NONDUALITY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

THE SACRED MIRROR

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century we are witnessing an increasingly intimate conversation between Western psychotherapists and teachers from the Eastern wisdom traditions. This conversation has been happening simultaneously on a number of different levels. The most obvious and outward level is intellectual, evidenced by the growing stream of books and journal articles (mostly Buddhist), as well as by conferences and academic classes that include a Transpersonal or Integral orientation. However, a less obvious but more important part of this conversation is happening experientially and intuitively as psychotherapists sit silently in meditation and dialogue with Indian and Southeast Asian sages, Japanese and Korean Zen masters, Middle Eastern Sufis, Taoist masters, Tibetan lamas and rinpoches, and more recently with some of their long-term Western students who have become teachers in their own right. In fact, this conversation between Eastern-oriented dharma teachers and Western psychotherapists is a smaller part of a much larger dialogue that includes millions of nonpsychotherapists as well as teachers in the Christian, Jewish, and native mystical traditions. In addition, increasing numbers of individuals in the West are reporting spontaneous and profound, life transforming awakening without prior exposure to any spiritual teachers, teachings, or practices. Surveying these developments, we see the emergence of an essential dialogue, stripped of its cultural forms and roles, between the conditioned mind and that awareness which is unconditioned, open, and unknown. Reality seems to be enjoying this conversation with itself, since it is happening with increasing frequency and depth.

The fruit of this dialogue has been an accelerated awakening of nondual wisdom. Nonduality is a rather curious and uncommon word that so far has been used by a relatively small number of scholars and teachers. It derives from the Sanskrit word advaita which means “not-two.” Nondual wisdom refers to the understanding and direct experience of a fundamental consciousness that underlies the apparent distinction between perceiver and perceived. From the nondual perspective, the split between self and other is a purely mental construct. This understanding, rooted in the direct experience of countless sages through millennia, is at the heart of Hindu Vedanta, most schools of Buddhism, and Taoism, and mystical Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Nonduality is a particularly elegant and clear formulation, since it describes reality in terms of what it is not (unsplit, undivided) rather than what it is. It has the added advantage of being

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1 I wish to thank my coeditors Peter Fenner, Ph.D., and Sheila Krystal, Ph.D., for their valuable suggestions and feedback for this chapter.

2 For three excellent examples of this phenomenon, see Eckhart Tolle's The Power of Now, Byron Katie's Loving What Is, and Tony Parson's As It Is. Also see Lynn Marie Lumiere and John Win's The Awakening West: Conversations with Today's New Western Spiritual Leaders.

3 See David Loy’s Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy
nonsectarian, unhinged to any particular religious or psychospiritual tradition, yet adaptable to many. It is a word that points to that which is before and beyond the projections of a separative, self-reflexive mind. What is pointed to can never be adequately conceptualized. It can only be lived in the timeless now.

Nondual wisdom expresses itself as and through a radiant heart (love) and illumined mind (wisdom). While essentially without qualities, it is commonly experienced as being vast, free, spacious, heartfelt, and present-centered. Many people report feeling a subtle joy, love, compassion, peace, gratitude, and sense of connectedness with all of life when they directly attune with it. There are many signs that this awareness is emerging in the West. Why now? Perhaps it is as the historian Charles Beard (Rogers, 1980) observed, “When the skies grow dark, the stars begin to shine.”

This flowering of nondual wisdom is presenting new challenges and opportunities for the field of psychotherapy. While Ken Wilber (2000, 1996) and other Integral/Transpersonal philosophers and psychologists have mapped out nondual awareness as the pinnacle of self-realization, it has been presented as a rarefied condition. Surprisingly, this no longer appears to be as true. As a result, a new generation of clinicians and teachers has begun to explore how this awareness directly impacts the way psychotherapists work.

