

Gracefully Extinguished: Seeing beyond the illusion of a separate self

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Abstract

This article is derived from a completed masters' thesis entitled: "The Non-dual Experience: A Phenomenological-Hermeneutics Investigation of the Seeker's Journey Towards Wholeness". It examines the psycho-spiritual transformations encountered on the journey towards non-dual living with a particular emphasis on the end of spiritual seeking. The rush towards transcendent experiences and non-dual living can be readily seen in the spiritual arena. This research study set out to interpret and understand the lived experiences of spiritual seekers who in their own search came to understand the futility and utter failure of personal seeking which facilitated initial awakening experiences of the non-dual nature of existence. A transpersonal phenomenological hermeneutic research approach was used in this study. Six of the nine core themes are presented in this article. They include: 1) seeking is suffering, 2) nowhere to go, 3) the illusionary seeker, 4) the collapse of time, 5) beyond knowledge, and 6) gracefully extinguished.

Nondual Wisdom

We live in a world today where the marriage between Western conventional thought and Eastern contemplative wisdom traditions is alive and thriving. A growing body of transpersonal and integrally informed theorists recognizes human developmental consciousness as extending beyond normal ego identity awareness to levels of the transpersonal with non-dual awareness as the transcendental ground of existence (Assagioli, 1971; Aurobindo, n.d.; Combs, 2002; Grof, 1985; Welwood, 2002; Wilber, 1999; 2000). Through a radical process of experiential inquiry what is normally assumed as the sense of individual separate existence and external reality is exposed revealing the non-dual ground of existence. In seeing beyond personal thoughts, self-images and psychic structures a radical experience can take place:

Passing fully through the state of cessation or unmanifest casual absorption,

consciousness is said finally to reawaken to its prior and eternal abode as non-dual Spirit, radiant and all pervading, one and many, only and all--the complete integration and identity of manifest form with the unmanifest Formless... Strictly speaking, the ultimate is not one level among others, but the reality, condition, or suchness of all levels (Wilber, 1999, p. 88).

This pinnacle of consciousness is so incredibly vast and infinite that it transcends and includes the boundaries and attachments of independent existence and the external world. It is pure unconditional awareness in which the apparent formation of personal identification rises and falls. In the words of the sage, Nisargadatta Maharaj (1999): “All the objects of consciousness form the universe. What is beyond both, supporting both, is the supreme state, a state of utter stillness and silence. Whoever goes there disappears” (p.35). It is here, in the depths of silence and absolute awareness, that the whole structure of subject-object dualism collapses revealing reality as it is before the infringement of mental conceptualization. The wisdom found in non-dual realization is the freedom from separateness; the constricted self, which perpetuates endless suffering. There is no independent entity separate from the external world. They are all one and the same, co-emerging in the timeless eternal moment. And yet, there *appears* to be this sense of independent existence. It is the attachment and identification with this *appearance*; with any and all form for that matter, that gives birth to the self-existing “me” and thus, severs the spontaneous connection and ease of being and non-dual living.

Non-dual realization is the sudden awakening out of the dream world of individuality to life as it presents itself moment to moment:

It is the *very* ordinary life, this simple life that surrounds you. But when you are not struggling, this ordinary life becomes extraordinarily beautiful. Then trees are more green, then birds sing in richer tones, then everything that is happening around is precious, then ordinary pebbles are diamonds. Accept this simple ordinary life. Just drop the doer. And when I say drop the doer, don't become a dropper! Seeing into the reality of it, it disappears (Rajneesh, 1977, p. 49).

Awakening is a shift from identifying with the illusionary self to unconditional presence as such. One cannot bring it about through effort, and yet, it is through the complete exhaustion of all efforts that realization is experienced. It is a direct spontaneous seeing beyond all personal and impersonal points of view, subtle or gross, high and low.

