

# **Beyond Words or a New Word? A Cross-Disciplinary Analysis of the Concept of Nonduality in Scientific Research**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract... i

Acknowledgments.... ii

Introduction... p. 1-5

Chapter 1: Historicizing Nonduality through Advaita Vedanta and Tibetan Mahayana  
Buddhism... p. 5-31

Chapter 2: A Rapid Review and Meta-Analysis of Existing Psychometrics in Contemporary  
Scientific Literature... p. 32-62

Chapter 3: The Absolute and the Therapeutic: How and Why a Teleological Impasse in  
Phenomenology Has Become a Buzzword for Social and Clinical Science  
Research... p. 62-86

Conclusion... p. 86-89

References... p. 90-101

### Abstract

Nonduality is a descriptive term that can be used to characterize ontological and epistemological phenomena, and its deductive rationale and/or direct realization holds soteriological value among several influential religious traditions. In other words, a meaningful interpretation that ‘all is one’, or, more aptly, that reality cannot be divided into pluralistic structures, is thought to be essential to being released from existential ignorance. The present research seeks to trace the transmission of the concept of nonduality through two pertinent religious traditions—the Vedantic school of Advaita and the later Mahayana schools into and through Tibetan Buddhism—as well as during the present epoch, particularly as it has come to be domesticated through medicalized instruments and language. In doing so, I do not take an evaluative stance as to whether the usage of terms like ‘nondual awareness’ or ‘nondual embodiment’ represent an improper deviation from its classical understanding. Instead, I observe the resonance that this framework has come to share with other relevant terms and the positionality of various researchers, including myself, that would allow for the popularization of metaphysical terms which have been culturally associated with the global East. My first chapter lays the foundation for this analysis through historicizing its traditional context, while the second chapter offers a presentation of how this construct is being measured through the use of scientific styles of writing. The third chapter presents the paradox of quantitatively evaluating nonduality, suggests various reasons for the naturalization of the term so that it may be experimentally studied, considers recent narratives that contextualize its resurgence, and reflects on the significance of contemplative studies for researchers. The introduction and conclusion support periphery implications of this critical analysis.

**Keywords:** nonduality, nondualism, non-dual, nondual awareness, nondual embodiment, Advaita Vedanta, Tibetan Buddhism

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# Introduction

Innumerable articulations have been made to convey the significance of the term ‘nonduality’, a heuristic that is meant to elucidate the relationship of things in the world as well as the very awareness by which we could know them. Most of these attempts have been worked out by those whom we might today say were *doing religion* but who more likely saw themselves as responding in ways that we all might in the face of extraordinary revelations: make meaning out of our experience so that it becomes a guiding fundament of our being or a constituent attribute of the supernatural which we incline towards. More recently, we have seen a similar religious affectivity by those who nominate themselves as embedded within the Western scientific tradition—that is to say, the transpersonal psychologists, contemplative scientists, and related camps—and, even more recent, those hardline neuroscientists searching for biological correlates of such nondual phenomenon. This thesis takes a particular interest in the developments of several of these players, selecting to review the denouements of Advaita Vedanta, Tibetan Buddhism, empirical scientists, and the broader cultural milieu that I, the author, find myself in. In taking on this comprehensive study, I synthesize the evolution of two traditions whom I desire to be more sensitively informed about as it complements the intellectual currents and academic relationships in my line of research. In keeping with the literature and style of writing of the experimental corpus, I then present the first literature review of research focusing on nondual phenomenology, importing two search methods, the rapid review and meta-analysis, that I had yet never dealt with. Finally, as warranted by the methodological style of critical sociological thinking that is more the trade of the humanities scholar, I offer an insightful commentary on the causes and conditions that have permitted the scientific assimilation of this historically religious term. The product of years’ worth of personal musings and certainly more than a semester of reading and writing, this thesis

recounts well-rehearsed details within Asian wisdom traditions while, at other times, generating new knowledge from within the quantitative purview, all for the sake of my expressing my erudition. From a more expectant posture, however, this project may serve as the edifice from which I hope to erect refined, publishable work out of.

Of course, the proposal to add any radically new commentary on this subject may strike concern of conservative dissent. Whether religious advocates were to raise this objection or not, it appears an elementary conjecture that nonduality, by its traditional and most popular understandings, necessarily exceeds the scope of science. This is for the mere fact that nonduality is a description of the relational property *of* awareness, not a discreet object or temporally bound state *within* awareness. Knowable only vis a vis experience, rather than through the intellect, the presence of nondual awareness fades to the background and is replaced by dualistic structures the moment that one determines to have established its parameters. In place of knowing mental life to be wholly dynamic, the continual product of conscious experience being borne through the emergent contact of sensory apparatus and stimuli, the thinker imposes the existence of discreet and independent states when insisting that nonduality is like X and not like Y. Any such claim about an awareness that is indiscriminately free of conceptual designations is creating a conceptual designation about how that form of awareness must be separate from other moments of awareness. Instead, nonduality, definitionally, is ineffable and ever-present. Of the countless number of articles and texts that I have read at this point on the topic, none perform the task of transmitting this subtle brilliance of nonduality so elegantly as Friedman (2018). Wedged between a thoughtful abstract that illuminates the challenges faced by this study and preceding a somehow numerous reference list is a single page bearing the ironic mark occasionally mimicked at the opening of a paperback: “[article text intentionally left blank]”. Thus concludes the piece “An Explication of All Cogent Scientific Conceptualizations Regarding the Non-Dual: Finding

Nothing to Write.” It is a salient reminder of the self-defeating concept that is nonduality, the concept to end all concepts. I, myself, would be happy to follow suit and lay down my typing utensils here, arresting the labors of my thesis dozens of hours short.

So why do I incline to elaborate on nonduality for what amounts to the total page length of a modest-sized novel? For the very reason that I sense this term is coming back into vogue, I suppose that a new tolerance for verbosity must now be available. As such, I don’t seek to have the last word, but I do propose to take this study into a new language, flexing a self-anointed bilingualism across cultures and disciplines. In this sense, I become the translator, attempting to gain proficiency in both languages in order to enable a discretionary ear for what might be lost in translation. In my own observations, I have so far appraised the lack of consensus around defining and using the term to be encouraging rather than misguided as it suggests there is something principled about this concept which leads it to be associated with all things good, including, but not limited to, love, equanimity, transcendence, and connection. Clearly, however, both innovation and ignorance are being applied to the word, and, in my estimation, the study of nonduality should be provided the essential clarity of mapping the multitude of ways that it has been employed. This, in turn, could distinguish it from other easily substitutable terms and highlight its recent transformations in psychological science. Importantly, though I am sympathetic to the clinical call of delivering psychotherapeutic support by any means possible—including in the name of an emergent nondual therapy—I hope to save the original integrity of the term ‘nonduality’ from being buried by a medicalized, naturalized renaissance of highly educated persons (e.g. myself) who may be inadequately acquainted with religious history.

I have become increasingly intrigued by the advance of research in the space of integrative medicine as I reflect on the responses of myself and my colleagues in the wake of our recent report on findings from the Nondual Awareness Dimensionality Assessment



(Hanley et al, 2018) that we recently submitted for publication. Tasked to write the introduction section and contribute to the discussion piece, my essential role was to make sense of how a novel meditation routine, Savoring Meditation (Finan et al, 2023), could help practitioners slip into nondual awareness as they brought awareness to positive emotions extending from a distant memory and into the present moment. As I continued to read, write, and rewrite the section, hoping to bridge affect theory with that of this particular instance of mindfulness meditation, I grew wary that these two strands of contemplation, object-anchored mindfulness and the awareness that is absent any notion of a ‘meditator,’ ‘meditation,’ and thing to be meditated on, were irreconcilably incompatible. So, when the two reviewers of our first journal swiftly rejected this painstaking manuscript with, ‘The suggestion that brief positive memory recall can reliably induce genuine nondual awareness states represents a significant theoretical leap,’ I was unfortunately unsurprised. Though I had previously informed the overarchingly discerning senior author and his more giddy lead author of the paper’s theoretical impasse in the early stages of drafting, I, too, was of the mindset “Let’s just get this thing published, man.” Consequently, I did not protest the speedy decision to submit to other, perhaps more sympathetic journals. Perhaps unlike a scientist of integrity, I was willing to detour around a concept that had received such precise interpretation over the centuries by untold contemplative experts if it resulted in getting my name on a paper showing some novel data. I have come to appreciate the amendments made of considering that there could be named the Absolutist view of nonduality that represents the traditional religious ideas unfurled in my first chapter, and the Therapeutic view that is being elevated in clinical research—in fact, I freely try out these terms in my thesis. Still, I have deliberated whether a new term is being rightly concocted by my own complicity, and this thesis is an attempt to bring me to think decisively about this tension.

On the one hand, I may need not foil this enterprise as the capacity for nondual awareness is explicitly universal, neither the property of Buddhists, Hindus, nor anyone in between. Hopefully, the reinvention and deployment of this term in clinical interventions could serve as a dharma-gate by which many enter the path of meditative wisdom. Even more provocative, perhaps the expedient process in realizing nonduality and the finality of genuinely perceiving in this manner was less a reality than the meditation manuals of old had prescriptively suggested; there could be credence to the idea that the transition to nondual awareness is, for most, gradual. Nonetheless, what is the attraction of this term that it has surfaced in the West above many other terms indigenous to the Eastern traditions but now finding themselves in wide circulation in the Spiritual But Not Religious lexicon? What place is there, even, for such radical inquiries into the annals of patients' phenomenological experience, not that of which refers to the symptomology of the issue being treated but the kind that reflects our wildest experiences? There is little surprise that our older patients are perplexed by the necessity of responding to questions like 'I have had an experience in which my mind expanded into space' while seated in the confines of a claustrophobic, monitor-filled laboratory room. (One might even infer a Hawthorne effect implicit in these reports, that the mere presence of a survey obviously measuring dramatic phenomenon would result in artificially higher responses the second time around!) My mere fascination with the multilevel cultural responses to such a consequential notion as nonduality offers the opportunity to intercede at critical junctures of knowledge production, especially as a trainee of the contemplative sciences who may have the responsibility to steer how this, and related phenomenon in the scientific study of religious practice, are treated. The transmission of this term from its unique religious semantics to its inheritance and treatment by clinical scientists is the original contribution of this thesis.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

Among the philosophical type, those known as the lovers of wisdom, there is the popular admonition that the truth hides in plain sight. For those of the wisdom traditions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, this idiom holds true as the character of the mind can be personally intuited through specific manners of contemplative facility. Still, those schools of thought from within Tibetan Buddhism and Hindu Vedanta that I will come to analyze would make the stronger claim that consciousness is the teleological medium and end through which we self-reflect; in truth, awareness is our primordial and everlasting nature, and awareness can know itself. In Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is That same awareness that colors our world to give the impression of a perceiver, and It is the foundation of the very apparatus (i.e. the sense organs) that can apprehend the world. Brahman is both What one is made of and Who one must identify with. Still, Brahman in its transcendental affirmation is beyond mental constraints—as neither a discrete experience or experiencer but instead the eternal potential for experience, this higher nature is without form or qualities, existing everywhere at all times. Similarly for the Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā systems of Tibetan Buddhism, the meditator comes to know what they are by knowing what they ultimately are not, a meditator. Instead, the transmitted instructions of these traditions make lucid that one’s being arises from primordial awareness. Certainly, these inferences are revelatory to the individual’s being in the world as they dismantle the rudimentary perception of being an individual, offering in place of this negation the affirmation of an interdependent and untainted nature. What this chapter of my thesis aims to show is that, in contrast to present-day medical models of non-duality, nondual awareness is not an emergent and transformational state of perceiving things, as though there was recourse to interpret the nature of self and world in another way. Instead, these traditions suggest that nonduality, as it concerns oneself and what one can be aware of, is axiomatic of how existence really is, unified beyond all divisions of concepts, states, and

entities. Importantly, Advaita Vedanta and Dzogchen/ Mahāmudrā proffer exact means for seeing this fundamental reality, namely through jnana yoga and Nature of Mind practices, respectively.

### **1.1. Advaita Vedanta**

Advaita Vedanta lends itself as an obvious candidate for an informative discourse on the topic of nonduality not only because the tradition has amassed a significant following as one of the most prominent representations of Hinduism but because the very namesake exudes the centrality of nonduality. The etymology of Advaita suggests a literal translation of the term to “nondual”, “not two”, or “not with a second” (Deutsch, 1988, pg 3). What these kindred translations all infer is that, according to Advaitins, the nature of reality is indivisible, veridical, and primary to anything else that could be (incorrectly) perceived as disjointed, relative, insufficient, or any other matter of reductivity. One might add that this Advaita Vedanta is non-dual in two senses, the one corresponding to a monistic claim in which reality is found only in the substance that is Brahman, while the other corresponds to a denial of extraneous parts being distinguishable from or located beyond Brahman (Malkovsky, 2000, p. 71). I should refrain from treating this first proposition merely because it applies a framework of mind-body dualism anachronistically to a South Asian, Vedic cosmology from millennia past (Heim, 2001, p. 227), choosing, instead, to elaborate on the realization of Brahman/Atman through the more appropriate medium of negative experiential reasoning (i.e. *neti neti*, or ‘not this, not this’). Nevertheless, while this first notion might properly reflect the metaphysical assumptions that sustain the occasional theistic language of our Advaitins, it may be most appropriate to contextualize my study in the very Indian milieu that I alluded to best understand ultimate reality as non-dualistic.

The story of Advaita Vedanta is presented with a fairly indeterminate genesis as the descriptor term *advaita* syncs with the kind of experience that has been recorded at least as

early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when the Upanishads, those late-Vedic texts dealing with analyses of mental and spiritual life, had begun circulation (Nakamura 2004, p. 678–679). Throughout this time, much of the Indian subcontinent adhered to a strict caste system where the brahmins, the upper class populated by priests, gurus, and scholars, held the distinction of the religious elite. Such figures were often distinguished on account of their virtuous behavior, indeed having come into their status as a consequence of good karma accrued in previous lifetimes. While they spent much of their time conserving the ritualistic duties demanded by the earlier Vedic texts, it was also said that a brahmin was unworthy of such a title unless having personally beheld That which they mediated for, Brahman (Nakamura 2004, p. 690). Proclamations that one had experienced reality without duality are cited in such scriptures as the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (4.3.32). Over the generations, the guiding ethos that designated proper worship to the observance of sacred liturgy was challenged by more esoteric and discursive leanings, leading to commentaries that explained the Vedic rituals (*Brahmanas*), interpolations on their meaning (*Aranyakas*), and then, later, abstruse debate on their culminating point, liberation, and how to attain such liberation through contemplative means (*Upanishads*) (Nakamura 2004, p. 782-783). To make sense of the ambiguity present in this trailing portion of the Vedic texts, a formidable tradition of commentaries emerged over the centuries. The canon of texts that became the germinating point of the divergent Vedantic philosophies are the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Brahmasutras (Hacker, 1995, p. 88).