The Sacred Mirror refers to the capacity of the therapist to reflect back the essential nature of the client – that awareness that is prior to and inclusive of all thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Sacred mirroring is multidimensional, reflecting both personal and impersonal dimensions of being. This capacity implies a high degree of maturity by therapists who are awakening to the realization that they are not only who they have taken themselves to be. They realize, at least to some degree, that they are not limited to being a “therapist” (although they may function in that role), or even a “person.” Their locus of identity is either resting in or moving toward unconditioned awareness, or Presence. The result is the emergence of a natural simplicity, transparency, clarity, and warm acceptance of whatever arises within themselves and their clients. Since they increasingly do not take themselves as some “thing,” they also do not take their clients as objects separate from themselves. They understand that there is no separate mirror and someone mirrored; there is only mirroring. As Rumi (1995) said, “We are the mirror, as well as the face in it.”

Through their Presence and skillful therapeutic means, awakening psychotherapists may spontaneously assist some of their clients to see through their various limited identities and gradually rest in an unknown openness, even as they fully honor, accept, and explore whatever mental, emotional, and somatic contractions arise. This expansive role complements and increasingly overlaps with the traditional role of the spiritual teacher or director, and raises a number of interesting questions.

First, we may ask whether we are witnessing the emergence of a new school of psychotherapy – one that is “nondual.” Certainly one could reasonably propose this. Perhaps a modern set of principles and practices that enhance awakening and transformation could be articulated and taught. Maybe, as spiritual teacher Peter Fenner
suggests, nondual therapy is what the sages, Buddha included, have been doing all along and we are simply encountering an old wine – Buddhadharma – in a new wineskin. On the other hand, there are good reasons to be cautious about trying to codify or reify nondual awareness into yet another framework that will eventually be added to the compost pile along with all of the psychological models that preceded it. By its nature, that which is nondual is undivided and nonconceptual. The conceptual mind can never nail it down. It is not limited by a set of principles since it is the source of all principles. Nor can it be confined to any particular set of practices, since reality uses all tools at its disposal at any given moment, including death, disease, pain, shock, and suffering, to point us to our true nature. Nonduality can never be confined by any philosophy or psychospiritual practice, although such practices may play a vital role in preparing the ground for awakening of facilitating a glimpse of our true nature. It is not limited to any object or subtle state of consciousness, even as it includes these. It is both no-thing and everything, empty yet full of pure potentiality. It is immanent and transcendent, formed and formless. And it is none of this. It is what is and what we are and little more of any meaning can be said about it. Mainly we can describe what it is not, and even that in time will be seen to be untrue.

Even though nondual awareness cannot be objectified, awakening to it changes one’s life profoundly. How may we assess its impact on the field of psychotherapy? It may be helpful to think of psychotherapy, and all of life for that matter, as having a horizontal and vertical dimension. The horizontal refers to the realm of form – the evolution of phenomenal life in time and space. The vertical refers to that which is formless and exists outside of time and space. Psychology, like all disciplines, evolves on the horizontal plane as new information about the development and functioning of the human body/mind is discovered and synthesized, leading to new schools of thought. While the concept of nondual awareness has already been incorporated horizontally into transpersonal and Integral frameworks, its main effect occurs vertically as practitioners deepen in their intimacy with their true nature.

Awakening nondual awareness adds a depth dimension to any of the existing schools of psychology, regardless of their orientation, through the psychotherapist’s deepening awareness. Whether their model is neoanalytic (object relations, self psychology, intersubjectivity), Jungian, cognitive/behavioral, humanistic/existential, or Integral/Transpersonal, awakening psychotherapists bring a quality of awareness that transforms their work. It is not so much that therapists integrate Being, as they are absorbed by it. As they more deeply attune with and embody the ground of Being, Presence is enhanced. Their thoughts, feelings, and actions tend to spontaneously radiate out from this open awareness. Authentic transformation arises from the therapist and client’s coexploration of what is.

Presence can be described as Being aware of Itself. Its effects are contagious. When we are in the Presence of an individual who has awakened from the dream of “me,” we can sense an unpretentiousness, lucidity, transparency, joy, and ease of being. Those same qualities are elicited within ourselves. What is normally background may temporarily be called into the foreground of attention. When Presence is particularly strong and we are
particularly open, it may feel as if a fire has been ignited. The German-Canadian sage Eckhart Tolle (1999) has commented on this:

When a log that has only just started to burn is placed next to one that is burning fiercely, and after a while they are separated again, the first log will be burning with much greater intensity. After all, it is the same fire. To be such a fire is one of the functions of a spiritual teacher. Some therapists may also be able to fulfill that function, provided they have gone beyond the level of mind and can create and sustain a state of intense conscious presence while they are working with you.

