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Issue: *Meditation***Love and compassion meditation: a nondual perspective**

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This paper discusses meditation from the unique perspective of the nondual approach and explores the possible relevance of this approach to applications of love and compassion meditation in clinical settings. It contrasts the nondual approach with the better known gradual or goal-oriented, dualistic view of meditation. This paper also introduces one of the central ideas of the nondual approach—that love and compassion, like other positive qualities that are ordinarily considered as goals of meditation practice, can be found to be already present within oneself as innate dimensions of one’s authentic being.

Keywords: love; compassion; meditation; nondual awareness; nonduality; clinical

Although happiness and suffering manifest, they are within the heart essence of enlightenment, not wavering from a single, naturally occurring timeless awareness.¹

Longchen Rabjam

Introduction

The nondual approach to meditation presents a unique perspective, known as the nondual view, on the nature of consciousness and one’s authentic being. The nondual view suggests that the goal of meditation, usually thought of as an idealized state reachable only in a very distant future, is already present and complete within oneself as one’s authentic being.² Meditation practice, in this view, is not about gradually perfecting oneself through improving one’s capacities, but about recognizing or realizing a very subtle background nondual awareness that contextualizes all of one’s experiences within this wholeness. The perspective presented here is based on the Tibetan Buddhist and Bonpo traditions of Dzogchen, Mahamudra, and the Hindu traditions of Advaita Vedanta and Kashmiri Shaivism. Traditionally, motivation for presenting a nondual view in the context of public discourse is twofold: to elucidate the nature of consciousness so that nonduality can be understood as the goal of meditation practice and to point out—to proponents of the gradualist traditions that see nondual medi-

tation as an advanced stage of otherwise dualistic practice—that the entire project can be made far less arduous if approached from the other end, by taking the goal itself as the method.³ Because both the more common dualistic and the less common nondual approaches to meditation are rooted in the same larger contexts of religious traditions in which they developed, such as Buddhism or Hinduism, and share many overlapping elements, differences between them are not always obvious. Discussing nondual approaches in the context of contemporary neuroscience and clinical psychology presents additional challenges. Unlike everyday experiences, nondual experiences, or realizations of nonduality, are intensely holistic, and expressing them in the linear dualistic structure of language can often result in statements that sound paradoxical or nonsensical, such as “everything is already perfect and complete just as it is,” or “the nature of mind is all-pervading like space.” Such statements can also appear to have a strongly essentialist and innatist flavor, which can be difficult to contextualize within the relativistic and constructivist views of contemporary science and the humanities. Here, it would be useful to keep in mind that these are primarily descriptions of what the realization of nonduality is like at the level of phenomenology and that claims about their ontological or metaphysical import are

inferences whose accuracy cannot be ascertained on the basis of those experiences alone. Maintaining this epistemic distance is necessary when introducing ideas from nondual traditions into scientific discourse. Conversely, the temptation to equate this epistemic uncertainty with ontology of these states needs to be resisted as well. Some nondual traditions have created ways of speaking “from nonduality,” which attempt to bypass the usual subject–object dichotomy inherent in language, and they hold that any language indicative of subject–object or experiencer–experience structuring cannot be describing nonduality.⁴ The present discussion is not concerned with this aspect of nondual traditions, while keeping in mind that the concepts used here are pointers and maps, not the territory. The nondual perspective may also be challenging for those familiar with more gradual approaches to meditation, such as mindfulness. While there are similarities between the two, the differences are both subtle and profound. In many ways, the nondual approach presents a completely different orientation and understanding of what is at stake in the human condition and what needs to be done to alleviate unnecessary suffering.^{5,6} Finally, reviews on the nondual approach to meditation are hampered by the significant paucity of studies on nonduality, especially within the field of neuroscience; hence, the ideas discussed are necessarily theoretical and somewhat speculative.