At what point Advaita Vedanta was a recognizable school of thought among the many interlocutors of an intellectually vibrant Vedic period is a matter of debate, but it seems that by sometime around the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE the core principles of Advaita Vedanta had been clearly enunciated by the prominent philosopher, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, or Sankara. Sankara himself claimed to be a part of an already established Advaitic tradition, having been the

student of Govinda Bhagavatpāda who was the student of Gauḍapāda, a preeminent codifier of commentarial tradition, systematizing such beliefs as his non-origination theory, an ultimate denial of the world of appearances and affirmation of Brahman as the absolute and only real reality. We begin to see in these thinkers a demarcation in Advaitic intellectual territory from other Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Yoga, Buddhist, Jain, and Carvaka contemporaries (Hacker, 1995, p. 88). Karl Potter emphasizes a salient and perhaps appropriately simplistic statement on the essence of Advaita that I will use to track the development of nonduality in this and the broader Vedānta systems: “Liberation is nothing more nor less than being, knowing, and experiencing one's true Self. In this disarming statement we can find the key to many of the Advaita teachings” (Potter, p. 32). This formula of attaining liberation, or *mokṣa*, by unifying one's paramount identity with that of God is the soteriological prescription for the many devotional traditions that are now called Hindu (Long, 2006, p. 264), but exactly how the Self is conceived, whether Brahman can be described in character or transcends all grasping, if this unification requires effort, knowledge, or some other method, and the experience of liberation are all guiding questions with which Advaita responds to and is defined by.

To envisage the realization of nonduality between Self and Reality that the Advaitins champion, it is critical to appreciate the metaphysical imaginary with which they were working. Intending to explicate the experiences and insights passed down by their spiritual forefathers, the great philosophers of the post-Vedic age, the Upanishadic sages, attempted to transcend the transitory, material body (*Prakṛiti*) and attain the realization of that what exists permanently and throughout every living being, what they establish as pure consciousness (*Puruṣa*) (Amaladoss, 2005, p. 10). Encountering this omniscient presence was to be achieved through austere practices of meditation and discipline in which the aim is to relax all attachments, physical and mental, hatred and desire, so that one might see without hindrance

their eternal being, *Atman* or the Self. Consequently, the unmistakable conclusion for those that would take up the interpretation of Advaita was that this essence is indistinguishable from the eternal ground of all being, *Brahman* or Ultimate Reality. Until then, one is trapped in ignorance and understands the world through the lens of the illusion that we are born into (Amaladoss, p. 12). The solution, one might say, is to reverse engineer one's perception to pierce through the abstractions and transitory appearances in order to discern what is unchangeable. Starting with the original scriptures and the exegetical corpus of Vedanta, the oldest of the four Vedas, the Rig Veda, posits that *Purusha* is a mythological entity that ordered creation (e.g. *Rig Veda 10:90*), yet, with the progression into more analytical norms of worship, some traditions came to reject any anthropomorphic attributions to the creative force, understanding it as transcending beyond all distinctions of names and forms (Puligandla, 2002, p. 6). Brahman is the name given to this unified reality later on in the Upanishads. Advaita Vedanta will elect to call this *nirguna Brahman*, or Brahman without distinct qualities, who can only be spoken of appropriately by propositional denial, indicating Its supremacy above conceptualization (Deutsch, p. 10).

Rather than a discrete Creator per se, we see that Brahman is both the unfolding nature of the universe and the manifestation of that universe itself. Indeed, the very etymology of "Brahman" is rooted in the suffix *brh*, meaning to grow or expand, and the subsequent *-man* infers its quality of being firm and fundamental (Puligandla, 2002, p. 27). In several places in the Chandogya Upanisad, Brahman is described as the vital force that is both the primordial cause of the world and the cosmic force that will someday draw it back in: "All this is Brahman. From it does everything arise, by it does everything live, and into it does everything return" (3.14.1). The experience of realizing Brahman, this experience of pure consciousness,

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is also described in cheerful terms as truth, consciousness, and bliss, or *sat-cit-ananda* (Raju, 2007, p. 22). Occasionally speaking through the orally related scriptures in divine revelation, Brahman seems to assume personified language as Lord of creation in his earnest attempt to be made known, though this does not equate it with the post-Vedic creator god, Brahma, of much later (Raju, p. 28). However, though esteemed qualities like bliss or lordship confer the highest level of regard to Brahman, the use of qualities is utterly futile as Brahman is beyond human language and sense faculties. “Brahman is he whom speech cannot express, and from whom the mind, unable to reach him, comes away baffled” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2. 4).

Other passages consider Brahman as the medium through which speech is conveyed and the mind can comprehend (Kena Upanisad, 1:5-6), which, as the principal expression and expressive power in the universe, would naturally lend itself to being localizable in the very essence of humans, too. Atman, then, is another concept equally denoted as a fundamental substratum of existence, though often this term is applied when approaching from the direction of inquiry regarding the fundamental essence of beings, not creation writ large. Again, we see the competing notion of Atman present in the Rig Veda, though it bears less gravity as an agential existent than as a phenomenon best translated as ‘life’ or ‘breath’ (Rodrigues, 2023, p. 17). Such allusion to biological essence may have provided allusion to the stronger claim that would develop for Vedantins in which Atman is indisputably a reference to the all-pervading and ever-lasting Self. The discrepancy between Advaitins and other schools would be that, for Advaitins, this Self is to be framed as identical with Brahman. This conclusion is supported by interchangeable uses of Brahman and Atman in such passages as “Whoever knows the self as "I am Brahman," becomes all this universe. Even the gods cannot prevail against him, for he becomes their Ātma” (*Brihadaranyaka*

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*Upanishad 1.4.10*). This emergent concept of the Self as another unified principle is accentuated by the confusion garnered by external perceptions of the plurality demonstrated in the empirical world. Responding to such paradoxicality, the Brahma Sutras explain creation as the sport of Brahman, an outpouring of its nature to extend and fascinate (Thibaut, 2005, p. 456). This allows Avaitins like Gaudapada to agree that the world which we inhabit looks and feels real—and in some sense it is, because the power of illusion was baked into it when the world unraveled, substantiating empirical reality as a neutral yet inessential co-extension of Brahman. However, the apparent diversity in the world, whether it be in the various amalgamations of chemical compounds that make up an item, the genera of trees in one's locale, or the uniqueness of each human face is argued as a chimera that obscures the primordial essence that is Brahman, the true and higher Reality. Retaining this sense of Atman as deferring to the organic life force, we may see Atman as the subtle trace of Brahman weaving throughout creation that tends to go unrecognized, no closer in principle to the subjective worlds of those born as a priest than a farmer—the major difference being that the priest has the affordance to investigate this cosmic comparison for a living.

Having coupled together the atomic with the astronomic, what may require further distinction at this point is the relationship between the Self and the self, also known as the *jīva*. Similarly translated in proximity to words like 'life' and 'breath' (Olivelle, 1998, p. 399), *jīva* represents our embodied selves, conditioned by the ego to suppose that there is a localized subject inhabiting the mind which is distinct from others. While other streams of Vedanta will suppose that *jīva* and Brahman constitute some or no relation, Advaita is thorough in stating that *jīva* never has been separate from Brahman and that the unchanging, eternal, and true Self that is Atman is stitched into every thought, emotion, or any other trace of the conditioned self (Meyers, 2013, p. 41). Unfortunately, because of the collective illusions that we inherit, we simply do not have the eyes to perceive its omnipresence. The

redeeming power of liberation is not to suppose that we mistook ourselves for being something that we are not (i.e. an unstable aggregate of parts, which we will see in Buddhism) but, to the contrary, that we never perceived ourselves as having an unshakeable identity in Atman (Meyers, p. 67). Again, the Upanishads may be instructive in this regard: “As a lump of salt when thrown into water melts away and the lump cannot be taken out, but wherever we taste the water it tastes salty, even so, O Maitreyi, the individual self, dissolved, is the Eternal - pure consciousness, infinite and transcendent” (*Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 2. 4. 12) . The Bhagavad Gita, whose storyline aptly teases out the existential anxiety of its protagonist, and the Brahma Sutras, which attempt to synthesize such fundamental concepts of the Upanishads that I have been contending with, illuminate the respective developments and coalescence of terms like Brahman, Reality, Atman, and self underneath the paradigm of nonduality. In short, Avaitins postulate that while our embodied self that we so closely identify with will someday be met with its own mortality, there will remain that which is immortal, ever-present, and intimately intuitive when the right conditions are facilitated. What is more, the conditions of this revelation are not all too esoteric, dependent upon ritualistic observance, nor need one await its being witnessed only upon death; instead, the salvific recognition that Brahman is Atman and that Atman is you is possible in the here and now (Deussen, 2015, p. 3-4).

A contrasting understanding of these major actors and the relationships that they share with one another start to become consolidated under a few major thinkers who emblem the various schools of Vedanta. Such conflicts include whether Brahman is utterly transcendent or may be assigned qualities; if Atman and jiva are identical to Brahman or, likewise, separate; if the world is just an illusion or if it is somehow causally dependent on, or self-existent outside of, Brahman; and if liberation is mediated by intuitive knowledge or by

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disciplinary action (Chari, p. xxiv). The Advaitic answers, some of which I have already foreshadowed, always defends the resoluteness of the reality of Brahman-Atman and rejects the world as comparatively false. Ramanuja, an early second-millennium commentator and lead proponent of *Visistadvaita Vedanta*, the school appropriately labeled ‘non-duality but with distinctions’, advocated that there is a qualitative distinction between the Self and Brahman, but, just as the body is tethered to the soul, so the self is inseparable from Ultimate Reality, finding its origination in this Source (Chari, p. 15). Carefully understood, the attainment of liberation is still vetted as one in which the unified nature of reality is apprehended, yet the depiction provided would diverge from Advaita, forsaking the sense of selfhood becoming enmeshed with that of a higher Self. In Visishtadvaita, there is a staunch veneration of Brahman as remaining both transcendent and immanent—an expression of non-dualism with differentiation—in which he is the supreme cause and sustainer of the universe, and yet exhibits distinct qualities, like virility and splendor. Maintaining the primacy of nirguna Brahman, there is also commemorated the lordship of *saguna Brahman*, where worship of this unabridged deity called Ishvara is tolerated as an appropriate expression spiritual inclination. Like people, Ishvara is a manifestation of Brahman in the world, one that people can positively comprehend (Thatamanil, 2006, p. 67). Rather than seeking identity with Brahman, which created beings could never, one seeks equality. Pursuing these qualities through means of devotion rather than direct intuition, the faithful servant is granted those qualities upon death where they can then know Brahman in his fullness (Sethy, 2024). Nonduality, therefore, remains an operative word, though for Visishtadvaitins this interpretation of unification entails that one be elevated from the level of inferiority to the level of Brahman, not that one was always equated with Brahman.

This illustration would strike greater accord with Sankara’s Advaita, however, than that of another branch of Vedanta philosophy which more conservatively opposes non-

duality. *Dvaita Vedanta*, pioneered by Madhva, a prophet of the Lord, is theistic in that it insists that the self is the creation of Brahman, but it is dualistic in insisting that this self will never be likened to or absorbed by Brahman. Even harsher, Dvaita is unprecedented in declaring that liberation is not only a product of achieving proper knowledge and proper devotion, but also of being graced by God to be selected as a soul destined for liberation, a determination that can only be overwritten with sincere yogic practice (Chari, p. 22). Madhva further contests Sankara and Ramanuja, arguing that delusion cannot be a part of God's creation and yet separate from his character. He denies the idea of individuality as an illusion in Advaita, holding firm that the physical world exists, that the individual soul is also of a distinct substance, and that both form and spirit are different—secondary if you will—to the Creator (Betty, 2010). The appropriate means to liberation, as in Visishtadvaita, is devotion, yet this is always performed in subservience to God and without the hope of becoming assimilated into his identity.

Advaita holds that this denigration of creation is an affront to the totalizing figure that is Brahman (Betty, 2010). Naturally, the response to Dvaitins would be that they have misunderstood the essence of devotion based on their fundamental misapprehension of the unstable hierarchy between this plane of reality and ultimate existence. For Advaita Vedanta, the integrity of avidya, or ignorance, to obfuscate the mind affords the power of jnana yoga, the yoga of knowledge, to be the scythe capable of cutting through the misnomers (Thatamanil, 2006, p. 75). Avidya explains why non-dual Brahman appears as a world of multiplicity and why beings mistakenly experience themselves as separate individuals rather than as Brahman itself; clouded by ignorance, the intellectual reactionary must demand separate ontologies for what Advaitins would say is right under our nose and planted in the very core of our being. To the contrary of such reactionaries as the Dvaitins, followers of Advaita Vedanta would suggest that what is needed is a separate epistemological

understanding, and in opposition to Vishishtadvaita, this epistemology does not require the addition of any new attribute, but rather the shedding away of what is false. By this we may be reminded of the epithet in the Upanishads of *Saccidānanda*, a conjunction that might be interpreted as a reference only to Brahman (Puliganda, p. 19). Advaitins took this description of the experience of Brahman to speak to our fundamental being as this untainted and reflexive luminosity: Segregating the terms in an order palatable to my own sensibilities, insightful contemplative practice will reveal that what rests behind the sense organs, perceiving mind, and egoic reference is the witness (pure consciousness, *cit*) that remains untaken by the valence of the contents that it lays witness to (self-sustaining bliss, *ananda*) and who is accessible to everyone and at every moment (ground truth, *sat*). It speaks directly to the way that Sankara and his successors understood the scriptures as speaking to the contemplations they decided were demonstrably universal. For them, awareness is our essence, awareness is unchangeable and eternal, and what is unchangeable and eternal must be the same fabric that fashioned the universe. This explains how Ultimate Reality could be equated with whichever term we assign to our true, indisputable Self. Up until the point of this revelation, one has falsely superimposed the separability of the mind-body-soul complex upon the indivisibility that is Brahman (Thatamanil, p. 8-9).

The epistemological impact of this awareness upon my discussion of nonduality takes force as this knowledge does not require a profound transformation in one's being—the yogi need not acquire new character traits along the way, nor may they be granted the prize of moksha in the afterlife. Attaining liberation in Advaita Vedanta is quite continuous with prior moments of consciousness, to which we might add that pre-moksha is not experientially different (non-dual) from post-moksha from an observer's perspective. The liberating insight that is the non-difference between myself and Brahman is something to be known as fact not

something that is glimpsed transitorily (Stephens, 2018). Reasserting the immanence of nonduality in every moment, one is beckoned to realize that they are already liberated because Brahman is not bonded and in need of liberation, and one is Brahman. This phenomenon is likened to what happens to the light reflected in a dirty mirror when the mirror is cleaned—it keeps on beaming, unadulterated—or the space inside of a clay pot when the pot breaks: nothing. Such arguments and metaphors are extensively elaborated on by Sankara in his commentary to the Bhagavad Gita (e.g. Bhāṣya 18.50; 4.1.3–4), where moksha is not a state to produce or reach, but the removal of ignorance concerning the nature of the Self. While this egalitarian ethos was certainly not unaccounted for in the millenia-and-a-half predating Sankara, it was in his works and the consolidation of an Advaita Vedanta that we see non-duality as a guiding framework to bring together the seemingly disparate terms regarding the subjective sense of an individual self, the external perception of a dynamic world, and the meditative apperception of pure consciousness (Thatamanil, 43). In the nonduality of Advaita Vedanta the human conduit is ascribed the designation of being a microcosm of That which pre-existed material form, gives rise to material form, and whose unitary essence is unassailed by these forms' various manifestations and tendency to occlude one's perception of Ultimate Reality. Advaita Vedanta, among the traditions which attempt to make sense of the esoteric threads from the divinely revealed Vedas, is that school whose epistemology, ontology, and soteriology are invariantly informed by the deduction that Creator, creating, and creation is inseparable, ultimately ascertaining truth in the terms of a positive theology.