Habitual Seeking

The journey towards non-dual realization begins with a seeker searching for lasting spiritual fulfillment. The whole quest for self-liberation is based on desire and belief; that there is some kind of experience to be had that will award the seeker with eternal bliss and ultimately reveal the truth of his or her identity (Balsekar, 1992; Gangaji, 2005; Krishnamurti, 1969). Unbeknownst to the seeker who is predictably filled with hope and promise of the search is the underlining issue that the act of seeking itself only serves to support and strengthen the ego identity. Even those experiences of a transcendental nature are used as a means of self-identification. There appears to be a subtle self which continues to register each experience as its own and thus, creates and recreates itself endlessly along the journey. Seeking can, and often does, become a

habitual form of addiction. It is another smoother and more refined way of establishing personal identity (Adyashanti, 2004). Liquorman (2000) explains this further:

The seeking is done through a body-mind mechanism that considers itself to be a doer who is going to do something, and thus get something. And even when there is an intellectual comprehension and an intellectual understanding that this is not the case, there's still the sense of personal doership on the part of the seeker. Until it's removed, it's there (p. 63).

In essence, the seeker does not realize the fundamental completeness of the moment due to the unresolved tendencies of the mind to judge, compare and compartmentalize experiences. This propels the seeker back into the world of dualism from which it seeks freedom from. To relax into the fundamental "suchness" of the moment is to give up all inner and outer forms of seeking thereby revealing the illusionary nature of the individual seeker.

Experiencing Total Failure

As we can see the search for realization is paradoxical in nature: a self assuming ego longing for enlightenment in some other future moment and yet missing the already existing eternal moment in the here and now. The invitation is to cease all seeking activity and to see what has always been readily available. Papaji's (1998) wisdom was in the "calling off of the search"; to simply stop and observe what is always available moment to moment requiring absolutely no effort at all. His direct invitation was to simply stop all mental activity, for just an instant, and see the situation as it is without the mind touching it:

The Truth is beyond thought, concept, and conditioning

And this Truth is what you are, and only the truth Is.

So stop your search, simply be Quiet, definitely do not stir a thought or make an effort, and the Truth will reveal Itself to Itself (pp. 400-401).

The revelation is the annihilation of the separate self and embracement with all of existence. The experiential understanding of this is the moment where the mind collapses under pressure. The finite mind can never comprehend the infinity of existence. It simply shatters revealing awareness as such with no object. The dualistic notion between an independent subject “here” experiencing another independent object “out there” falls apart. They are seen as happening all at once: the perceiver, the perceived and the perceiving are all one movement (Krishnamurti, 1969).

And in that eternal moment, the present moment, there is no “me” and there is no duration; no past, present and future. And when there is no “me” and no sense of duration, all there is, is that silence in which conceptualization cannot take place (Balsekar, 1992, p. 10).

This is what many mystics and wisdom traditions refer to as awakening. Resting in the stillness and silence of unconditioned awareness life continues to happen but there is the direct understanding that there is no *self* experiencing life. It is a shift from conditioned existence to impersonal existence. Here, there is no separate sense of “me” to define, support or protect, and more importantly, no one to get enlightened. Furthermore, it is recognized that this experience of no self can not be enhanced in any way for there is nothing more or less that is needed. In fact, it is not an experience per se, but the ground

from which all experiences arise and subside. The need for any improvement would only usher one back into the world of dualism and further away from the truth of one's identity (Balsekar, 1992).

To impose definitions on pure awareness, to awakening, would only make it into another experience to be had. It is absolutely ordinary because awareness is not dependent bound, it is always already available. Existence does not have to be practiced or sought. It is already the case, right here, in the stillness of the eternal present moment.

The Research Study

The central purpose of this research study is to examine two important questions:
1) What are the actual themes that emerge out of the end of spiritual seeking? 2) What are the specific transformational experiences encountered in the end of seeking?

Research Methodology

This research is somewhat unique in that it addresses experiences that go beyond normal self-identity awareness and into the realms of the transpersonal. With this in mind, it was critical to utilize research principles that would honor this particular body of knowledge and experience. Since the aim is to investigate, understand and interpret what it is like for each co-researcher to experience the end of individual seeking on the journey towards non-dual realization a methodology used by phenomenological researcher Ron Valle (1997) called a transpersonal phenomenological research design was implemented to assist with our study.