Tolle’s proviso that therapists must transcend the mind is critically important.

Does this mean that psychotherapy is evolving into a Western vehicle for the transmission of the flame of dharma, or truth? Are awakening psychotherapists in the same lineage as the Buddha or India’s other illustrious sages? It seems obvious that any awakening or awakened beings will transmit their understanding according to their capacities and limitations in any moment. This holds true for psychotherapists and nonpsychotherapists alike. In some ways being a psychotherapist may make awakening more difficult, especially if there are strong attachments to theories about the mind. On the other hand, psychotherapists are in a unique position in modern society to offer a sanctuary for individuals to sort out their lives and more intimately explore their direct experience. Further, people may be more at ease working individually with a therapist who has a nondual orientation than with joining a spiritual organization or community that has its own specialized rules, roles, and rituals.

Having identified the flowering of Presence as the primary impact of awakening, we can also recognize a number of powerful secondary effects. One obvious area is in our self-identity as a “psychotherapist.” When we awaken from the sense of personal identity, we also awaken from all of our role identities, even as these roles continue. We are like the actor who snaps out of his trance while onstage and suddenly realized that he had lost himself in his role. Even though we continue our roles as Mr. or Ms. Jones, we do not forget that it is just a play. Therapy is what we do, it is not who we are. As a result, we take ourselves much more lightly. The role of psychotherapist has its legitimate and socially relevant function, yet we no longer allow it to become a screen or mask to hide behind. Freed of the role identity, we are more authentic, transparent, available, and creative in the moment. We are no longer problem solvers facing problem holders. Instead, we are Being meeting itself in one of its infinite and intriguing disguises.

If we no longer take ourselves as problem solvers, it is also true that we can no longer find any real problems. This radical understanding can be disorienting. Clearly, nearly all clients come in presenting problems that therapists are taught to carefully assess in their initial sessions. If there is no problem, what is there to do? We meet the client where they are. If they believe that they have a problem, and certainly there will be compelling evidence to support such an interpretation, we join them there and begin the process of intimately exploring what the actual experience of the “problem” is. As apparent
problems are gradually unpacked and clients deepen in their self-intimacy, they will eventually encounter a profound sense of emptiness that has been fiercely defended against. They discover that their prior problems were all outcomes from and compensatory expressions of this defense against what at first appears to be annihilation and in time reveals itself as unconditional love. When we believe that we are not enough, we think, feel, and act in all kinds of way that create suffering for ourselves and others. Yet even this avoidance of emptiness is not seen as a problem. It is simply a misunderstanding of our true nature that is fundamentally empty – of everything we have taken to be true about ourselves and the world. This misunderstanding is also part of the divine play. Facing emptiness either will or will not occur depending upon the motivation and readiness of the client. It is not up to the therapist, who is free of any agenda, to change things as they are.

Another impact of an awakening nondual awareness is an enhanced capacity to be with what is. All mainstream schools of psychotherapy understand the importance of acceptance, yet the dualistic mind can never be an agent of complete acceptance. The mind only accepts what is conditionally, hoping that if something is accepted, it will change. The living insight of nondual awareness is that everything already is accepted and embraced just as it is. As awakening deepens, the judging mind loses its grip and attention becomes increasingly innocent, intimate, and impersonally affectionate. Attention drops from the head to the heart. Without any conscious intention on the part of the therapist, an optimal field of loving acceptance arises that facilitates transformation. What has been unmet is waiting to be fully embraced before it can transform. Unconditional love is the greatest transformative power. A flower bud naturally unfolds to the caress of sunlight; it cannot be willed to open.