## **1.2. Tibetan Buddhism**

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Globally emblematic because of its charismatic leadership, pop cultural fascination, and spirit of resiliency, Tibetan Buddhism contributes some of the most innovative and apposite ideas to the study of non-duality in religious discourse. Distinguished as the “Great Perfection” and “Great Seal”, Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) and Mahāmudrā (*phyag chen*) are two scholastic courses within the Old and New Translation Schools of Tibetan Buddhism, respectively, that reflect the culminating ideologies of those who have become advanced in meditative teachings (Kapstein, 2013, p. 62). Formulating their own discernable identity as two of the later (that is to say, more recent) traditions within the third and arguably final vehicle to Buddhist enlightenment, Vajrayāna, the centrality of nondual philosophy within these schools leaves the impression that they converge on emphasizing non-duality as a crowning development in Buddhist thought. As a recurring conclusion to doctrinal contestation, the utility of nondualistic frameworks may serve to elucidate or even encapsulate Buddhist teachings in one swift stroke. The term ‘nonduality’ is fitted for multiple uses in Tibetan Buddhism that include both the practical and the metaphysical, including aphorisms like the goal of meditation being the path, the recurrent immanence-transcendence dichotomy of such terms as suchness (*tathātā*), and related expressions that affirm the unity of conventional and ultimate truths, demonstrating the significance of nonduality as a viable position from which to communicate—or outright deny—essential concepts in later Buddhist thought (Duckworth, 2013, p. 99-101).

A more provocative argument for staging cross-cultural dialogue between Dzogchen/Mahāmudrā and Advaita Vedānta is the geographic and temporal proximity of their respective instantiations. There is ample reason to believe that even if disputes between Tibetan monastics and Advaitin swamis have not been highly commemorated, it is unlikely that proselytizers of the two traditions passed each other by unknowingly (Davidson, 2002, p. 71-74). Coming into their own in the 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE within such vibrant hubs as

Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Kashmir, the Indian Buddhist progenitors of traditions from which Dzogchen/ Mahāmudrā later emerged and proto-Hindu pundits of Vedānta engaged in well-documented debates (Davidson, p. 75-77). Such intellectual exchange is also evidenced by Gaudapada, the grand-teacher of Shankara and a seminal figure in Advaita Vedānta, who is earlier said to have incorporated ideas from Yogācāra and Mādhyamika philosophy, leading scholars to believe that there was some form of intercultural mimesis and a perception of mutual compatibility between these two traditions of non-dual philosophy (Potter, 103-105). While it is less apparent whether those Buddhists perched far away in the Land of Snows could have been as impacted by the Vedāntins as was true for their lower-lying Mahāyāna kin in India, the formation and verbal force of such intellectual opponents as Vedānta must have inversely pushed some Buddhist thinkers in India to clarify the premises underlying their doctrines and establish normative and heterodox interpretations of contemplative insight (Davidson, p. 82).

In place of any written record, Buddhist iconography found in disparate Himalayan municipalities in the early centuries of the Common Era offers us a rough estimate of the germinating point of Tibetan Buddhism (Kapsteinn, p. 12-14). By the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism had officially migrated north where it was named the official religion of the unified Tibetan Empire, marking the first dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet. Prior to this, the region was subdued by peoples known for their fierce militarism, nuclear communities, and indigenous religion, replete with imperial cults centered on the figure of the Emperor and their tombs, as well as local gods whose benediction could ensure domestic security (Thurman, 1997, p. 18-20). Also leading up to these events, there had developed a certain self-conscious evolution in the philosophy of those northern Indians whose migratory ascent in geographical topography mirrored a spiritual ascent above the cloudy, conceptual abstractions obscuring the mind. Robert Thurman describes the advent and diaspora of this Vajrayāna Buddhism as ushered



forth by an apocalyptic sense of urgency, spurred by external cues of invasions in India, the rising popularity of Hindu deities and magic, and concern about Mahāyāna's arduously slow path to enlightenment in the face of the compelling social ethic of later Buddhist sensibilities. More importantly, he argues that this indestructible, adamant vehicle elevated the relevance of nondualism to include all aspects of teaching and practice, exploring the union of compassion and wisdom in male-female copulation, and the realization of these cosmic phenomenon through direct experience rather than dualistic meditations (Thurman, p. 17). The so-called indestructible vehicle of Vajrayana thus aimed to facilitate rapid spiritual awakening in the form of nondual awareness by using imaginal, postural, acoustic and other esoteric forms of high-risk-high-reward practices that contemplatively explore ordinary experiences in which intimations of non-duality occur, such as sexuality, death, extreme emotion, transgression, sleep and dreaming (Gray, 2016, p. 5). While the high stakes of the contemplative path would become articulated in the meditative instructions of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā, these esoteric practices maintained the presuppositions that are illustrative of Mahāyāna, placing a premium on expedited results in the form of transformed perception and understanding. As I will draw out, this integral notion of non-duality was facilitated by activities that transcended conceptual thought, and, for Tibetan Buddhists more so than other Mahāyāna counterparts, it demanded a logic of spontaneous awakening in which every moment is bursting with the potential for realizing Buddhahood (Davidson, p. 22-25).

Just as Vedanta sought to refashion the claims of their holy texts to accommodate discrepancies in experience and sociocultural shifts in religious attitude, so too Tibetan Buddhism assimilated earlier Buddhist propositions and practices in distinctive ways. Sharing some essential features with Vedanta regarding the laws that govern the cosmos and life therein, Buddhism in India introduces a polarizing divide in its orientation towards the nature of the self as a non-self and, perhaps to a less divisive extent, ultimate reality as a thorough

“emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). The core of Buddhist insight, owing back to early teachings from the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, can be encapsulated in the maxim of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), whereby all phenomena, which seem to us to be unitary things, are instead viewed as in fact composite dynamic processes of fundamental elements coming together and breaking apart (Waldron, 2023, p. 25-33). Insinuating the impermanence of all things and the futility in seeing them as stable objects, the coupling of these premises suggests that we can never at any point locate a static self in living beings or other phenomena and that we ought to abandon this binding habit of reification. In fact, this foundational Buddhist tenet of there not being an eternal and unchanging self enduring over time presented an existentialist schism in the Indian imaginaire (Harvey, 2013, p. 34). *Anattā* (“anatman” in Sanskrit), the term for no-self, was disparaged by Vedic apologetics as nihilistic, particularly with the formation of representation-only philosophy (Skt. *vijñapti-mātra*), dramatically misunderstood as the proposition that nothing at all exists—not in the empirical world, nor a hidden, higher reality (Harvey, p. 36).

An irony might be spotted in that the Buddha’s argumentative style for alleging the inconceivability of the self utilizes negative reasoning that is akin to Advaita’s fundamental dictum, *not this, not this*: “Any kind of [insert skandha] whatsoever, Rahula, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one sees all form as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self’” (*Samyutta Nikāya* 22.59, trans. Bikkhu, 2006). Naturally, this assertion might seem to conflict with the causal efficacy that we observe ourselves having in the world. However, the

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negations herein are not meant to undermine the prominence that affirmative reasoning had in the teachings of the Buddha. Importantly, the processual complexion of all phenomena, namely their lack of self, demands that there truly are no separate entities within existence, and that all existents are dependent on one another for their instantiation. While the groundwork for social cohesion and the compassionate response to interdependence is certainly evident in these early Buddhist discourses, these postulates are much more elaborated in later Mahāyāna writings (Waldron, p. 309-313).

A defining characteristic of early Buddhist thought would be its ability to artfully navigate the tensions of positive implication and negative denial as befits the audience's ability to move beyond rigid ideas (Gethin, 1998, p. 5). For instance, when asked by a brahmin a series of questions that first declared the ultimate reality of all things and then negated their fundamental existence, the Buddha expressed agreement to each statement despite their logical incompatibilities (SN 12:48). While his apparent indifference could be understood as relative to the more empirical issues that he may have wanted to stress, his unwillingness to choose one definitive statement over the other reflects how dualistic thinking does not compute for the enlightened one. By avoiding the conceptual traps of eternalism and nihilism, the Buddha walks his so-called middle path that sees linguistic designations as insufficient renderings of their conditioned nature (Bronkhorst, 2009, p. 15-20). This election to take the central route between two perspectives—or, stated more accurately, the inability to faithfully take either side of the existing binary—remained a guiding perspective over the centuries and became the inspiration of Nagarjuna's Middle Way and the associated Mahāyāna traditions.

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Nagarjuna extended this nondualistic framework to the extremes regarding not just the self but ultimate reality, as well (Bronkhorst, p. 40). In fact, *śūnyatā* confers that all things are empty, or void, of inherent existence. This realization applies to the sense of self that it was originally formulated around, yet it also applies to the condition that constrain this very self; suffering, too, is dependent upon precedents that generate and perpetuate its distortions. When one realizes emptiness, one understands what gives rise to suffering and that one's own actions have been a condition that caused suffering in other people. And, following the prior analysis of the plasticity of the self and its interdependence, one comes to desire the alleviation of suffering in others as they would for themselves, not merely as a charitable aspiration, but as a genuine product of their having equalized all abstracted notions of a self that could be fundamentally separated from another, including the fundamental divide of self and other (Gowans, 2014, p. 69-70). This mutual responsibility that makes preconceived social boundaries porous is emblematic of the bodhisattva philosophy that today characterizes Mahāyāna and signals a jumping off point for the study of nonduality in late Buddhism.

In the unveiling of emptiness as sunyata, we gain definitive and positive language that describes what ultimate reality really is, not just what the self is not. Despite emptiness seeming to be a negation, multiple Buddhist sources described it as not only unobjectifiable and pre-representational, but also as dynamically self-sustaining (Shin, 2013). This cosmic principle naturally extends to us, where we are part and parcel of the universe demonstrating its disposition towards emptiness through the continual recomposing of self-aggregates. Such exposition is compatible with Advaita Vedanta, where the creating force behind existence is

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viewed as inextricable from its unfolding, though in Buddhism this ultimate, too, is empty of inherent existence.

While originally designating that which could not be pinned down and identified with, emptiness has been the subject of significant transformations within Buddhist India, especially as the Dharma pushed beyond and fused with East Asian thought (Williams, 2008, p. 67-70). Whereas much of the discourse concerning the substrata of self, other, and the material world had been framed as an analytically deconstructive project under Middle Way philosophy, Buddhist literature introduced an ingenious construct with which to dance the forsaken line of essentialism while still maintaining the imperative of *anatta*. When all the layers of the egoic self are peeled back through self-inquiry and meditative facility, some Mahāyāna scriptures hold that what remains is the unimpeded and self-luminous mind, called *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha-nature (Williams, p. 104). "Moreover, emancipation is termed that which severs all conditioned phenomena, gives rise to all wholesome qualities ... severs attachment and does not sever the vision of the Self. The view of the Self is termed the 'Buddha-dhatu'. The Buddha-[nature] is true emancipation, and true emancipation is the Tathagata" (*Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, Chapter 7, trans. Blum 2014). Innate to all sentient beings, the rediscovery of Buddha-nature and its blossoming into Buddhahood becomes the soteriological aim of thought and praxis in some strands of Mahāyāna. Rejecting subordination to the rank of conventional discourse, this essence is considered the true self in the sense that it is the latent potential of the awakened person that otherwise lay dormant (Jones, 2020, p. 42-43). In this regard, the true self is the ground of our being as conscious creatures, and, as we shall come to see, this awareness becomes the ground of all existence in later Tibetan Buddhism. Critically, the notion of Buddha-nature suggests a radical ontology

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that was not accounted for in earlier Buddhist thought, namely that there is something which exceeds the dictates of dependent origination and forever remains unconditioned: the deepest nature of the mind (Blum, 2014, p. xxiv-xxv). Reference to earlier conceits of non-self and emptiness are therefore at times seen as contextual teachings that can be deployed skillfully, when, for instance, a person is struggling with attachment and needs to be reminded of the impermanence of phenomena, or, conversely, when they risk annihilationist interpretations of no-self and require moral directives (Williams, p. 105).

For some Mahāyāna proponents, the doctrine that everything is defined by sunyata is to be supplanted with the belief in an unchanging awareness suffused within ordinary cognition, nondual with ultimate reality yet detectable in conventional reality (Jones, p. 55-60). In this move towards exalting the mere existence of subjectivity over any conceivable object therein, the tathagatagarbha transcends the duality of self and non-self. This underlying awareness, relayed by Yogacaran philosophers like Dignaga and Dharmakirti, is pure luminosity in and of itself—capable of self-sustenance at the same time that it permits phenomenal cognizance (Suzuki, 1991, p. 103-105). “Dharmata-Buddha is the ultimate Principle of Reality from which all things derive their being and truthfulness, but which in itself transcends all predicates. Dharmata-Buddha is the central sun which holds all, illumines all” (Lankavatara Sutra, Chapter XI). Repurposing the rhetoric of maya/illusion within the cosmological register of the time, the resolve of the spiritual aspirant is to clear away the afflictions that have been ingrained over time so that one’s quintessence shines through. Again a reflection of unadulterated consciousness, Buddha-nature is described with labels like ‘bliss’, ‘purity’, and ‘luminosity,’ and the awakened person operating from this newfound mode sees everything else in naked form, subject to conditioning and pregnant with Buddha-nature (Blum, p. xx). The brilliance of these qualities signify that they are intrinsic to consciousness and somehow constitutive of fundamental reality: the Buddha-to-be does not

attain spiritual actualization by cultivating new traits, per se, but by unearthing the isomorphic impulse towards benevolence.

Of course, this novel argument does not coincide well with the supposedly impenetrable logic of sunyata, whereby even the very concept of emptiness is empty, denying the very possibility of a metaphysical absolute. Candrakīrti is among these critics, warning against the reification of emptiness (including more positive claims about the ultimate, like Buddha-nature) into a thing rather than a process (Dunne, 2011, p. 207). Representing the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka school and rangtong (*rang stong*) perspective (“intrinsically emptiness”) that would inform the Gelug and other New Translation schools of Tibetan Buddhism, he took issue with the implications of such developments whereby understandings of reality and contemplative practice would be skewed by false notions of dualistic reality. Like the patriarchs that he represented, the path set forward by Candrakīrti prioritized the pursuit of liberation and compassion over elaborate theorizing. He and his followers were thus reacting against Mahāyāna scriptures like the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, which, making their stronghold in the Indo-Tibetan commentarial tradition, presented views that in Tibet would be understood as Shentong (*gzhang stong*), or “emptiness of other” in which ultimate reality is empty of conventional, impermanent phenomena but is itself not empty of those dynamic qualities of Buddha-nature (Dunne, p. 220).