Such a design blends existing phenomenological inquiry theories and methodologies (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1969) to help illuminate the essence of the

transpersonally lived experience. A turn to the transpersonal and integral communities researching such experiences will be beneficial in fleshing out the important points when doing transpersonal research.

For decades, these communities have been studying this paradoxically new way of being in the world (Combs, 2002; Valle, 1997; Wilber, 1999; 2000). As well, this new way of being in the world also brings about a completely different way of *knowing* in the world. This is a critically important issue because knowing and knowledge has been correlated to what can be observed with our senses or apprehended by the mind. As our co-researchers are describing experiences beyond personal conceptualization we have to ask ourselves how can one comprehend phenomenon which is beyond mental comprehension? Fortunately, Wilber (2001) sheds some light on this issue illustrating three different modes of attaining knowledge. He reminds us that human consciousness possess “three eyes” in which to perceive and engage the world. He begins with the eye of flesh, which is the ability to view the objective world of space, time, and objects; secondly, the eye of reason is the capacity to attain knowledge of philosophy, logic, and mental phenomenon; and lastly, the eye of contemplation, aids one in directly accessing knowledge of transcendent experiences. It is the inclusion of the eye of mind and the eye contemplation that will help us in our study.

In a similar position Valle (1997) identified this problem in his own research on transcendent experiences and began “recontextualizing the existential-phenomenological concept of intentionality by acknowledging a field of awareness that appears to be inclusive of the intentional nature of mind but, at the same time, not of it” (p. 277). Here,

a “transintentional” field of awareness is needed in researching and understanding the particular contours of pure awareness and transpersonal phenomenon.

With this in mind, the issue then becomes about knowledge verification. How can such transpersonal phenomenon be verified especially when discussing experiences of pure consciousness without the Cartesian split of subject-object dualism? Again, Wilber (2001) helps us by pointing out that to verify any form of knowledge, empirical or otherwise, consists of utilizing three foundational components:

1. An instrumental or injunctive strand. This is a set of instructions or complex, internal or external.
2. An illuminative or apprehensive stand. This is an illuminative seeing by the particular eye of knowledge evoked by the injunctive strand.
3. A communal strand. This is the actual sharing of the illuminative seeing with others who are using the same eye (p. 29).

Thus, in following these three strands to understand the depth of particular experiences of transpersonal and non-dual phenomenon, we can begin to conceptualize and communicate with likeminded researchers and human consciousness explorers a level of confidence and accuracy about the verifiable nature of transcendental experiences.

Cautiously though, when interpreting the lived experiences of transpersonal phenomenon this research recognizes the need for a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1970). Since phenomenological inquiry is about developing a knowledge base out of interpreting and understanding the lived experiences through

particular signs and symbols as they present themselves in our awareness and experience with another person the experience itself is partially covered.

Given the rich tapestry of transpersonal experiences available, the interpretation of experiences have been sifted through psycho-spiritual models, re-worked, and coated with layers of esoteric language. The researcher would do well from falling prey to unexamined preconceptions.

Selection of Co-researchers:

In this study, Osborne's (1990) invitation was used, for researchers to replace the term "subject" with "co-researcher" as it implies a mutual cooperative engagement between the researcher and co-researcher rather than a removed "us" and "them" position. The selection criteria consisted of requiring i) each co-researcher to have been on a path towards self-realization for a minimum of two years, and ii) over time have experienced the end of seeking itself. An advertisement was published in selected newspapers and magazines throughout the provinces of Alberta and Vancouver, Canada to recruit co-researchers.

An initial screening process was used with each prospective co-researcher. I compiled a list of questions which focused on identifying the length of their journey and their abilities to provide a description of their experiences encountered along their journey particularly in regard to the end of seeking. There were nine co-researchers who met the research criteria. In compliance with ethical standards a letter of consent was read and completed by each co-researcher. Confidentiality was adhered to through the use of pseudonyms selected by the co-researchers for the transcription of the interviews.