Duality and nonduality, once more with feeling

Nondual traditions see the basic human predicament as unnecessary fragmenting of experience into rigidified dualities of subject versus object, self versus other, and mind versus body.⁴ (For a more detailed discussion of topics covered in this section, see Ref. 7.) This fragmenting is seen as only apparent or conceptually constructed, rather than as being the innate property of experience. It is seen as ultimately rooted in the ignorance of the true nature of experience, which is unified and holistic, yet having two different basic aspects, the relative and the absolute.⁸ The relative aspect of changing, interdependent phenomena includes the perceptual, affective, and cognitive functions and their contents, and various global states of arousal, most notably waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, but also a variety of altered states, such as those generated through

meditative absorption. The absolute aspect is an open-ended potential to cognize, a nonconceptual nondual awareness that is present, though usually unrecognized, in the background of all experiencing.⁹ Over the centuries, numerous terms have been used to point to it, such as clear light, innermost essence, atman-Brahman, the self, Buddha-nature, timeless awareness, and Shiva-Shakti. The significance of this awareness, in nondual traditions, is that it cognizes without relying on dualistic concepts, in particular without needing to conceptually reify either subject or objects, or situate them within a self–world construct. Whether this awareness functions entirely without concepts, as nondual traditions claim, or only without upper-level concepts while the implicit propositional concepts remain intact, would need to be determined by further research. (For a detailed discussion of different levels of nondual awareness in relation to degrees of conceptual mind, see Ref. 9.) Perceptions, emotions, cognitions, and the global states of arousal appear to this awareness as contents, while to itself this awareness appears as an empty space-like context, pervading and encompassing experiences much like the space pervades and contains all that is in it.¹⁰

Ordinarily, these two aspects of experience, the absolute and the relative, are separated by an unconscious substrate, which obscures the presence of nondual awareness and is believed to serve as the repository of memories and patterns of dualistic structuring of experience.¹¹ As a result of further conceptual reifications, the relative aspect of experience appears as both internal and external objects, while the absolute aspect appears as the subject or the experiencer, with the two appearing as fundamentally different and antagonistic.¹² This duality does not occur only on a conceptual level, but also affects the emotional and somatic levels of being. It results in experiencing life as an ongoing struggle to control oneself and one’s environs, and is thus seen as an unnecessary suffering, irrespective of how successful one may be at obtaining desired goals.

Contemplative traditions differ in how they see the solution of this predicament, and these differences have given rise to different notions of nonduality. For some traditions, the objective side of experience is seen as inherently flawed and one that should be progressively shut down until only the absolute aspect, awareness itself, remains. Such a

state is then seen as nondual, literally, as “not two,” as there is nothing in it but an awareness empty of content.¹³ Meditations with this orientation show a pattern of increases in the activity and connectivity in the intrinsic or default mode network of the brain, accompanied with decreases in the activation and connectivity of extrinsic network areas.^{14,15} Other traditions see the subjective side of experience as the problem and attempt to forget the self until only the objective side is present, without an apparent experiencer.¹⁶ Here, nonduality is usually interpreted as interdependence of phenomena.¹⁷ Meditations with this orientation show a reverse pattern, with increases in the activity and connectivity of the extrinsic areas of the brain, such as those of the dorsal attention and salience networks, accompanied by decreases in activation and connectivity of intrinsic areas of the default mode network.^{18,19} Still others regard both the subjective and objective sides of experience as flawed and practice to shut down all experiencing and cognition into an absorption in the substrate unconscious.^{20,21} For these traditions, nonduality is the absence of all and any experience or cognizance. Neural signatures of such states may include global decreases in cortical activity.^{22,23}

The view of nonduality presented here regards the above approaches as limited in that they fail to understand that human experience, when undistorted by duality, is innately holistic and positive.²⁴ Nonduality, from this view, is the totality of experience at any given time and includes the presence of both the absolute and relative aspects of experience as distinct but unified.¹³ Such nonduality can encompass, in principle, all and any experience without the background nondual awareness becoming obscured. Conversely, the presence of nondual awareness neither obscures any experience nor is affected by the presence or absence of any experiences.

This two-in-one nonduality has been frequently described using a metaphor related to a mirror and its images,²⁵ in which nondual awareness is a mirror, merely reflecting experiences, without being fundamentally affected by them, just as the mirror is not affected by images that it reflects. The images in the mirror may have causal relationships with each other, but these causal relationships do not have any bearing on the presence or functioning of the mirror itself. This means that no amount of improving of one’s cognitive, affective, and somatic aspects of