The partisanship around such philosophical suppositions as Buddha-nature (i.e. whether the mind requires purification or is intrinsically pure) is among the dividing points between different regional formations of Buddhism as well as the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Williams, p. 105-108). As to the latter stance, the capacity to realize one’s true nature as undefiled found a great degree of commensurability in the existing religious atmosphere of East Asia, most notably China (Williams, p. 161). A viable cultural good that could be passed along the Silk Road, the active discourse around these recent and progressive

ideas suggested their centrality to the Dharma. Compatible with Daoist philosophy, concepts like Buddha-nature, Buddhahood, and innate luminosity were integrated and thoroughly expanded upon in China (Lai, 2003, p. 18). Key to their intercultural exchange is the assertion that awakening can be suddenly realized in this lifetime. Siding with the more deterministic expression of sunyata, wherein Buddhahood is our true nature and not just an untapped potential, monastics of the Southern School, like Shenhui, were adamant about the instantaneity of enlightenment, arguing that the gradual path denotes a dualistic, uninspiring sentiment about enlightenment that insists it as far off in time (Ying, 2010 p. 128-132). Nonetheless, he situates sudden awakening in a somewhat nondual frame of everyday piety, supposing that awakening is to be realized and lived out in one's actions beyond the initial point of attaining Buddhahood (Ying, p. 132). Finally harkening back to the acculturation of the Tibetan Empire following their Buddhist patronage, the capture of Dunhuang, a Buddhist center along the frequented trade routes in China, is credited for introducing the Tibetans to this prospect of rapid enlightenment (Kapstein, p. 20-22).

Evidently influenced by indigenous influences and by exposure to Chinese traditions, but to a much greater degree the Indian tantric mainstream of its day, the flowering of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā teachings from the ninth century onwards gave incentive for practitioners to no longer tally in refuting such philosophical concepts as sunyata, but to directly see through them (Kapstein, 2000, p. 21). In a word, the two dominant trends in Mahāyāna Buddhism—Madhyamika and Yogacara—largely issued their statements of nonduality around conventional/ultimate truth, samsara/nirvana, subject/object and other conceptual dichotomies, respectively (Williams, p. 40-60; Williams, p. 80-96). In the brand of Tibetan Buddhism that I present, nonduality becomes more than a topic for inspiring philosophical verbosity but a framework of practice that is made to be continuous with the original teachings while at the same time surpassing them in spiritual efficiency.



Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā are said to have co-evolved over the centuries in Tibet, with Dzogchen representing an initially peripheral development from normative Mahayoga tantric systems and Mahāmudrā instead flowing directly from Indian sources in the a later ‘modernist’ movements in Tibet that criticized ritualistic and philosophical complexities (Germano, 1994, p. 205-209). The extensive canons of these two systems developed explicitly around hermeneutical inquiries that explicate the gnostic, descriptive core of the Mind-Only school, yet their dealings with Buddha-nature doctrine and reinvention of sunyata are inextricably present throughout their evolution (Germano, p. 211-212). Gaining prominence as an independent vehicle to salvation, Dzogchen critiques not only the standard practices of Vajrayana tantric systems but the theological underpinnings of key Buddhist contemplative models and techniques. This includes visualization practices of embodying and identifying with the three buddha-bodies that one is said to be able to navigate upon Buddhahood (Makransky, 1998, p. 86-88). In this manner, concepts play a provisional role that helps one to traverse from the impure to the pure until pristine awareness is revealed. Meanwhile, Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā take a more radical stance, demanding that the mind is already pure and that what prevents our recognition of this is not the defilements themselves but our conceptual grasping, which thus needs to be dispelled (Williams, p. 105-109). The real culprits, then, are not some ‘destructive’ tendencies as opposed to virtuous qualities. Advocating for a path they see as much faster than the eons of lifetimes required by early Buddhists to attain enlightenment, they critique the gradual procedural transition from aspirant to buddha espoused by previous Mahāyāna advocates as a display of ignorance that misrecognizes the true nature of mind and again rings of gradual, dualistic ideology. The sacred and mundane, then, are untenable distinctions that are superfluously applied to a reality that is itself an undivided oneness. Or, as Longchenpa is held to have stated with a bit more personality, “Since everything is but an apparition, having nothing to do with good or bad,

acceptance or rejection, one may well burst out in laughter” (*The Great Perfection’s Self-Liberation in the Nature of Mind*, Chapter I). There is no Buddhahood to be claimed as making definitive claims implies independent, static existence. Instead, nondual awareness elucidates the fact that Buddhahood, like the self, neither exists nor does not exist—it is just awareness of reality as it is, in all its dynamism.

To make sense of the claim that Buddhahood is the spontaneous knowing of the pristine nature of mind rather than its transformation, one must appreciate the innovation applied to the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology in which the Ground of all being (*gzhi*)—this abiding nonconceptual, self-reflexive, and empty potential—becomes the axis of practice. No longer do concepts perform the mediatory work of pointing to the ineffable as reality can instead be directly experienced. As a vehicle to this apprehension, contemplation is not a bridge to actualizing mental qualities but, instead, a stabilization of seeing the mind’s purity with clarity (Thurman, p. 249). For this reason, while the preliminary practices of visualization and other tantric methods would later be reincorporated into the tradition as influenced by other Buddhist developments in the second wave of dissemination of Buddhist into Tibet, it was sufficient for these early yogic systems to rely on more rudimentary forms of calming and insight meditation that could make lucid the fundamental ground of awareness (Germano, p. 227). Still, subtly advanced practices like *trekchö* (*khregs gcod*) in Dzogchen and nonmeditation in Mahāmudrā provided stylistic originality and novel approaches for transcending conceptual frameworks, thereby softening the divisions between formal and informal practice (Suzuki, p. 82). Mastering the ambidextrous systems of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā, the contemplative adept perceives the world with the apparatus of nonduality,

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aided by the mindfulness that effortlessly transcends cognition and itself knows no cognizing, for cognizing would imply a duality between knower and a known (Sheehy and Deroche, 2022). The buddha, as I am describing, is now liberated from the conceptual grasping that has been believed to be the real source of suffering since the time of Gautama Buddha, navigating the physical world from a functionalist purview that permits conceptual designations when skillful but knows these to be truly provisional (Waldron, p. 309-313).

This simplistic conclusion is not intended to offer the false suggestion that all prior Buddhist traditions had merely overlooked the ironies presented when reifying philosophical concepts. Instead, for the sake of demarcating developments in Buddhist thought in a reasonable number of pages, I draw a line in the sand wherein the emphasis of Buddhist dialectics in this Himalayan terrain seems to have shifted from intellectualization and sophistication to apprehension and simplification in these two traditions of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā. Where I see this expression of nonduality dovetail with the earlier Advaita Vedanta traditions is in their poetic themes of immanence, immediacy, and identification. The more pressing analytical insight that this study begs, however, is to decipher how the two traditions diverge. In proper thematic recourse, I opt to say that I do not view these traditions as "two", by which I mean that they are reflective of their own brand of nonduality. Instead, I understand them as an attempt at phenomenological hermeneutics that may have diverged early on due to extraneous social, cultural, and historical influences. Equally inventive expressions born of classical Indian cosmology, Advaita Vedanta and Tibetan Buddhism present reality and ourselves within it as fundamentally inextricable and pure, with all core dualities being transcended in the realization of this underlying unity. I thus would suggest emphasizing their similarities above their differences as both traditions attempt to

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meaningfully position this perception at the core of their philosophy, thereby distinguishing themselves as among the leading contributors to the dialogue on nonduality.

## Chapter 2 Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate my command of knowledge on the subject of nonduality as it pertains to contemporary psychological literature. While the subsequent chapter will maintain the posture of critical social and historical analysis found in Chapter 1, the present piece, Chapter 2, maintains the terse, straightforward regularities of scientific reports. As such, the current chapter is an alternative form of knowledge production that mirrors the style of writing with which the content responds to. The reader can, therefore, see my writing as oscillating between the two formats that I have been familiarized with disciplinary, the formats of Religious Studies and Psychology. Specific to this work, I performed a literature review in keeping with the scientific method that allows for critical review of a topic. I decided to use the format of a rapid review given my timeline, resource constraints, and because I had never before considered the rapid review method. (I have had the fortune of learning the systematic review method in other projects.) Likewise, meta-analytical methods are new to me and presented the opportunity to apply myself to strictly quantitative methods. Provided the context of this project as a requirement for the completion of a Master's thesis, this manuscript is to be recognized as my first attempt in formally surveying the literature and a training in methodological rigor. A planned and publishable systematic review, rather than an independent rapid review, is expected to follow in the months after the completion of this project. Considered together, my thesis project has the benefit of being a mixed-methods approach to the study of nonduality, ensuring a multidisciplinary assessment of this topic across historical eras and perspectives of expertise.

## 1. Introduction

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As a philosophical throughline found particularly in Asian contemplative traditions, nonduality is a term that can be used to describe the undivided continuity of conscious thought, the inability to bifurcate between discreet objects in the world, and the inclusion of subjective self-perceptions among one's objects of awareness (Loy, 1999: p. 7-19). Important to the soteriological aims of several of these religions, nonduality is not a concept to be grasped, but a characteristic of perception to be directly known (Loy, 2019: xix-xx; Josipovic, 2019). Contemporary Mindfulness-Based Intervention programs like Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) or Mindfulness-Oriented Recovery Enhancement (Garland, 2024) have been revealed to directly involve techniques intended to facilitate the recognition of nondual awareness (Dunne, 2015; Garland, 2022). The phenomenal experience of nondual awareness (NDA) has been related to peak or self-transcendent experiences and accompanied by profound forms of positive affect and lasting change (Yaden et al, 2017; Van Cappellen and Rimé, 2014). As such, the intensity of NDA can be said to fall along a gradated continuum from the softening of self-other boundaries to the mere gross, residual awareness of one's being (Dorjee, 2016), and it is thought to catalyze change by decoupling maladaptive narratives about oneself (Garland and Frederickson, 2019). Consequently, the study of nonduality may be of interest to psychological researchers inquiring into the structural variants in consciousness research, extraordinary forms of perceptual cognition, and optimal health and well-being.

A substantial number of studies have applied qualitative methods, such as phenomenological interviewing, to characterize the first-person perspective of nondual awareness or nondual embodiment (Conway, 1988; Costeines, 2009; Martin, 2010; Fire, 2011; Costines et al, 2021). Data from these studies has been highly informative in describing the lived experience of nonduality and the outcomes of having apprehended NDA, offering

such insights as its association with desirable qualities like empathy, humility, and joy, and a reduction in negative or antisocial emotions like anger, anxiety, or narcissism. These inquiries have also been useful for demarcating between cross-cultural and cross-traditional interpretations of nondual experiences, as well as drawing distinctions between nonduality and related constructs like minimal phenomenological experiences (MPE; Metzinger, 2020) and ego-dissolution experiences (Nour et al, 2016; Canby et al, 2024). Other studies have forwarded a mixed-methods approach that combines diachronic-style interviews with longitudinal questionnaires assessing changes in well-being and cognitive performance (Butlein et al, 2005; Siegel, 2013). Given the inherent linguistic obstacles in conceptualizing nonduality, less considered and more provocative still are the few attempts that have been made to explain the phenomenon of nonduality using quantitative methods.

Hanley et al (2018) suggested that the study of NDA has been driven by theoretical and religious motivations and lacked evidence-based support for the clinical implications that alterations in self-consciousness have on health. The Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment (NADA; Hanley et al., 2018) was therefore designed to assess the traits of a nondual experience and its two theorized dimensions of self-transcendence and bliss. The 13-item trait-level form of the questionnaire, the NADA-T, was designed by collating items from six related scales: the Mysticism Scale (Hood, 1975), Altered States of Consciousness Rating Form (Studerus, Gamma & Vollenweider, 2010), Mystical Experiences Questionnaire (Barrett, Johnson & Griffiths, 2015), Ego-Dissolution Inventory (Nour, Evans, Nutt & Carhart-Harris, 2016), Dimensions of Meditative Experience Questionnaire (Osis, Bokert & Carlson, 1973), and the Effects of Meditation Scale (Reavley & Pallant, 2009). Six new items were composed using Buddhist theory to reinforce the theorized dimensional structure, and the resulting 100-item questionnaire was validated and pruned on an online sample of 528 college students and Amazon Mechanical Turkers. This was followed by confirmatory factor

analysis and correlation assessments for construct validity. Given the observed relationships between the NADA-T and length, frequency, and duration of mindfulness meditation practice in those who answered affirmatively to having a meditation practice, a brief measure of nondual states of awareness was developed, the NADA-S, to capture acute changes in awareness between evoked practices on a 10-point Likert scale (1=Not at all, 10=Very Much).

The Nondual Embodiment Thematic Inventory (NETI) was originally developed by Butlein (2005) to differentiate between conceptualized beliefs about nonduality and lived knowledge of NDA. Details about the development of the NETI are omitted from the original dissertation, though it was approved of by a renowned spiritual teacher and employed as the single spirituality-relevant measure during its original testing. In this proof-of-concept, the dissertation author delivered the NETI to transpersonal and non-transpersonal psychotherapists to appraise how they differed in personality traits, worldviews, and impact upon clients. It was also tested on Masters-level psychology students at a local university, demonstrating that purportedly awakened psychotherapists had significantly higher scores. The NETI accounts for such qualities as compassion, resilience, propensity to surrender, authenticity, humility, and frequency of nondual experience and has since been expanded to account for alternative conceptualizations of nondual experiences (Martin et al, 2023).

### **1.3. Present Study**

The aim of this rapid review and meta-analysis is to offer the first quantitative synthesis of research on the topic of nonduality in scientific research using these two psychometrics, the NADA and the NETI. Given current themes in research related to self-loss and permutations in self-other boundaries (Milliere, 2020; Britton et al, 2021) I intend to address the following



research questions using evidence-based support: “How does Western psychological science conceptualize and measure nonduality?” “What applications can and does nonduality have for health and psychiatric treatment?” “Are modern contemplative programs (i.e. Mindfulness-Based Interventions) capable of achieving changes in nondual awareness according to psychological instruments of measurement?” “And, do these interventions require an arduous amount of training as prescribed for such rarified meditative attainments, or can effects be had at moderated levels of meditative engagement?” The product of this investigation will facilitate novel and informed perspectives on the study of nonduality in empirical scientific literature. Importantly, a thorough synthesis of findings across varied study designs, along with an attempted meta-analysis of relatively short, nondual style meditation interventions will be able to illuminate areas for future clinical research to address, including feasible intervention designs, relevant populations, and efficacy relative to comparative treatments.