Interview Format & Data Collection

I interviewed each co-researcher separately, using an open-ended semi-structured interview format (Osborne, 1990). The interviews were approximately 90 to 120 minutes in length. In these interviews, co-researchers described their experiences of what it meant to cease spiritual seeking and the transformational experiences involved. I conducted the interviews in a comfortable setting of their choice. I also used a person-centered theoretical orientation suggested by Osborne (1990) to capture the lived journey experienced of each co-researcher. I utilized an empathic and non-judgmental approach, which appeared to help co-researchers feel at ease in sharing their story with me. They seemed to value my involvement and regarded me as more than just a researcher, but as a fellow co-researcher.

The interviews were transcribed and I contacted each co-researcher, provided them with a copy of the transcriptions, and gave them an opportunity to discuss the transcripts and share their experiences as a co-researcher. All of the co-researchers were satisfied with the quality of their transcriptions and did not feel the need to add or delete any information.

Thematic Results

There were six core themes that emerged out of the co-researchers' lived experience in their pursuit towards non-dual realization. The results pointed to what appeared to be a stage like process in realizing and surrendering the search. The end of the search was illuminated with the understanding that seeking, in any form, spiritual or otherwise, is the root of perpetual suffering and only serves to sustain ego identity

awareness. This theme produced another important insight of recognizing that there is fundamentally nowhere to go. The belief that some omnipotent figure or particular experience will give us fulfillment and ever-lasting peace begins to crumble. Following these first two initial insights was the awareness of the illusionary nature of individual existence. With nowhere to go the whole structure of independent existence begins to collapse. This ushered in a number of important insights including the collapse of conventional time, moving beyond rational modes of understanding and knowing to a state of not-knowing, and finally the fundamental insight and understanding that existence is already graciously the case. Only the last six core themes of the original thesis are presented here. A full description of all nine co-researcher's lived experience is provided in the original unpublished thesis (Therriault, 2005).

Seeking is Suffering

The search for truth and understanding can lead many seekers to literally journey across the globe. Four of the six co-researchers travelled to various parts of India. They were armed with the belief that Eastern religion and mysticism were more advanced than any Western contemplative approach. When living in Mother Ammaji's spiritual community Nancy and Dan were shocked by the core similarities in both Eastern and Western religious scriptures and were disgusted with the behaviours exhibited by other seekers living there. Here is Dan's report:

It was a watershed going to her Ashram. A big watershed. I read some of the books on what the Hindu religion was all about. I had very little idea, you know, about all the Gods and Goddesses and all the rest. I just started to look and say,

Hold on a second. This is the same as Catholicism. This is just another religion. It has more the essence of the belief in Oneness, but if you dig, you know, there are parts of Christianity that do that very well too.

The difference appeared in cultural conditioning but the core teaching was universally the same. Convincingly, Dan stated, “I don’t believe all this bullshit anymore. Suddenly India is more spiritual than all the rest? It’s no more spiritual than anywhere else in the world.” With feelings of frustration he turned to Nancy for support only to find she was having a similar experience. Her initial attraction to Mother Ammaji was in the way she presented herself and her teachings. Each spiritual discourse was filled with bright lights, music, and beautiful singing. It was later in her stay that Nancy discovered,

This spiritual community is the same as any other community. Exactly the same human desires are going on. There is a great deal of suppression and that it actually ends up looking like religious communities where people are not who they actually are. They are just making a presentation image. I was quite shocked, depressed even.

After only five weeks and feeling disillusioned both Dan and Nancy left the community and India altogether.

While living under the guidance of a spiritual teacher in India, Randal experienced a similar period of suffering when noticing how his expectations of spiritual fulfillment were not being met. He explains:

The guru was incredible. There was no doubt, but I felt we were all supposed to reach the highest planes in a very short time, especially if we were sincere and all

of that. It wasn't going as quickly as I had thought, even though it was going much better than people on some paths would hope for in a lifetime. It still wasn't satisfying ... some years later we ended up leaving India in poor health. Very disappointing.

With the signs of fatigue settling in, for Randal, the experience of finding enlightenment only in the East was met with considerable doubt.