experience will, in and of itself, lead to the realization of nondual awareness. To the extent that realizations of nonduality happen in the course of such practices, it is only because one has let go of attaining goals of meditation and controlling one’s experience, and the presence of nondual awareness has become revealed within one’s authentic being. Conversely, just as a mirror does not make preferences about what images it will reflect, nondual awareness equally reveals whatever experience happens to be occurring. Hence, the presence of nondual awareness does not require abolishing specific experiences or aspects of experience, such as thoughts or emotions. It is precisely this property of nondual awareness that gives it its psychologically liberating and healing potential. A central point here is that an individual can become free within the scope of one’s experience as it is and that involving oneself in constructing idealized versions of one’s experience does not lead to freedom. This is because, from this view, a dualistic pattern of cognizing is itself a fragmentation and an obscuration of wholeness, resulting in a sense of lack, which is then projected outside of oneself as a desired goal that will restore one to wholeness upon being attained.⁴ However, as long as this dualistic habit of cognizing remains, no matter how much one perfects oneself through various contemplative practices, there will always remain a sense of lack or incompleteness and, hence, the perpetual striving to construct a more perfect version of oneself. From a nondual perspective, such a constructed being is always an inauthentic being.²⁶ Finally, as images in the mirror are not something separate from the mirror, so too, the nondual awareness and experiences are one single unitary being. The indeterminate substrate, and the different degrees of unconsciousness, can be compared in this metaphor to a light being progressively dimmed, so that distinguishing either the mirror or images in it is impeded. Of course, the metaphor breaks down here, as the capacity to cognize is a basic property of awareness and not something added to it.

Nondual traditions that espouse various versions of this view see the main purpose of meditation as the discovery and stabilizing of nondual awareness as the context of all experiencing, or the ground of being. A number of stages beyond this are frequently outlined, which can be briefly summarized as the realizing of simultaneous transcendence and immanence of nondual awareness, and its eventual

stabilizing beyond any notions of meditation and postmeditation.²⁷

Love and compassion: in light of duality

Traditional Buddhist perspectives see compassion as the main motivating factor of contemplative practice and one that requires lifelong cultivation of its four components: awareness of suffering, sympathetic concern, intention to relieve suffering, and motivation or readiness to do so.²⁸ This emphasis is tied to a preoccupation with rules of ethical behavior and the metaphysical belief that one ascends the stages of enlightenment in proportion to how selfless and helpful one is to others.²⁹ In line with this perspective, several compassion-based programs have been introduced as complementary treatment modalities in clinical settings,^{30–32} including Cognitively Based Compassion Training,³⁰ Compassion Cultivation Training,³⁴ and Loving Kindness Training,²⁸ which are inspired by or related to Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.³³ Other programs, such as Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT),³⁴ are based on methods primarily grounded in psychotherapy. These and other such programs rely on Buddhist *metta* and *tonglen* practices, either in their original form or with various modifications.^{31,32} Some programs also add other elements, such as neuroscience or contemporary psychology perspectives, or real-life exercises adopted from positive psychology.^{31,34} In addition to compassion meditation, most programs also include some basic mindfulness training, such as focused attention and open monitoring, together with the analysis of experience either along traditional Buddhist or contemporary psychological lines.³⁵ Most compassion training programs see compassion as a trait that can be deliberately developed.³¹ In this view, compassion training is a process of gradual skill acquisition, akin to acquisition of cognitive or social skills, which leads to skill mastery and development of positive habits. As in cognitive behavioral therapy, psychological health is thought to depend primarily on cognitive control. Research of mindfulness indicates that the development of cognitive control during a course of mindfulness training proceeds at first mainly in a top-down fashion via mechanisms for voluntary attention and working memory, and later, with acquisition of skill, mainly in a bottom-up fashion via mechanisms for salience detection and

reappraisal.^{36,37} Alternative perspectives have come from programs inspired by research on the neurobiology of trauma, in particular as it relates to the states of the autonomic nervous system.³⁸ For example, CFT views compassion training as aimed at affect-regulation mechanisms—downregulating threat and drive systems and upregulating the soothing system—with the objective to foster a state of peacefulness and quiescence.³⁴

Love and compassion: in light of nonduality

It is still too early in the research on nonduality to discuss the potential neural mechanisms underlying nondual love and compassion. However, we can begin to understand the potential differential effect of the nondual approach to love and compassion on clinical outcomes by looking at the difference between the mechanisms underlying nondual and dual approaches to meditation. We have previously proposed that the main difference between nondual awareness meditation and focused-attention or open-monitoring meditations with respect to their principal underlying neural mechanisms is that, unlike focused-attention and open-monitoring meditations that are mediated by the dorsal attention and salience networks, respectively, nondual awareness meditations are mediated by the precuneus awareness network.^{39,40} This difference can explain their differential effects on the two global cortical systems, the intrinsic and extrinsic systems. Nondual awareness meditation increases the functional connectivity between intrinsic and extrinsic systems in the brain, without the loss of internal organization of each network. In contrast, focused-attention and open-monitoring meditations decrease the connectivity between these two systems (i.e., increase their functional segregation and increase the internal disorganization of the intrinsic or default mode network).^{7,40} In principle, this difference should also apply to the mechanisms underlying nondual love and compassion. This may explain an anecdotal observation that practitioners of nondual-style meditations appear on the whole to be less concerned with others and perhaps less compassionate while at the same time being more at ease with themselves than those who practice dualistic-style meditations, in which deliberate cultivating of love and compassion is emphasized.