## **2. Rapid Review and Meta-analytic Methods**

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### **2.1. Literature review**

The literature search was not pre-registered provided the exploratory context of this manuscript. The literature search followed the developing PRISMA-RR guidelines for a rapid review (Stevens et al, 2025). Accounting for the constraints imposed by the relatively short timeline of the thesis project and the author’s status as an independent reviewer, a rapid review was opted for as a type of knowledge synthesis in which components of the systematic review process are simplified or omitted to produce comprehensive information in a short period of time (Kanghuru et al, 2012; Tricco et al, 2015). Limitations in time and reviewer resources have made necessary the omission of a risk of bias assessment and quality assessment. This rapid review aims to synthesize the available evidence regarding

experimental studies involving the use of measurements that purport to capture phenomenon described with the term ‘nonduality’. Previous research has reported findings disparately and non-comprehensively. This work will provide an updated and rigorous summary of the evidence such that inferences can be made about the relevance of this phenomenon to clinical research and the contributions that this area of study offers to the interdisciplinary science of integrative medicine.

### **2.1.1. Eligibility Criteria**

Eligibility criteria for inclusion in the *rapid review* were primary studies which included secondary analyses of original research but not grey literature (i.e. unpublished dissertation studies) that investigated changes in NDA as the primary or secondary outcome. To the author’s knowledge, this is the first literature review on nonduality or related measures of self-loss, therefore no review papers have previously existed and were available for inclusion. Inclusion criteria for the systematic review ensured that all studies included for analysis: A) Were written in the English language, B) Published in or after 2005, C) Involved a pre-and-post intervention design, and D) Utilized the NADA or NETI as associated measures. Exclusion criteria denoted those studies that mention the NADA or NETI but did not explicitly involve them as psychometric measures. All study designs were eligible, meaning that randomization to treatment and control groups was not necessary and that several studies involved single-arm treatment groups where participants had already been enrolled in a clinical intervention program or were compared against other active treatment groups. There were no restrictions relating to participant population, with studies recruiting healthy and clinical populations being eligible. Likewise, all outcome measures were given consideration in their association with measures of nonduality, though NDA and the dimension of self-transcendence are featured will be the focus of commentarial analysis.

Inclusion criteria for the *meta-analysis* was further refined to permit a strictly quantitative analysis. The relatively limited number of studies on the topic of nonduality in psychological research has restricted the amount of shared design features that could be used to perform multi-study analyses. Consequently, this meta-analysis should be seen as exploratory and inspiring further research on standardized implementations of contemplative interventions so that a general relationship between common meditation practices and NDA can be ascertained. Prior familiarity with the existing literature indicates that there exists substantial interest in whether relatively non-intensive, popular, and therapeutic meditation practices can achieve outcomes comparable to traditional accounts. Studies were, therefore, considered for meta-analysis if the full-length manuscript indicated the use of the NADA or NETI immediately preceding and following a clinical mindfulness-based intervention. Admittedly, filters (i.e. the use of the NADA-S instead of NADA-T) were applied during the search process as methodological challenges were presented by the scarcity and heterogeneity of literature. These constraints and the remedial analytic choices are detailed in Section 3.1.

### **2.1.2. Search strategy**

A systematic search was initially conducted in late January-early February and then repeated in late March-early April 2025. The search was filtered for studies dating as early as 2005 to reflect the earliest publication of psychometric literature on nonduality (Butlein, 2005). One author (JCRS) searched PubMed (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>), APA Psych Net (<https://psycnet.apa.org/home>), Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>), Scopus (<https://psycnet.apa.org/home>), Science Direct (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/>), and PsycINFO (<http://www.apa.org/pub/databases/psycinfo/index.aspx>) for all papers using the NADA and NETI. Independent searches therefore contained the keyword phrases ('Nondual Awareness Dimensionality Assessment') and ('Nondual Embodiment Thematic Inventory').

This extensive list of articles was then refined by searching within results for studies whose title was thematically related to nonduality, self-transcendence, mindfulness, and other constructs that would indicate a study design appropriate to contemplative thought and practice. Abstracts were consulted to see whether the study featured an experimental study and not theoretical, observational, or other genre of literature. Abstracts were specifically evaluated for language indicating the gathering and reporting of quantitative data. While the reference lists of some studies were previewed, a more extensive search of references inclusive of backward citation tracking, relevant review papers (e.g. Barrett and Griffiths, 2018), non-peer reviewed sites, and contact with authors will be considered for a post-thesis research project to ensure that no studies are missed. Figure 1 represents the flow of information through different phases of the review.

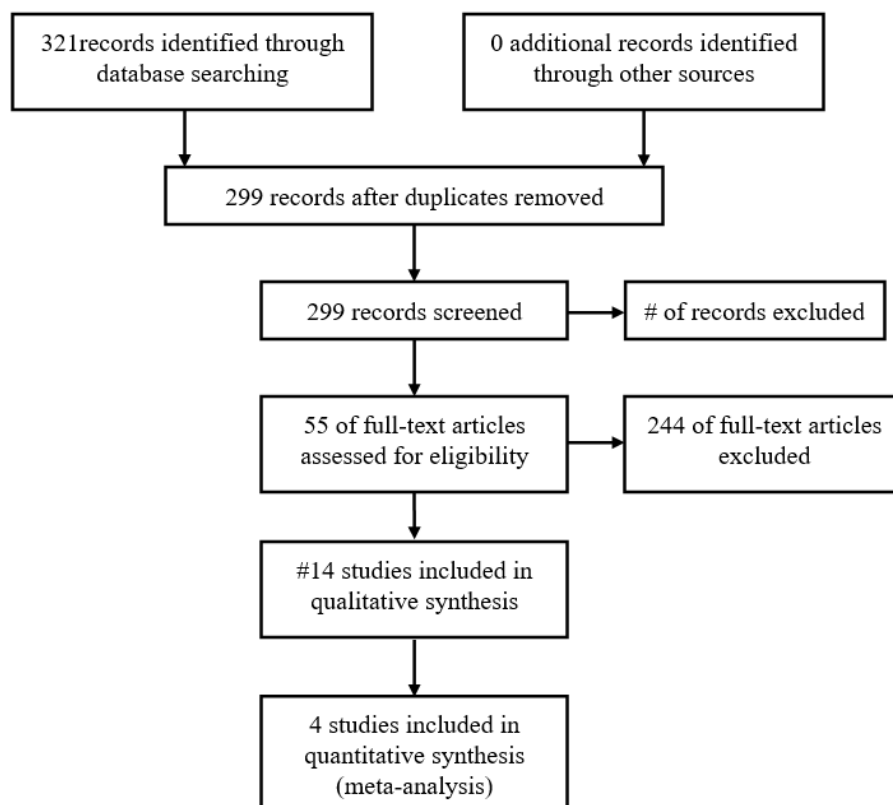


Fig. 1. PRISMA Flow diagram (adapted from Moher et al. 2009)

### 2.1.3. Study Screening and Organization

Studies that surfaced during the two searches were categorized as either meeting the strict eligibility criterion for systematic review or providing useful, though ancillary, data that could support introductory or discussion context. A spreadsheet was kept that includes this basic metadata, key quotes, reflection comments, and supplementary psychometrics (e.g. Spatial Frame of Reference Continuum, Hanley and Garland, 2019) regarding the resulting studies and can be accessed upon request. While these scales assess phenomenon relevant to the expansion or dissolution of boundaries between self and other, making them relevant to the two surveys on nonduality and available to studies on the effects of brief mindfulness practice, they were excluded from analysis for my purpose of commenting solely on the operationalization of *nonduality*. Future research will consider these insights and measures in a formal publication.

For the purposes of quantitative review, those studies meeting the criterion for meta-analysis were further categorized from within the category of studies meeting systematic review, entered into another spreadsheet (also made accessible upon request) and included in statistical analysis. As all articles were being collected, organized, and readied for evaluation, duplicate results were removed. This included articles which presented the same data but were titled differently on account of their being accessible both as pre-prints and published manuscripts. Without examining article content, papers were extensively searched to ensure that a full manuscript could be found.

Because this search was carried out by only one reviewer, the two separate searches (one performed in mid-winter and the other in early spring) served to resolve disagreements in article screening and inclusion. Moreover, two searches had to be performed for studies utilizing the NETI as it is often cited to different sources; in the first search, I entered the article title for the original dissertation study (Butlein, 2005), and, in the second search, I

entered the title for the other, more recent clinical study (Mills et al, 2018). Searches for the NADA (Hanley et al, 2018) presented no such discrepancy and included both the longer and shorter forms.

## **2.2. Statistical Analysis for Meta-analysis**

### **2.2.1. Data Sources and Preparation**

Study data were extracted from an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed using R version 4.4.3. Data was imported from an organizational spreadsheet containing study metadata and descriptive statistics. Exploratory random-effect meta-analysis (Anello & Fleiss, 1995) was chosen as the method of choice because the studies which met the criteria for inclusion in a meta-analysis demonstrate heterogeneity in population, intervention, and other features which would result in systematically different effect sizes.

### **2.2.2. Effect Size Calculation**

A meta-analysis was conducted to estimate the standardized mean difference (SMD) between post-intervention control and treatment conditions. Effect size was computed using the *metacont* function from the *meta* package, where treatment values were treated as the experimental condition (*e*) and active control values as the control condition (*c*). The *metacont* function has been found to be robust in pooling effect size estimates, ensuring, in the case of one study, that the respective pre-post time points are treated as separate conditions (Cheung and Chan, 2008). Analysis of all other studies reflects the standard approach of comparing data from treatment conditions to a baseline control (Mikolajewicz and Komarova, 2019).

The effect size was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Hedges' } g = \frac{M_1 - M_2}{SD_{pooled}^*}$$

The inverse variance method was used for weighting studies to provide a more accurate pooled effect size estimate, which was reported with 95% confidence intervals. Effect sizes were interpreted in the context of study features, like sample size, intervention expectations, and previous literature.

### 3. Results

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#### 3.1. Search Results

The searches identified a total of 321 records from databases and other sources with a total of 14 studies meeting inclusion criteria for rapid review (Hanley et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2018; Hudak et al., 2021; Garland et al., 2020; Garland et al., 2022; Hanley & Garland, 2022; Jain et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2023; Hanley et al., 2023a; Hanley et al., 2023c; Liu et al., 2022; Garland & Jinpa, 2024; Meling et al., 2024; Gutierrez et al., 2024) and 6 studies meeting inclusion for meta-analysis (Hanley et al., 2018; Hanley & Garland, 2022 Study 1a; Hanley and Garland, 2022 Study 2a; Hanley and Garland, 2022 Study 2b; Hanley et al., 2023a; Hanley et al., 2023c). Of the 321 records, 288 of the studies represent the NADA and 12 of these were included for review. Contrarily, 33 of the studies represent the NETI and only 3 studies met the full inclusion criterion. This demonstrates a much higher popularity in the scale designed by Hanley and colleagues (2018) despite significantly postdating that of Butlein (2005). Previewing of the manuscript content also indicates that the NETI has rarely been evoked for use in quantitative or mixed-methods studies, with several studies being

excluded as qualitative investigations that did not fully report NETI findings. A majority of studies using the NADA have relied on the trait-level form that seeks to verify longitudinal changes, the NADA-T, provided its dominant deployment as a measure of wellbeing for people being treated for chronic health conditions. As a general trend, the NADA-S has received increasing popularity in the past few years.

### **3.2. Rapid Review Results**

The systematic review uncovered a comprehensive set of papers involving a variety of contemplative and psychotherapeutic techniques intended to induce alterations in conscious perception consistent with the Therapeutic view of nonduality. [Table 1](#) shows the characteristics of all included studies for the systematic review.

### **3.3. Meta-analysis Results**

Substantial heterogeneity in the studies located by the systematic literature review search and filtered by the eligibility criteria of the meta-analysis resulted in a small number of included studies that only used the NADA-S. The first of the six included studies (Hanley et al, 2018) was conducted as a single-arm validation study for the developed psychometric, thus no control group was included, and data had to be analyzed with pre-intervention data as the control group and post-intervention data as the treatment group. Considering other idiosyncrasies, Hanley et al 2023a placed post-intervention data as corresponding to the fifth



Reference	Study Objectives	Study Design	Sample Size	Sample characteristics	Treatment Condition	Control/Other Conditions	Measure	Statistical Results	Conclusion relevant to ND
Hanley et al, 2018 (Study 3)	To validate a subset of items modified for the purpose of capturing nondual states rather than traits	Random assignment to active control or mindfulness condition	53	Students from a large university in the Western US (meditation proficiency unspecified)	11-minute standardized, body scan meditation	Active listening to Nature documentary	NADA-S (Item Set 1 and 2)	Participants in the mindfulness condition reported significantly greater increases in nondual awareness at Time 2 across two subsamples, while active-control participants showed no such gains.	A single, brief mindfulness practice session increased participants' nondual states relative to an attention control condition.
Hudak et al 2021	To determine the spectral power and frequency correlates of MORE-based mindfulness meditation and how these were associated with core dynamics (e.g. self-transcendence) of meditation.	Two-arm ancillary mechanistic sub-study of veterans enrolled in long-term opioid therapy	62 (n=34 in treatment)	Primarily males around age 60 recruited from VA primary care and pain clinics in Utah, and meditation-retreat naive.	8 weekly, 2-hour MORE sessions with daily mindfulness practice and mindfulness breathing exercises before considering opioid use	8 weekly, 2-hour Rogerian group psychotherapy sessions with clinician facilitated discussion of chronic pain and opioid use/misuse	NADA-S	While not reporting on NADA-S directly, the study showed positive associations between frontal theta activity and self-transcendence via scatterplots.	The experience of self-transcendence occasioned by reduced self-referential processing might produce endogenous rewards and thereby restructure reward processing relevant to behavioral addiction
Garland et al 2020	To conduct a theory-driven mechanistic analysis of positive psychological variables of MORE for chronic pain patients with opioid misuse	A Stage 2 randomized controlled trial	95	Patients with opioid-treated chronic pain who did not evidence clinically-significant levels of opioid misuse symptoms but who were at heightened risk	8-session group MORE intervention with extensive group clinical therapeutic support and debriefing	8 weekly, 2-hour conventional Support Group therapy sessions based on the active intervention condition outlined in the Matrix Model intensive	NADA-T	MORE participants showed significantly greater pre-post increases in self-transcendence (? = .42, p = .002) compared to the support group.	MORE decreases risk for prescription opioid misuse among patients with chronic pain by increasing positive psychological factors like positive affect, savoring, meaning in life, and self-transcendence, with the latter

Reference	Study Objectives	Study Design	Sample Size	Sample characteristics	Treatment Condition	Control/Other Conditions	Measure	Statistical Results	Conclusion relevant to ND
				due to long-term opiod use		outpatient treatment manual			demonstrating the largest effect sizes.
Liu et al, 2022	To investigate if an embodied and dream-inspired VR flying experience could support self-efficacy and self-transcendence	Random assignment to different orders of a specially curated VR program, including a mixed-methods assessment of user experience	20	Healthy participants from China recruited by word-of-mouth or social media advertisement	Group 1 performed the first VR session using normal hand controllers and the second using a feature in which the headset can direct embodied motion Group 2 performed the first session with the Headjoystick and the second session with controllers	*Both groups received VR treatment, but in different orders	NADA-S	HeadJoystick users reported 13% higher nondual awareness than Hand Controller users ( $F(1,15) = 6.74$ , $p = .02$ ).	The more embodied interface would better contribute to self transcendence
Garland et al, 2022	To investigate more specifically the relation of previously identified neural correlates shared by MORE meditation and self-transcendence with addiction and opiod use behaviors	Two-arm ancillary mechanistic study of patients recruited from two preregistered clinical trials for comorbid chronic pain and opiod addiction	165	Patients with primarily back pain and with opiod use tending to exceed 100 months in maintenance of an opiod use disorder.	Eight-session group MORE training	Time-matched active control Support Group therapy	NADA-T	MORE led to greater self-transcendence than SG at 9-month follow-up ( $F = 6.43$ , $p = .012$ ), with increases predicted by FM? power during mindfulness ( $B = 0.39$ , $p = .01$ ).	Frontal midline theta power is positively associated with improved NADA scores, which are both heightened by MORE training.