Alan found that all forms of seeking led to some form of suffering. He noted that in his discussions with other seekers "... people would tell me they are on a journey and I would often ask them where the suffering is because why would you want to go anywhere unless you are not happy where you are." He explains this further, "To me its like ... where is the suffering? What is the suffering? If you can go to the suffering you can see what it is you think you're missing. To me, that's the most direct root, which is to see where the suffering is." To observe the core of suffering is to temporarily cease the pattern of outwardly seeking and turn awareness inward. Suffering is the beginning and the result of the search itself. Met with unfulfilled spiritual expectations in the East, the very experiences of disappointment and frustration forces one to stop, to question, and to investigate one's own motives and actions. When seeking stops, even for just a moment, insights are revealed.

Nowhere to go

The call to question the journey towards non-dual realization appears to be a necessary step. This understanding appeared suddenly for a few co-researchers.

During a particularly stressful time in Alan's life he impulsively purchased a plane ticket

to India with the intent of living the rest of his life at the holy mountain of Arunachala in Tiruvanmalai, India. Although he had travelled to India before he was prepared to make this his final trip. Several weeks before boarding his flight he had a profound insight. He remembered:

I was thinking about Ramanasramam and the holy mountain and how quiet I would be there and of course I just went ‘click,’ I thought, “Where do I, you know, what do I think I am missing here?” Because I know when I am there it is just life again. There is a huge energy and there is a lot of beautiful things, but there is still me there. There is still the ego there. So, here is the ego thinking it is going to be better somewhere else.

Alan used this experience as a transformational opportunity. He digested this insight further, stating:

It’s that opportunity to look and say, “What do I think I am missing here? What does the ego think it is missing?” Because that is all it is. With the ego there is a sense of loss. That’s all it is. When there is no sense of loss of something that you can suffer around there is no ego.

Similarly, Jason noticed how he was constructing and reconstructing what he called a “spiritual identity.” The act of seeking gave the impression of transcending the limited ego but in fact his seeking appeared to only strengthen it. Because of the amount of time and energy invested in the quest this was understandably a difficult realization for Jason to accept. He explains why:

I had trouble with that at first. I would hear *satsang* teacher’s talk about seeking is

actually the problem, and I'm like what? What are you talking about? I got to do this. I need to find out. I want to find out what my true nature is. I want to get enlightened. So, that whole thing was quite a shock for me at first, actually. It took a while for this Source to soften this body-mind in a sense to see that; to see that at a deeper level, and to realize that the seeking actually takes one away, moves one away from your true nature. From what is. The moment I seek I'm moving away from home as opposed to coming home ... thinking that it's somewhere in the future. It is time and space. It's somewhere else and at another time. Some other time and place this is going to happen to me.

For the co-researchers, the experience of non-duality being found in another time or place was another form of dualism. The paths of seeking were beginning to give way to resting in present moment awareness.

After numerous failed attempts at "getting enlightened" Sean recognized that "... it's actually futile to search. You're not going to get anywhere. There's nowhere to go. It's pointless. I'm almost at a point where I don't feel a need to attend *satsang*. I don't feel a need to go to a retreat ... a lot of that neediness is gone. The game is falling apart."

In a similar position, Nancy and Dan were losing interest in various kinds of spiritual pursuits. Nancy commented, "I'm less interested in going anywhere. Dan and I went all over the world you know, searching this teacher and that teacher and going to India and all the rest ... very little interest. Very naturally." Even their involvement in maintaining a local website devoted to non-dual teachers and in housing various visiting teachers was coming to an end. The disillusionment felt in India helped her crystallize

this understanding at a deeper level. She explains:

I am no longer interested even a little in enlightenment, but I am deeply drawn very naturally to the Truth. So, it just happens. I've lost control entirely, but I've also lost interest. I am no longer interested in the whole intellectual game ... there is just a plethora of intellectual stuff coming out of the New Age community and all of the Western world about enlightenment, and I have no interest. Now that doesn't happen as a result of either resistance or indulgence if you know what I mean. I like reading but I am about as interested in those books as I am about reading *Cosmopolitan*. I don't care. It doesn't matter. It's all fine.