Awakening nondual awareness fully discloses the therapeutic encounter as a shared field and enhances the phenomenon of empathic resonance (Hart, 2000). When we are no longer protecting and projecting a personal identity, we are multidimensionally open and available to our clients. A remarkable intimacy may evolve, depending in part upon the availability of the client, where we are able to experience our client’s world as if from the inside. Interpersonal boundaries become very fluid and permeable yet without the merging and confusion that is typical of unconscious relationships. The therapist intimately experiences without becoming identified with or caught in whatever is being experienced, a blending of love and wisdom. We can touch the core of a client’s contraction even as we retain a sense of spacious detachment. Interestingly, clients consciously participate in these encounters, knowing when a therapist’s heart and sensitivity have touched them where they have never been met before. This empathic resonance helps heal the pain of separation.

The awakening of nondual awareness also facilitates the depth and transformative power of inquiry (the investigation into one’s fundamental nature). Discernment is significantly enhanced. As therapists learn to live in the unknown, increasingly free of conclusions, they are better able to assist their clients to do the same. They see thoughts for what they are – just thoughts, recognizing the different layers of their clients’ stories and assisting in their gradual deconstruction when this is appropriate. They know the peace and
freedom of living without attachment to any story of how things are or should be. This is especially the case with the story of being a separate self, which is unquestioned by all conventional psychotherapies. The unfolding of nondual awareness allows therapists to authentically pose or support the investigation of essential questions such as “Who am I?” “What do I really want?” and “Is it true?” and follow the process of undoing fundamental beliefs to their end beyond the conceptual mind. This is in marked contrast to the process of purely cognitive or intellectual inquiry that stays limited to the surface, rational mind. The illumined intellect (buddhi in Sanskrit) shines more freely as nondual awareness awakens to itself, allowing a natural resting in non-knowing.

We should also briefly address the issue of methods and skills. Since nondual awareness is all-inclusive, it will at times use skillful means to assist its own unfolding. Wisdom and love work through many “little methods.” In psychotherapy this may look like silent listening, empathic reflections, inquiries, interpretations, educating through teaching stories and metaphors, invitations to be attentive to something, or to look, listen, or sense in a new way. Therapy can use nature, breath work, movement, bilateral stimulation, dream work, free association, toning, gazing, journaling, art, or a gentle touch of the hand. When effective, it almost always engages the body on some level. The critical question is whether the therapist’s awareness is centered in the moment and creatively responsive to what is. Are we entering a session fixed to an agenda and protocol, or are we able to let everything go and be fresh and truly available? Can we let the session be naked and unfurnished at any moment? Are we able to rest in the Unknown?

The Sacred Mirror [the book to which this chapter is the introduction] is primarily about how awakening impacts the psychotherapist and secondarily about how it affects psychotherapy. Yet awakening is not something that the conditioned mind can “do.” It is out of the ego’s control and happens of its own. We cannot pretend to be awake when we are not (this is still part of being in the dream of a separate self), nor can we completely deny or refuse our underlying nature as Awakeness. When awakening happens, it is an impersonal event and belongs to no one. It is from, not for the person. As the European sage Jean Klein (1988) observes, “Awakening happens when we are convinced that there is no one who awakens.” It is enough to be where we are, as we are – lucidly allowing our experience in the moment, whether we are at war or peace with reality. The love of truth, manifesting as the surrender to Silence and an active investigation into all of our cherished beliefs, gradually leads us to greater authenticity. The rest takes care of itself. Living this way brings a sense of transparency to our lives and our work as psychotherapists. In time and without any conscious effort or intent we become like stained glass, more adequate forms of transmission of light. Our individuality is liberated and enhanced as we knowingly share this common ground with all beings.

Notes


*Editor’s note:*

Richard Miller and Peter Fenner, who are featured in this book, have each contributed chapters to *The Sacred Mirror*. 
How is modern psychotherapy impacted when it is approached from the presence and understanding of the unconditioned mind? What happens when therapists are able to function as a sacred mirror for their clients' essential nature, reflecting back not only the contents of awareness—thoughts, feelings and sensations—but awareness itself? Informed by their direct experience as well as by nondual teachings from both eastern and western wisdom traditions, the authors take a fresh look at what psychotherapy can be. These seminal essays will challenge and inspire readers to approach psychotherapy in a new way.

Relationships and nonduality have been touchy areas for many spiritual teachers. But each of the 13 authors here offers a unique perspective and add understanding to that perennial philosophy. The writing is uniformly excellent.