Reference	Study Objectives	Study Design	Sample Size	Sample characteristics	Treatment Condition	Control/Other Conditions	Measure	Statistical Results	Conclusion relevant to ND
Hanley and Garland 2022	To present the findings from two clinical trials that report whether surgical patients could achieve self-transcendent states and whether those states predicted better clinical outcomes	Study 1: single-site, parallel-group RCT with 3 treatment conditions (one is an MBI) Study 2: single-site, parallel-group RCT with 3 treatment conditions (two are MBIs)	Study 1: N = 196 Study 2: N = 118	Study 1: Patients scheduled for either knee or hip replacement surgery and who were taking part in weekly preoperative surgical educational sessions	Session 1: mindfulness of breath instructions focused attention on the breath and meta-awareness of thoughts, negative emotions, and body sensations. Session 2: *same mindfulness of breathing as Session 1, but mindfulness of pain, which instructed how to map painful sensations spatial location, broaden the field of attention to include non-painful sensory elements, and cultivate meta-awareness, was included	Session 1 cognitive-behavioral pain psychoeducation intervention consisted of psychoeducation about the link between thoughts, emotions, and behavior Session 2: *same as Session 1	NADA-S	Breath-focused mindfulness predicted increased self-transcendence post-intervention (? = 0.41, $p < .001$ ; contrast estimate = 2.05, CI [0.98, 3.11]).	A brief MBI was able to induce self-transcendent states in a general sample of surgical patients, mindfulness meditation-induced self-transcendent states were associated with immediate decreases in clinical symptomology, and the depth of self-transcendent states achieved during meditation before surgery predicted better outcomes after surgery

Reference	Study Objectives	Study Design	Sample Size	Sample characteristics	Treatment Condition	Control/Other Conditions	Measure	Statistical Results	Conclusion relevant to ND
Hanley et al, 2023a	To investigate the process by which self-transcendent experiences emerge in novice practitioners.	Two-arm randomized controlled trial	26	Young-adults recruited from a large university in the Western United States	11-minute standardized mindfulness and body scan meditation	Active listening to Nature documentary	NADA-S	A significant Condition x Time interaction showed increased self-transcendence with mindfulness ( $F = 4.41$ , $p = .001$ , $d = 0.88$ ), partially mediated by decentering ( $? = .41$ , $p = .008$ ).	Mindfulness training increases both decentering and self-transcendence, with participants who were better able to non-reactively observe their thoughts, feelings and physical sensations while meditating also more likely to experience self-transcendence.
Hanley et al, 2023c	To extend the extant body of research on brief, embedded MBIs by examining the impact of embedding a brief MBI in a new activity and in a new clinical population, and to investigate the multivariate relationships between mindfulness-related phenomenological constructs	A single-site, two-arm, parallel-group randomized clinical trial	99 (N=49 treatment)	Cancer patients enrolled in a fitness program at an academic cancer hospital	Listened to a 3-minute audio recorded mindfulness track, followed by a 7-minute mindful treadmill walk	Let their minds wander for 3 minutes, followed by a 7-minute mindless walk	NADA-S	Mindful Warm-up led to significantly greater baseline-adjusted self-transcendence ( $F = 4.23$ , $p = .04$ , $d = 0.41$ ), with SEM confirming direct effects ( $? = 0.21$ , $p = .04$ ).	Brief, embedded MBIs are capable of inducing self-transcendent states, as well as similar constructs that transcendence is strongly correlated with
Garland and	To test whether Mindfulness would	Secondary analysis of a	N=187 (n= 90	Diagnosed with chronic pain,	Manualized 8-session group	Manualized 8-sessions of	NADA-S	MORE produced significantly greater	Mindfulness-induced self-

Reference	Study Objectives	Study Design	Sample Size	Sample characteristics	Treatment Condition	Control/Other Conditions	Measure	Statistical Results	Conclusion relevant to ND
Jinpa, 2024	increase self-transcendence and feelings of universal love, the association between these two variables, and their carryover effects for opioid craving and misuse	two-armed randomized clinical trial involving 1, 3, 6, and 9-month follow-ups	treatment)	had been taking daily prescription opioids for a marked duration, and had met criterion for opioid misuse	intervention of MORE	supportive psychotherapy for emotional expression and regulation of opioid craving and pain		increases in NADA-S post-treatment ( $B = 3.57$ , $p = .002$ , $d = 0.50$ ).	transcendence may promote feelings of universal love, with possible downstream benefits on reducing addictive behavior
Meling et al, 2024	To investigate the effect of the psychedelic substance DMT on meditative states, such as nonduality/self-transcendence, compared to meditation with a placebo	Double-blind, placebo-controlled study over a 3-day meditation retreat	40	Healthy, intermediate meditation practitioners at a Zen meditation center in Switzerland	receiving incremental doses of DMT hemisuccinate and harmine glucuronate, totaling 120 mg over four periods	Synchronous dosing of verum tablets matched in appearance and taste	NADA-S	Significant main effects of group ( $F = 8.78$ , $p = .005$ ) and time ( $F = 21.47$ , $p < .001$ ), plus a significant interaction ( $F = 5.48$ , $p = .006$ ), indicated enhanced self-transcendence with DMT-harmine.	Psychedelic adjuncts like DMT-harmine can facilitate key mechanisms of meditation, like broadened awareness, and an enhanced sense of transcendence.
Gutierrez et al, 2024	To determine the effect of centering prayer practice on counselor empathy, and if levels of nondual awareness mediate this relationship over time	4-week randomized controlled trial with waitlist control group	73 (n=36 treatment)	Counseling graduate students across the US who did not already have a daily meditation practice	Followed video instructions that guided participants through 10-minute Christian centering prayers in the morning and evening	Completed empathy and nonduality forms concurrently without engaging in practice	NADA-T	A three-way interaction showed that changes in Nondual Bliss significantly predicted empathy trajectories over time ( $B = 0.33$ , $p < .001$ ).	Nonduality potentiates the intervention and moderates the effects of centering, increasing the empathy of counselors
Mills et al, 2018	To examine the effects of a multidimensional wellbeing program	Quasi-randomized, unblinded evaluation of a	125 (n=65 treatment)	Healthy participants with no major medical or	Rejuvenation program consisting of twice daily	Relaxation program where participants were instructed to do	NETI	Significant time effects and group time interaction on NETI scores ( $F =$	An intensive integrative medicine program can support a shift in

Reference	Study Objectives	Study Design	Sample Size	Sample characteristics	Treatment Condition	Control/Other Conditions	Measure	Statistical Results	Conclusion relevant to ND
	on cultivating the sense of nondual aware ness and spiritual awakening	holistic wellbeing program		mental illnesses who were willing to abstain from intoxicants for a week and who had not attended a retreat in the past year	group meditation (30min per session) and daily yoga (60min per session), breathing exercises (pranayama) (5min per session), and journaling	what they would normally do while on vacation		38.4, $p < .001$ ; $F = 4.96$ , $p = .029$ ), with meditation practice positively correlating with NETI ( $r = .35$ , $p = .004$ ).	nondual perception, which can support the development of more transpersonal experiences and wellbeing.
Martin et al, 2023	To produce and study persistent forms of self-transcendence through intervention programs of varied length and examine these indices in relation to the Persistent Non-Symbolic Experience Continuum	Non-controlled convenience sample pilot study of spiritual program interventions.	Program 1: N= 371 Program 2: N= 245	Healthy individuals interested in persistent self-transcendence but who had not had such an experience themselves	Program 1: Cumulative 50 hours of instructed positive psychology and meditation practices, with weekly hours committed escalating in the initial month up to 3.5 hours per day, followed by a two-week break period from formal instructions, and then another month supplemented by new meditation	N/A	Modified-NETI	In Program 1, participants showed significant group differences ( $F(5,353) = 35.93$ , $p < .001$ ) and strong improvements over time ( $F(1,353) = 174.92$ , $p < .001$ ). Notably, the effect of time varied by location ( $F(5,353) = 100.10$ , $p < .001$ ), suggesting that program impact was context-dependent. In Program 2, similar patterns emerged: significant group effects ( $F(5,192) = 12.81$ , $p < .001$ ), improvements over time ( $F(1,192) = 42.51$ , $p < .001$ ), and	Both long and shorter mixed positive psychology and meditation programs can transition participants to both transient and persistent forms of self-transcendence and result in highly beneficial results across a broad range of psychological indicators.

Reference	Study Objectives	Study Design	Sample Size	Sample characteristics	Treatment Condition	Control/Other Conditions	Measure	Statistical Results	Conclusion relevant to ND
					practices Program 2: A modified 6-week program accumulating 13 hours of practice with a minimum of 1.5 hours of practice per day and additive practices being introduced in the first 4 weeks			a time group interaction ( $F(5,192) = 4.37, p < .001$ ), indicating that changes differed across experimental conditions.	
Jain et al, 2023	To examine the feasibility and effectiveness of a virtually-delivered, biofield-based sound healing treatment to reduce anxiety, and, among other outcomes, enhance spiritual experience	One-group, mixed-method feasibility study	15	High-level anxiety individuals interested in a research organization, the Consciousness and Healing Initiative, with no previous exposure to the treatment	A standard biofield tuning protocol comprised of three stages intended to activate bodily energy channels	N/A	NETI	A trend-level result ( $p < .07$ ) showed a mean score of 23.13 ( $SD = 5.91$ ), suggesting a possible but inconclusive effect.	Biofield tuning delivered virtually is feasible and amenable to study, and its impact may be substantial in reducing anxiety and improving mental health

Table 1. Descriptions of studies included for review.

and final time point, and the two mindfulness groups in Hanley and Garland 2022 Study 2 were compared against the same active control.

Statistical results from the meta-analysis included  $k = 6$  studies, with a pooled standardized mean difference from the random effects model of 2.95 (95% CI: [0.70; 5.20],  $z = 2.57$ ,  $p = 0.0101$ ). The heterogeneity analysis indicated 98.0% [97%; 98.6%];  $H = 7.05$  [5.78; 8.59], suggesting high heterogeneity. A forest plot (Figure 2) was generated to display individual study estimates along with the overall pooled effect size.

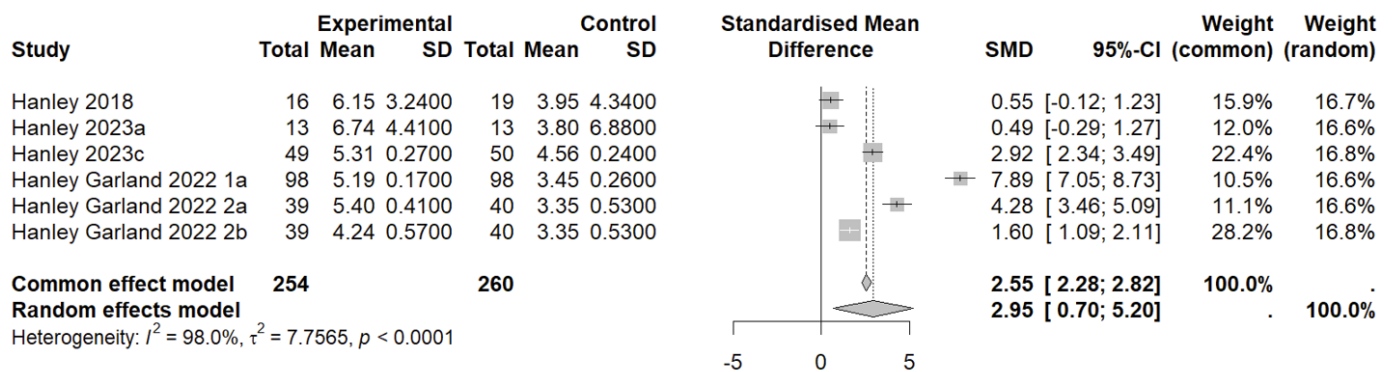


Fig. 2 Forest Plot of control and treatment conditions in relation to NADA-S scores.

## 4. Discussion

The results of this review suggest that nondual states of awareness and embodiment are a highly accessible experience that can be incurred by relatively short mindfulness practices designed for clinical settings. Though the objective of the rapid review and meta-analysis was not to assess the effectiveness of these interventions for particular outcomes in clinical or healthy populations, the studies reviewed suggest that an abiding form of non-dualistic perception can be encouraged by these medical interventions and is a vital avenue for complementary health. Having critically analyzed the existing surveys which nominally



define nonduality as a mental and embodied experienced, this research also allows us to consider how Western science conceives of nonduality as a quantitatively measurable phenomenon. Notably, nonduality in the psychological literature often takes a positive, implicative stance, affirming a discreet experience of unification with all things rather than negating the existence of an independent, perceiving entity as is popular in traditional contemplative pedagogy (Potter, 2008: p. 53-55). Especially for the NETI, living with nondual awareness suggests a lack of existential tension, egocentrism, and, contrarily, an unmerited appreciation for social and environmental existents and their mutual interdependency. Importantly for both psychometrics, NDA is often accompanied by deep positive affectivity and spiritual assurance, the latter of which could be studied as a third dimension of nondual experiences.

Data from the present study suggests various technologies by which nondual awareness can be generated, including meditation (e.g. Hanley and Garland, 2022), psychedelics (Meling et al, 2024), virtual reality (Liu et al, 2022), neuromodulation (Cain et al, 2024), and exposure to natural environments (Sanyer et al, 2023). Mindfulness meditation practice was especially accentuated as a reliable means for inducing NDA following the results of my meta-analysis (k=6). This analysis indicates that momentary experiences of NDA were more likely following mindfulness practice than before the intervention as common effects models showed high and constantly positive effect sizes, albeit with relatively wider confidence intervals when considering random effects across studies. Scores on the NADA-S, which captures transformations in awareness in response to a variety of contemplative interventions (Hanley et al, 2018), have been found to change with longer, two-month training programs (Garland and Jinpa, 2024). Here, we found that NADA-S scores correlate strongly with the Altered States of Consciousness Rating Form (Dittrich, 1998) and could be improved by just minutes of practice. Indeed, results demonstrate that the average

participant in the treatment group scored 2.95 standard deviations higher on the outcome than the average participant in the control group. However, given the significant amount of heterogeneity in effect sizes across studies, extreme differences in experimental and control standard deviations for two studies (Hanley and Garland, 2022; Hanley et al, 2023c), and the small number of studies included for analysis, these findings should be interpreted with caution. The efforts of this meta-analysis to bring several meditation studies into conversation by way of their lack of intensity might also overlook the mechanistic differences that are critical to these disparate interventions: attention to embodied form and movement in three of the four studies (Hanley et al, 2018; Hanley et al, 2023a; Hanley et al, 2023c) rely on different neural and psychotherapeutic processes than mindfulness of the breath or mindfulness of pain (Hanley and Garland, 2022; Grecucci et al, 2015; Zeidan et al, 2019). Future endeavors to investigate the efficacy of popular contemplative practices for such changes in self-awareness should conduct analyses with a wider pool of samples and encourage standardized protocols for contemplative intervention. Until then, researchers will have to contend with the iterative nature of clinical trials and the lack of consensus around how best to define and feasibly deploy mindfulness training (Bishop et al, 2004; Shapiro et al, 2006).