The Illusionary Seeker

In exhausting all avenues of seeking, a couple of co-researchers put forth the question, "Who is it that's seeking?" This was a difficult exploration because to question one's self is to begin piercing through the belief of possessing any independent existence.

In his own investigation of the origin of the individual self-sense, Adi Da (1995) found that turning awareness inward toward the one who was seeking revealed not a fixed "me" but a series of conditioned layers of intentions, motivations and desires which constructed the sense of an independent existence. In his experiences as a seeker "I was always involved in one or another form of the "problem" of conditional existence. I was always in search and research ... [where] everything was communicated to me as a particular objective form, and I (seeming to be an entirely separate, subjective identity) was forced to experience it over against myself..." (pp. 367-368). This only served to further strengthen the individual ego. He goes on to say that observing this process in its

entirety dissolved the habitual patterns of seeking as an independent seeker. There was no individual “me” and yet, “[I] continued to act on a physical level just as before ... but everything was new. Everything was utterly free of any kind of dilemma, separation, unconsciousness, and primary fear” (p. 370). There was freedom from self-identification, and yet at the same time, there was the sense of separateness. It appeared to be a process of paradoxical living.

Two co-researchers, Alan and Dan, discussed how this paradoxical theme emerged at various points along their journey. Intrigued with hearing how other seekers were receiving spiritual names from Papaji, Alan communicated a similar wish to Papaji through a written letter but sadly he received no reply.

When I was with Gangaji in Lucknow a lot of people had spiritual names from Papaji ... I wrote him a letter saying that I wanted a name and he didn't read the letter. So, I went to his house and I wrote him another letter and he read the letter but he didn't do anything right away ... I wanted a name as fresh as the dawn. Following his second letter a few months later Alan received his spiritual name.

I wrote him a letter just saying, “Hi, it's me I'm down ...” and he says, “Oh this is beautiful! So lovely to have my son back! I'll give you a new name ... and he gave me the name ‘Pabekar,’ which means ... God of the morning son.

Unfortunately, the name was difficult for Alan's Western friends to pronounce. He stated, “I had to repeat it ten times to everybody before they were able to repeat it back. It was a hard name for Westerners so I used to say its like ‘probably a car.’ It was the only way I could get people to remember it ...” Frustrated, Alan sent another letter outlining

his complaints. At the same time he suspected his spiritual name was another of Papaji's playful interventions aimed at relinquishing his sense of self identification. His suspicions were proven correct. One evening while attending *satsang* the illusionary seeker called 'Alan' was revealed. Filled with laughter and tears he shares this event:

I was sitting at his feet and he was calling other people up and I was just gone. I was just about drooling and my eyes were like this, just like a big huge empty space. So, at the end of the *satsang* he gets up and they take off his microphone. He gets up and, he has got two guys helping him out, and he sort of comes over to me and looks at me and stares in my eyes and says, "I forget who you are Mr. No-name." And then it was like, it just doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's all a joke. Who is there to want anything? Even you can't name you. There's no one there to name. Did we ever leave? At some point the seeker just falls away. Until then, sure try and describe it. At some point it just stops. Can't make that happen. Who will?

For Dan, the desire for any form of self-referencing dissolved. He realized the need to "fix myself" appeared trivial. He points out that,

Seeking enlightenment is not the same, its not ... you don't have to do anything. You don't have to go anywhere. It already is. And if anything, the remembering that what's being sought here right now is that remembering ... that Dan will never get fixed. Dan will never get fixed, because there is no Dan to be fixed.

This is very similar to Alan's awareness who expressed, "... when I get lost, I go 'Yeah, this moment! Right here! Awareness.'"

Both co-researchers acknowledged this process as being a moment-to-moment phenomenon. They described this experience as being fundamental in their journey with the emphasis on “seeing through the seeker.”