Although nondual awareness is unitary, it has discernable dimensions, which have been traditionally identified as: being or emptiness, a self-evident existence that is empty of all conceptual imputations; clarity or luminosity, a reflexive self-knowing cognizance; bliss, an ecstatic pleasure of being; unity, singular presence of awareness and its dimensions; and nondual or nonreferential love and compassion, an emotional openness functioning as resonating concern.² Most nondual traditions are in agreement that nondual love and compassion are innate dimensions of authentic being and can be discovered to be spontaneously present once nondual awareness is realized and the dualistic fixations and learned inhibitions are relaxed.⁴¹ Dzogchen specifically regards compassion as the innate energy of authentic being and the impulse of nondual awareness to discover itself.⁴²

In that vein, nondual traditions discourage creating altered states of consciousness, especially through meditation, and regard these as particularly harmful, since such states can be obstacles to recognizing nonduality.²⁵ With respect to contemporary programs, this means that methods that condition one to be in constructed states, whether of enhanced peacefulness and quiescence or of enhanced love and compassion, will have beneficial effects in some respects, but fixating on them will obscure one's essential reality as a unique authentic being. With respect to neurobiology, such fixations can result in psychological and existential disturbances, such as depression and derealization that can occur when one excessively meditates into quiescence while suppressing the dopaminergic drive system.⁴³ Some dualistic traditions regard these negative states as necessary stages on the path.²⁰ Nondual traditions, however, see these as side effects of mistaken applications of a meditation technique or of using a meditation technique that is too coarse.

Clinical relevance

The issues for which a nondual approach might be most applicable are the existential ones, such as the loss of authentic being. Beyond this, some specific styles and associated patterns that may be helped by nondual therapies potentially more than by other methods include the following: (1) dissociating and disconnecting from the embodied dimension of experience, which can be exacerbated by constructed meditation practices that regard human

experience as inherently flawed, can be helped by nondual methods because realizing the pervasive space of being situates one in the fullness of one's experience; (2) dependency issues, because the realization of nonduality brings with it the realization of the spontaneous completeness of one's being; (3) issues involving the false self that are usually exacerbated by practices that actively deny the existence of self, or insist on giving practitioners a new spiritual identity, can be remedied by the realization of one's authentic being; and (4) people with compulsive and rigid styles of personality, who can become stuck in micromanaging their experience according to the prescribed steps of a goal-oriented path, can be helped by the realization that everything including oneself is already perfect just as it is.

Although nondual approaches to meditation are relatively rare compared to the prevalent dualistic gradual methods, several therapeutic methods based on nondual meditation have been developed, including the Realization Process^{®44} and the Diamond Approach.⁴⁵ While discussing these therapeutic methods in any detail is outside the scope of this paper, we will here report a couple of features that may have relevance for clinical work. In the Realization Process, the nondual ground of being is considered to be the primary context of the therapy, the clinical relevance of which is that the ground of being is realized to be the basis of both the most intimate contact with oneself and the maximal openness toward others and the environment.⁴⁴ In the course of therapy, the increasing intimacy within, and openness without, co-occur simultaneously through the attunement to the ground of being. Within this context, capacities that are ordinarily seen as goals to be attained, such as nonreferential love and compassion, appear as spontaneously present dimensions or qualities.⁴⁵ It has been proposed that the disconnect from an embodied experience of dimensions and qualities, as can occur due to various traumas, is at the root of neurosis.⁴⁵ The implication of this for the existing compassion training programs is that the target state of nonreferential compassion can be approached more directly by discovering its innate presence within one's own being. It is possible that this nondual approach does not lead to as much improvement in one's capacities as do gradual dualistic approaches; currently, there is insufficient research to assess this. But more importantly, such arguments miss the point. From a

nondual perspective, the issue is not whether one's love and compassion have been enhanced or whether one's behavior is more in accordance with some code of ethics, but whether one's love and compassion and the ways that one relates to others are authentic or not.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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