A growing body of literature identified through the rapid review consistently highlights Mindfulness-Oriented Recovery Enhancement (MORE) as a promising intervention for eliciting NDA through structured, medicalized programming. This emphasis is unsurprising given that MORE was explicitly developed to guide participants through deconstructive meditative inquiry, culminating in the integration of reconstructive, positive psychological practices (Garland, 2024). In fact, MORE is stated to incorporate the direct ‘pointing out’ instructions of Buddhist Mahamudra philosophy. Several studies included in the review implemented the full 8-week MORE protocol (Garland et al, 2020; Hudak et al, 2021; Garland et al, 2022), which combines savoring, cognitive reappraisal, and attentional

bias modification to support therapeutic outcomes. These interventions have demonstrated improvements in inhibitory control over addictive behaviors and enhanced self-regulation in the context of pain processing. Notably, two similar clinical trials examining the neural correlates of mindfulness meditation before and after training found that participants in the MORE condition exhibited increased frontal midline theta coherence and alpha power relative to those receiving standard psychotherapy (Hudak et al, 2021; Garland et al, 2022). Elevated activity in these oscillatory bands has been linked to enhanced meta-awareness and cognitive control, which are associated with functional and structural brain changes conducive to behavioral regulation (Aftanas & Golocheikine, 2001; Leet et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2019). At the subjective level, Garland and Jinpa (2024) conducted a secondary analysis of data from Garland et al. (2022), showing that mindfulness-induced NDA, including both aspects of transcendence and positive affect, significantly attenuated comorbid symptoms of pain and addiction. Of particular interest, the non-discriminative nature of NDA appears to play a key role: universal love, a related construct cultivated through objectless attention practices such as loving-kindness meditation, was strongly correlated with NDA and had its effects on clinical outcomes mediated by NDA.

Hanley and Garland (2022) appear to offer the first examination of NADA scores with self-transcendence as a primary—and not secondary—outcome of interest. This study is also relatively early in using one-off, brief (~15 min) mindfulness intervention treatments. In particular, this paper reported on findings from two studies, one which pitted a mindfulness of breath intervention against a cognitive-behavioral psychoeducation program, and the other including a mindfulness of pain intervention alongside the other conditions. Both mindfulness interventions predicted increases in self-transcendence following preoperative practices. In Study 1, the mindfulness of breath intervention demonstrated indirect, mediatory effects on physical function postoperatively, while, in Study 2, self-transcendence did not appear to

significantly mediate clinical pain symptomatology in either mindfulness condition. Findings from these studies elucidate a critical mechanism, meditation depth, which drives the efficacy of mindfulness practice in achieving state-level nonduality as opposed to the longer and cumulative development of trait-level nonduality. Unlike the more dramatic forms of nonduality described in traditional absolutist paradigms, participants in these studies reported an average of 5 out of 10 on a Likert scale measuring the frequency of nondual experiences—suggesting a more moderate level of self-transcendence.

Subsequent studies (e.g. Hanley et al, 2023b, Hanley et al, 2023c and Guitierrez et al, 2024) have continued to explore minimally time-intensive formats, delivering interventions as short as 10 minutes to induce the desired changes in self-referential awareness. For instance, Hanley et al 2023b assigned a group of participants to a mindfulness ‘warm up’ as part of a mind-body care routine for cancer treatment. Tasked with several minutes of seated mindfulness and several minutes of mindful movement while on a treadmill, participants in the treatment group demonstrated improved NADA-S scores, as well significant increases in related measures such as the Spatial Frame of Reference Continuum (Hanley and Garland, 2019) and a new, pictographic Sense of Wholeness item (Hanley et al, 2023c). Hanley, Mai, and Garland, 2023 then pursued an intermediate level of training commitment, observing significant positive improvements in NADA-S scores following 4 sessions of an MBSR course for university staff participants attending a campus mindfulness program (Hanley et al, 2023b). Hanley, Lingard, and Garland 2023 tested the effects of MORE on self-transcendence as a secondary outcome following a single 2-hour session. Overall, these studies indicate the potential that non-intensive training has for achieving acute, state-level experiences of NDA as construed by a standardized psychometric measure. Of particular importance to the clinical researchers, participants in several of these studies were able to generate these atypical and transformative experiences despite serious health conditions and being located within noisy

hospital or unfamiliar laboratory settings. Such embedded installments of nondual mindfulness practice into comprehensive treatment routines presents an inexpensive and evidence-based adjunct to first-order healthcare, affirming that the recognition, and benefits therein, of nonduality are immanent in phenomenal experience.

Another theme to emphasize from the review is the validation of the bliss factor in the theoretical model of the NADA as being important to the phenomenology and application of nondual experiences. Hanley et al, 2018 performed rigorous structural equation modelling analyses confirming the existence of a cluster of items that thematically related to an aesthetic quality of NDA. Gutierrez et al, 2024 showed that bliss, and surprisingly not self-transcendence, demonstrated moderation effects on empathy following a religious prayer practice in a group of counselors-in-training. The authors argued that positive affective states, especially those as pervading and meaningful as bliss, are integral components of contemplative practices which can buttress mental healthcare workers' efficacy, resilience, and own wellbeing. The elicitation of positive affect, over and above the reduction of negative affect, has also been hypothesized to be a sustaining mechanism of changes in psychiatric conditions such as chronic pain and addiction (Garland et al, 2014; Finan and Garland, 2015).

Compared to other instruments assessing nonduality, the NETI has been used relatively sparingly in published scholarship, particularly within pre–post intervention designs. Mills et al. (2018) represents an early and notable attempt to validate the NETI as a primary tool for detecting NDA in spiritual experience. Importantly, it remains the only study to approximate a gold standard design, owing to its inclusion of a control condition. Participants at a Southern California holistic retreat center completed the NETI prior to arrival, immediately following a six-day program, and again at one-month follow-up. Results showed improved NETI scores over time and greater gains for those in an Ayurvedic mind-body program compared to a relaxation program, sustained up to one-month post-

intervention. Additionally, analyses revealed that a greater history and frequency of meditation practice positively correlated with NETI scores. Crucially, the authors emphasize that elevated scores do not reflect a permanent state of NDA, as would be asserted in many contemplative traditions, but rather signal a movement toward egolessness and a transpersonal orientation (Mills et al., 2018). Building on this, Martin et al (2021) introduced a modified version of the NETI (M-NETI) designed to capture what he terms “Location 4” experiences, characterized by nonconceptual, nondual awareness. Situated within the context of positive psychology and contemplative programming, Martin’s study combined M-NETI scores with those from the Mysticism Scale (Hood, 1975) to create a composite Self-Transcendence measure. This index revealed modest to strong effect sizes across two different programs and time points, tracking participants’ movement from temporary experiences of self-actualization toward more sustained states of self-loss and nondual awareness.

Though not formally included for review, additional studies using the NETI may supplement the evidence base of studies that purport to measure nonduality. In the original dissertation study that the NETI emerges from, Butlein (2005) observed differences in score totals across a range of measures that were meant to determine whether purportedly awakened versus unawakened psychotherapists bring different interpersonal qualities, such as nondual recognition, to their practice. After corrections, the results showed that the groups did not have significantly different scores, though the low sample size may have resulted in an underpowered test. Validating this against a group of Masters students in psychology, comparative results suggest that all psychotherapist groups scored significantly higher than the less proficient student group (Butlein, 2005). Likewise, among other measures of spiritual awakening, Corneille and Luke (2021) deployed the NETI in an observational self-report study of online respondents who had experienced significant altered states of consciousness outside of the context of pharmacological agents, finding that participants generally resonated

with the assessment when reflecting on previous spiritual experiences. Another mixed-methods study, Jain et al, 2023 utilized self-report questionnaires and linguistic word count to assess changes in affective processing following three weekly sessions of a virtually delivered sound therapy called biofield tuning, reporting an absence of significant NETI scores in the lone treated group. In a cross-sectional study of non-meditators and meditators, the majority of which practice multiple times a week for an average of 22 minutes, participants in the meditation group scored significantly higher on the NETI (Garcia-Campayo et al, 2022). Finally, Garcia-Campayo and colleagues (2023) have published a study protocol detailing their intention to test the effects of four deconstructive practices—mindful breathing, Tibetan Buddhist prostrations, according to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, a Zen Buddhist koan, and a Toltec storytelling exercise—with non-dual and spiritual experiences as their primary outcomes of interest.

#### **4.1. Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite advancing the availability of nondual awareness and nondual ways of embodiment beyond conservative contemplative prescriptions, the papers included for review are not without substantive shortcomings that limit the interpretation of results and relevance to interdisciplinary discourse. Several design limitations present themselves immediately. For instance, Mills et al, 2018 non-randomly assigned a quarter of participants to the treatment condition and intervention groups were not blinded. Hudak et al, 2021 refers to general associations between self-report measures and neural data, yet the paper does not include descriptive statistics within the paper body, nor are supplementary materials provided. Hanley, Lingard, and Garland 2023 also indicate the generation of meaningful data, however only an abstract, not a full-length manuscript, is available. Finally, as has been alluded to, modifications in study design (e.g. intervention length, session duration, and practice style)

were not performed in a consistent fashion, making comparisons across studies using the NADA-T and NADA-S, respectively, difficult and idiosyncratic.

Specific to my decision to group for meta-analysis those studies utilizing the NADA-S for short interventions, these studies deployed one of two 3-item sets which was said to provide greater consistency with secular interpretations of nondual self-transcendence (Yaden et al, 2017; Hanley et al, 2018). Contrastingly, the original short-form survey, Item Set 1, was espoused to reflect more Buddhist definitions of nonduality provided a change away from the items, “I experienced the boundaries of my self dissolving” and “I experienced my mind expanding into space”. In doing so, these studies are internally restricted from commenting on the power of brief MBIs as they are purported to relate to nonduality in the traditional sense, and, instead, may disregard the metaphysical implications of the construct of nonduality. Critically, though, these Item Set 1 items appear to be loosely based in non-rigorous accounts of nondual philosophy (Bucke, 2010; Higgins, 2012). To facilitate more meaningful scholarship between scientific research and religious studies around this focal construct, it is critical that opportunities for learning from meditation communities and cultural studies scholars be promoted (Dunne, 2025), though there does exist precedent in the literature around deep engagement on the topic of nonduality (see Schoenberg et al, 2018). One important area of amendment concerns the conflation of experiences of oneness and/or dissolution of the self with NDA. While states of nondual awareness certainly are characterized by the potential to induce this degree of self-transcendence, theory would suggest that such radical phenomena are not necessary for the recognition of nondual awareness (Travis, 2014; Hartelius, 2023). Indeed, nondual awareness is stated to be compatible with all other states of awareness, demonstrating nonduality as a fundamental property of consciousness, not a momentary, necessarily awe-inspiring event (Josipovic, 2024). The extricability between transpersonal and nondual states of awareness is



foregrounded in some of the literature included for review (e.g. Mills et al, 2018), where NDA remains present and undisturbed even after the self is transcended or seen to be illusory.

Final, and perhaps obvious, limitations to emphasize is the choice of methodologies for a quantitative analysis and literature search introduced here. While meta-analyses tend to include studies with notably different study designs and approaches to adjusting for and reporting statistical results, the present study elicits assumptions about comparator conditions, forcing one study to use pre-intervention results as control data and using unadjusted or same-study data for others. The results demonstrate dramatic differences in standard deviations and variability in effect sizes, thus the conclusion that mindfulness practice improves self-transcendence scores should be interpreted in light of previous research. As a consequence of streamlining the systematic review process, rapid reviews are subject to passing over critical information, such as was done here in regard to risk of bias assessment, and the confidence in review quality may be weakened provided that these are often executed by small research teams working against short deadlines (Ganaan et al, 2010). A pre-registered research project with a more established clinical scope and inclusive eligibility standards would offer a necessary synthesis to yet unresolved questions in the study of self-loss phenomenology.

Debate still exists about the processes by which mindfulness training, which contemporarily involves the cultivation of attention for noticing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations in a non-reactive manner (Bishop et al, 2004), enacts dramatic changes in subject-object perception (Miller, 2004; Vago and Silbersweig, 2012; Barrett and Griffiths, 2018; Sacchet et al, 2024). Hanley et al, 2023a proposed that decentering, the capacity to reflectively note these perceptions as arising at a distance apart from the observer (Bernstein et al, 2015), allow for a disidentification with restricting perceptions about the self and the possibility for self-transcendence. Eventually, this shift in perceptual position can lead to a

dismantling of subject-object structures as all thoughts are rendered to have no inherent belonging but exist as undifferentiated mental forms in consciousness. Results from Hanley 2023a revealed that mindfulness training increased both decentering and self-transcendence over the course of five training sessions relative to an active control condition. Furthermore, path analysis demonstrated that greater decentering by the mid-point of mindfulness training predicted greater self-transcendence by the training's end. Building on this research, Sanyer et al, 2022 uncovered positive relationships between self-transcendence, decentering, and nature connectedness from an observational study of over 600 respondents, finding that NADA-T scores fully mediated the relationship between decentering from egocentric experience and the perception of interconnectedness. Clinical research needs to continue to clarify, leverage, and bring to bear the contextual features and mechanisms for experiencing nondual states of awareness or embodiment as it is imperative that inexpensive, time-sensitive, and transformative approaches to healthcare be made accessible. As a descriptor for perceptual experience that likewise maps onto ontological and relational levels of philosophical discourse (Josipovic 2013; Josipovic, 2016), the framework of nonduality proposes a multivalent avenue for individual and social wellbeing that is just as meaningful to psychological research as it is to contemplative religious ethics.