The Collapse of Time

For most of the co-researchers, unpacking of separate self existence led to the dissolution of time. The individual identity is a result of time a succession of moments strung along by thought and belief. Our behaviours, responses and actions, our particular attitudes and views about the world and ourselves, are an accumulation of the past. The identification with the flow of thought gives rise to the sense of an individual “me” living in time (Krishnamurti, 1975). Mark reports, “Time is thought. Thought creates the notion of time, because who I am is a deep sense of timelessness. It’s effortless.”

This is often difficult to understand. Through concerted effort, Alan attempted to comprehend the idea of timelessness using the mind. He shares, “... I used to try and grasp that. I became really frustrated for years trying to grasp that because obviously there was no way.”

Alan described the timeless moment as an “interphase” between the past and future where “There is nothing there.” In essence, “It’s a lot easier being me, now. When I see that there is nothing happening, that there is no time, I can hardly be concerned about what is happening in some previous time. There is just acceptance with the moment.” In this place there is no sense of duration for Alan. “No duration is big for me. I have to have duration to have time.” Duration is another way of saying “becoming” and to become is to be identified with thoughts of self-improvement and attainment, giving

the impression of the passing of time.

Dan began questioning whether seeking enlightenment in the future was possible. The habitual tendency to project the idea of enlightenment into the future was becoming transparent to him. One night just before falling asleep the dimension of time collapsed before him when he pondered the question “Where is this enlightenment?” He shares it this way:

And I went, “Hold on a second. It can’t be in the future because that’s where I always held it, that’s where we all hold enlightenment in the future.” Any of us who are seeking enlightenment it has to be in the future, because if it was here, it would have already happened, and I went, “Hold on! There’s no future.” So, the only place I could look for enlightenment was right here and now. And if I don’t find it, whatever I conceive it be, end of story ... and what it seems to do to me Brian, and this is what’s happening now up to date; “What’s happening here Dan? What’s happening here?” That’s all.

On another occasion following an evening *satsang* with Toni Parsons Dan reported having a physical reaction in response to the insight on timelessness.

Tony was talking about timelessness and that there is no time, and for a second it appeared like the mind went there. That’s the best way I can describe it. I don’t know what happened ... I realized after that something had happened in that second where ... and I can’t describe it ... and when I came out I was actually shaking.... My body was actually vibrating.

Beyond Knowledge

A few co-researchers also experienced the limits of conceptual language to describe their experiences. Sean expressed this ineffability as, “Just this ... you know. I can’t, it’s difficult to explain. It just is.” For Sean there was no description that could ultimately capture and contain the depths of non-duality. In a similar vein when Dan was asked to provide a description of the Absolute he paused and replied, “I don’t know how to talk about this. I don’t know how to talk about it ... I mean how can you talk about it? Everything I say will simply be a concept.” After a long period of silence Dan laughed and pointed “There’s Buddha. It just appeared.” He went on to share how knowledge led to self-contraction while laughter was the best evidence of being closer to Truth. In laughter, our built up ego defences have dropped and we are free and open to the unknown.

For Alan, it was paramount he have an experiential experience rather than parrot what others have heard or experienced. He explains:

It’s Beyond, beyond anything you could name. Everything, everything is just a pointer to That. I wrote a letter to Papaji about it’s really love calling love to itself. But you didn’t know. It’s like you’re feeling this absence that you can’t truly ask for because you don’t know what it is. In the end you know what it is that you’re seeking you just can’t describe it. It’s something you can’t describe, but you know its there. It’s a feeling. A feeling and you know, otherwise you couldn’t seek it. You can’t miss it. That’s the joke. In the seed of that longing is the evidence that it is there.

Gracefully Extinguished

Several co-researchers were able to describe their experiences of the non-dual nature of existence. Despite her discouraging experiences within Mother Amaji's community, Nancy experienced the suchness of non-dual awareness when attending one of her last *satsangs*. She remembers this transformational experience vividly:

And it broke, it just broke. I heard her, I got it. One day I realized Ammaji is telling me she's the same as me. She means she's the same. It's simple. It's a flat playing field. Everything is God! If everything is God, everything is God! And that includes the table. It includes the cement. It includes the garbage dump. It includes Hitler. It includes, you know, Bin Laden. It includes horror. It includes all the people I see in palliative care dying of horrible diseases for no reason that the mind will ever understand. Everything is God. Man, Brian, I'm telling you, it just blew the socks off me! It blew everything to smithereens! Just blew everything to smithereens!

