W. Watts, *The Supreme Identity*. London: Faber and Faber, 1950; p. 69 and 95; and *The Way of Zen*. New York: Pantheon, 1957. Pelican-edition 1976; p. 59-