In that moment, for Nancy, the drama of individuality appeared to shatter. For several weeks, she reported feeling physically traumatized, almost losing her abilities to function in day to day living.

I was speechless. I was breathless. I was actually physically affected. I felt trauma. I felt traumatized that day. I understood. I was very good to myself. I kept my body warm. I fed myself. I didn't get into any confrontations. I didn't try to do any work. I didn't try to talk to anybody on the phone. I think I got dinner made, which was actually quite sweet because it was familiar, you know. Physically

familiar tasks can be very soothing. Yeah, and it just took time, and then everything was God and it kept going deeper.

Upon her return to Canada Nancy continued to feel the residual effects of her experience. She reported it had the phenomenological qualities of “depth” and “energy” and she continued having an increasing number of “deeper openings.” Through this she found journalling to be an avenue of expression and groundedness. Tearfully, she shares a recent entry piece summarizing her insights:

I’m nothing that anybody ever believed has ever made any difference at all and no action taken or not believed ever happened. Action simply arises. Life is really, really, really meaningless. Everything sees this at once and it woke up everywhere in that moment.” So, after that came this next movement, “My intention is a thought. It does not have the power to make anything happen. Intention just happens.” Now, when I actually experienced that is when I stopped being interested in enlightenment, because everything sees anyway. So, it was seen that all of that was a thought. It’s still a thought and its fine. But it’s seen as a thought and it’s not followed anymore, and its losing, it’s losing its strength everyday, because it is simply seeing its own thought. I am here.

She goes on to say, “It’s just nothing ever happens, other than just what’s arising It’s just simply, its not believable. It’s been seen. It’s like it is trying to tell me that the rope is a snake when I’ve seen that it is a rope.” It is not that her thoughts suddenly vanished but instead they lost their significance and were not seen as absolute truths.

For Sean the taste of non-duality opened up before him after spending a relaxing evening with his partner and prior to falling asleep. He remembers it this way:

My head was just about to hit the pillow and everything completely disappeared. Any sense of body or thoughts, umm, no spatial or temporal reference whatsoever. Just absolute nothing, you know, and it was just umm, it didn't last very long, but it like wiped the slate clean. There was nothing there. There's no self-reflecting consciousness. There was just absolutely nothing. It was a non-experience because there was absolutely no reference whatsoever. Sean was not there..... I came out of it, and I just started crying. I just, you know, this! Then I started laughing and I started crying again and Kim said, you know, what's wrong? What's going on? What's wrong? I said nothing's wrong, everything is perfect. This sense of grace and absolute perfection.

Conclusion

The themes generated from this research point to several core areas to consider in the spiritual search and movement towards nondual being. They highlight the potential misunderstandings to embodying this realization and described how some co-researchers were able to move through these barriers through sudden insight and observing the separate self contraction.

The shift from a constricted sense of personal existence to an embracement of boundless being requires a radical shift in perception. We saw how such a shift in perception was described in both gross and subtle aspects; from relaxing the need to travel to the furthest reaches of the globe in the hope of attaining spiritual experiences, to

witnessing the limitations of constructing personal reference points, and finally realizing and embodying the already available impersonal presence of consciousness in each and every moment. This shift in perception can be sudden and effortless.

Each of the themes becomes obvious in the experience of no-self. When this is seen and experienced outside of mystical intellectualization the spiritual search comes to an end; for who is to seek and for what. Time only exists in the movement and attachment to thought whereas; the awareness of no-self is timeless and spaceless. One's being is open and fresh, free of any judgment and grasping of existence. There is fundamentally nowhere to go, nothing to know and no experience to be had. Each theme is a thread leading to the transcendental understanding that existence is not given twice that it arises and subsides in the eternal stillness of the moment. The grace is in giving up all hope of ever figuring it out or achieving some desirable state and to relax into the moment to moment silence of oblivion.

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