## Chapter 3 Introduction

As the concluding sentiments of my first chapter would suggest, nonduality, by its application as a characterization of experience, is nonconceptual (Thurman, 1976; Loy, 1986; Josipovic, 2019). This impasse bears the deterministic mark of failure for any attempt to veridically relay the *Ding an sich*, the thing-in-itself, beyond mere symbols. More challenging for modern sensibilities, ‘experience’ that one possesses unalienable proprietorship over—that is, the features of privacy and autonomy that we assume are essential to experience—is a relatively new idea (Sharf, 2000, p. 276-278). As Robert Sharf, a scholar of Buddhist Studies, explains, this definition of experience as purely subjective and immune to social, cultural, and political influences is an Enlightenment product that is simply untenable. Historical ignorance becomes especially salient as we attempt phenomenological investigations on those meditative traditions that have emerged from highly organized institutional orders in ancient Asia, where instructions for practice were highly prescriptive (i.e. ‘This is what a meditator should learn through practice’) and experiential reports may have contorted to those norms expected by one’s lineage, guru, etc (Sharf, 272-275). Indeed, there is a taboo within many meditation cultures of disclosing the practices and perceptions during one’s training that make such observational inquiries on nonduality a disruption of, if not privacy, tradition (Goleman and Davidson, 2018, p. 210-211). By aspiring to isolate and observe the natural unfolding of experience beyond the typical physical and environmental contexts that the practicing participant is accustomed, the mere pursuit of this especially sanctified moment of nondual recognition may transgress lines that are invisible to the empiricist and binding upon the yogi.

The question, then, arises ‘Who dare propose experiential standards for a subjective phenomenon so elusive as nonduality?’ And were we to concede on the common knowledge that verbal self-report (or some other associated means of thematic capture) is our most appropriate option, “What are the sentimental, structural, and universal features, if any, that

need to be included?” While the pooling of data from a few dozen or a few hundred disparate respondents might offer little resolution in the multi-millennial debates that this contemporary project sits upon, there can be had a certain appreciation for the topical revival that is being stoked within our postmodern context. Perhaps for the first time, those not trained in religious or theological disciplines are attempting to intimately know and produce scholarship on nondualistic perception. Novel methods for describing and applying nonduality are, at the very least, suggested by the use of modern psychometrics, particularly those that rely on quantitative, and not qualitative, insights (Vieten et al, 2018). The present chapter will put forward two measures that purport to capture nonduality before offering thoughtful consideration as to the conditions that would permit such a provocative project, including the incentives and historical trends that could make sense of the scientific study of nonduality.

### **The Nondual Awareness Dimensionality Assessment (NADA)**

The researchers responsible for the questionnaire that has largely inspired the fascination of my study—Adam Hanley, Yoshio Nakamura, and Eric Garland—certainly propound a reconciliatory attitude towards the differing conceptions of nonduality in traditional contexts. In introducing the cultural significance of the construct, they explain nonduality as the mystical core of many varied religious traditions. In the introduction of “The Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment (NADA): New Tools to Assess Nondual Traits and States of Consciousness Occurring Within and Beyond the Context of Meditation”, they comprehensively relate the nonduality in question to the dichotomies of subject and object, self and world, thinking mind and non-thinking mind. Nondual awareness, they posit, is a reference to those discrete experiences in which one is able to transcend above whatever be the parameters of normal perception and see through cognitive obscurations. This state of experiencing is alleged as compatible with all other conscious states, coexisting as an

unperturbed and indivisible feature of human consciousness that only becomes foregrounded on special occasions.

A distinctive contribution to the study of nonduality and nondual awareness by the present authors is that they suppose a two-dimensional characterization of NDA along the continuums of self-transcendence and bliss. They extract these particular dimensions by deferring to classical narrative descriptions (Bucke, 2010) and popular philosophical systems, namely Dzogchen (Higgins, 2012). Considering self-transcendence, Hanley and colleagues (2018a) entertain various models, stating that the designation of their own original instrument is not intended to validate any one model but rather test a multiplicity of competing definitions of what it means to transcend one's self. Among these models are the bifurcation of relational and annihilational (i.e. unification with the greater natural world versus dissolution of the individual ego) transcendence (Yaden et al, 2017), the process of surrendering to and being absorbed into some apparently agential cosmic force (Bucke, 2011), the capacity to see through all perceptions as projected representations of the mind (Kalupahana, 1987), or the insight that the nature of mind is open, sky-like awareness (Namgyal & Lhalungpa, 2006). Eventually, through a particular form of structural equation modelling performed on the questionnaire responses of some 500 amateur adults, they affirm self-transcendence as a gradational process of ever-permeable or ever-expansive representations of the self. This model seems to align better with contemporary scientific and psychosomatic ideas (i.e. Yaden et al, 2017; Dorjee, 2016) over traditional contemplative frameworks. This emphasis on spatial boundaries is also reinforced by the manual addition of just two items, one related to dissolving ("I have had an experience in which the boundaries

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of my self dissolved”) and the other to expanding (“I have had an experience in which my mind expanded into space”), to the more than 90 items already extracted from comparable surveys.

Bliss, the other proposed dimension, is stated to be ubiquitous in both Western and Asian descriptions of nondual awareness. Humanistic psychology has interpreted the prevalence of this factor as somehow owing to the intellectual satisfaction of having self-actualized, a positive feeling innate to realizing that the fundamental expression of consciousness or the universe is demonstrably good, and the relieving of psychological tension that arises from upholding and navigating ontological dualisms (Panzarella, 1980). Indeed, these transformative events can elicit a range of emotional expressions, including that of terror and incomprehension (Mathes et al, 1982). Thus, it is a wonder why the authors did not name this dimension as one of mere emotionality, or, better yet, selected a term that has multiple uses (e.g. awesome as both ‘great’ and ‘fear-inspiring’). Nevertheless, the research team concludes, perhaps rightfully so, that such perceptions of transcending the normal self is usually accompanied by overwhelming positive affect and interpreted as an encounter with innate, pure and good qualities.

Obviating a priority in interests, the researchers attribute considerably less importance to this second dimension, providing more than twice the amount of description and items for self-transcendence than for bliss. One could conceivably reference the NADA as a measure of self-transcendence, which the authors themselves appear primed to do so given its use cases shown in Chapter 2. It can be inferred, however, that the ‘Bliss’ factor was a particularly robust and thoughtful addition to the survey as the four original items added during the initial testing phase were seemingly retained, despite little attention in the supplementary surveys being given to positive affectivity (e.g. Altered States of Consciousness Rating Form; Studerus, Gamma & Vollenweider, 2010). In positing this second dimension, the scale

becomes more than a measure of exceeding a certain cognitive identification with one's conceptual self as the phenomenon aspired to here requires a certain affective orientation. Consequently, this phenomenon may be distinguished from a closely related phenomenon, awe, which appears to be explicitly available to negative as well as positive affect (Keltner and Haidt, 2003). Still, with only 56% of the variability in item responses explained by the organizational presence of these two factors, there leaves wonder as to whether a model comprising more dimensions (e.g. cognitive luminance) would have outperformed the current two-factor model, thereby advancing the significance of these additional characterizations of nondual experiences. Contrarily, high performance in a model that only contained one factor, say self-transcendence, would infer that nondual experiences as defined by the psychometric are ultimately synonymous with self-transcendent experiences, which is clearly equated with the overcoming of perceived bodily boundaries (Hanley et al, 2018: p. 5).

Though successfully serving as a stimulus for future interdisciplinary research between religious studies scholars and quantitative scientists, my initial critiques include that the reliability of study findings, which the authors concluded was validated by a subsample of moderate meditators, could be made stronger were the initial surveys to have been validated by expert meditators. What is more, when validating the survey's utility as a measure of mindfulness practice, the intervention that was implemented consisted of an 11-minute body scan meditation. The brevity of this single session, along with the particularity of a meditation practice that may have been foreign to traditional practitioners (Dreeben et al, 2013), may fall short of the intensity of preliminary practices often needed to generate entrance into nondual states of awareness (Gyatso, 1999). Provided the decades of devotion with which certain contemplative traditions have ascribed to those advanced enough to authoritatively comment on nonduality, the sample demographics used in the studies of Hanley et. al, 2018a—university students and convenience samples of online respondents—are likely incongruent

with those needed by strict traditionalists to inform a measure of nondual awareness. While I generally wish to remain agnostic to the level of dedication needed to offer one's opinion on nondual experiences, I simply claim witness to the possibility that the nondual awareness imagined by these researchers could be somehow underrepresentative (by orders of magnitude!) from that described by monastics. Indeed, this asymmetry in attitude between those contemplatives who would see nondual awareness as a rarified attainment and today's researchers who might be convinced that nonduality is a highly accessible experience is made salient by the end of the first study, where we see that nearly 50% of those same participants concur with statements like "I have had an experience in which I felt myself to be absorbed as one with all things".

### **The Nondual Embodiment Thematic Inventory**

While a brief glance at citation counts and publication density histograms would suggest that the NADA is receiving a high degree of traction among related scales, it is not the only survey measuring constructs relevant to the expansion or dissolution of the self. In fact, a number of psychometrics measure perceived changes in self-other boundaries, such as the Self-Extension Dimensional Assessment (Hanley et al, 2018b), Ego Dissolution Inventory (Nour et al, 2016), or the Interbeing Identity Scale (Fryman, 2023), to name a few that possess similar conceptual frameworks. However, for purposes of concision and a precise analysis of the literature that nominally concerns itself with the measure of nonduality, a second psychometric leveraging my concept of interest has been made available (though with difficulty in accessibility) to my study. The Nondual Embodiment Thematic Inventory (NETI) (Butlein and Astin, 2005) is a 20-item assessment that attempts to reflect what it is like to "live the transpersonal at the deepest levels possible". The NETI was developed out of the research of the dissertation of the first author, David Butlein, from which he declared that



nonduality is best expressed through lived expression and not by stating the correct conceptual beliefs about what it means to exist non-dualistically. Unfortunately, substantial description regarding how the survey was compiled and corroborated has gone unpublished in the dissertation and is elsewhere inaccessible online, despite my strained attempts to find such supporting information. Because of this obstacle, I have had to make sense of the limited and indirect methodological detail admitted throughout the rest of the original dissertation, along with assimilating details from the more recently published articles that have begun to excavate this psychometric. Consequently, I cannot refer to validations and insights gleaned during the construction process as I would with the NADA.

Unlike with the NADA, the NETI is not reduced to distinctive dimensions, though the authors of Mills et al, 2018, Corneille and Luke, 2021, and Siegel, 2013 certainly see it as relevant to studying other experiences of interest, namely spiritual awakening. Specifically, these other citations equate nondual experiences with kundalini and mystical experiences, demonstrating a historical lack of specificity when using this measure and its generalization to metaphysical conceptions of unity. On the one hand, this threatens to mischaracterize the concept of nonduality as presented in religious statements, where a non-dualistic relationship implies a denial of two entities' separability rather than a positive remark about the unification of all things. On the other, this framing of nonduality, though it is descriptive more so than prescriptive, authorizes a contemporary view of the science of nonduality that prioritizes interpretations and values instead of deferring solely to positivistic statements from the cognitive science on perception and awareness. Indeed, the author recruited expert opinion from a renowned Zen Buddhist spiritual teacher when recruiting participants. This had the biasing effect of systematically introducing convenience sampling into the scale's

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construction. Upon inspection, then, the NETI seems designed for usage beyond measuring the phenomenon of nonduality, where, in addition to declaring its ability to assess the frequency or intensity of nondual experiences, the author considers it able to address the qualities of experience. These qualities present a variety of outcomes that infer a modern psychotherapeutic emphasis on nonduality, including compassion, gratitude, authenticity, and anxiety. In doing so, nonduality becomes couched as another term made amenable to positive and transpersonal psychology, insinuating its necessary association with well-being (Ruzek, 2007).

Aside from any concerns that may be raised by the envelopment of this term by an scholarly culture that has at times shone ignorance to Asian contemplative foundations (Edleghass, 2017), the NETI impressively predates much of the popular interest in scientific literature regarding contemplative theory and practice. Highlighting the obscurity of such research related to spirituality and meditation, the defending PhD candidate notes in the ‘Materials’ section of his dissertation that, at the time, no measures existed that would support his aim of describing the awakening process in the vernacular of psychotherapeutic language. As such, he and his primary advisor crafted the NETI in order to capture intimate details of what awakening is like, which, when I analyze the language of the appendiceal items, denotes to me an equanimous way of responding to life events; in this sense, the word “embodiment” corresponds more to the internalization of contemplative values than the attempt to reflect what nonduality is like from the somatic sense of phenomenological inquiry. This interest in meta-reflections of one’s purpose and place in the world can be deduced from items that require respondent’s level of agreement to items such as “[I have an] interest in clearly seeing the reality or truth about myself, the world, and others, rather than in feeling a particular way,” or “A sense of the flawlessness and beauty of everything and everyone, just as they are.” While there are certainly items that maintain a conservative rendering of nonduality that

would be appreciated by traditional textualists, most items infer a more artful and imbibed quality of awakening that does not neatly fit into our understanding of nonduality as a perceptual or identity-based recognition.

As the most thorough re-presentation of the NETI questionnaire, Mills and colleagues excavated the NETI in 2018 for the purpose of validating the efficacy of their holistic well-being program . This study pitted an active control program that consisted of a (tragically!) unstructured, 6-day relaxation program at a Southern California resort against a disciplined program comprised of meditation, yoga, and other practices informed by the Indian medicinal system of Ayurveda. Interestingly, lecture material in the treatment group was devoid of religious rhetoric or any references to nonduality so as to ensure that any retrospective reflection on disruptions in self-related boundaries were discussed in the authentic terminology used by this group of, for all intents and purposes, non-meditators. As the NADA had not yet been published, the authors ground their interest in using the NETI in part to verify the construct validity of the measure—which the original author admits to having failed to do so when not reporting data from the NETI’s first out-of-lab deployment (Butlein, 2005: p. 96)—thereby establishing the hope that this metric could become an indispensable instrument for use in psychological studies of nonduality. What is more, Mills et al (2018) aimed to vindicate, however covertly, the importance of nondual awareness as exalted by non-Western meditation traditions, as well as the implications of clinical mindfulness interventions for achieving nondual awareness. Unsurprisingly, the results suggest that such a

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clinical science intervention as the “Perfect Health program” improved scores on the NETI, thus enhancing participants’ experiences of nondual awareness and spiritual awakening, although the methodologies’ section does not make clear how nondual practice and theory was explicitly incorporated, leaving the suggestion that it is an integral part to Ayurvedic Indian medicine.

Reflecting the questionnaire’s appropriateness for capturing a more wholesome manner of being in the world, the implementation of this questionnaire within a New Age program marks the attempt of psychological scientists to soften, if not secularize, the concept of nonduality. Here, nonduality becomes explicitly restated as an elected way of perceiving the world through a more holistic outlook rather than the more radical stance of religious advocates that considers fundamental ontologies about the nature of how things really are. Nowhere is this more critically stated than in the opening sentences of the discussion section in which the authors concede that participants likely did not attain a stable ability to permanently abide in nondual awareness, but rather that the findings from their program indicated a *shift* towards a new, interdependent disposition. Instead of viewing nonduality as an all-or-none identification with the nature of the mind in the later Mahayana sense, Mills et al (2018) represents nonduality as a continuum from which individuals progress from being highly enmeshed in their own mental proliferations to having these cognitive obscurations increasingly dereified (see Dorjee et al, 2025 for a novel illustration of this continuum). Naturally, the religious apologists that I encountered in my first chapter would push back against this gradual approach, insisting that nondual awareness is the latent realization of our primordial essence, in which the purpose of practice is to quiet the mind long enough to see the pristine nature of consciousness (see “The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomenon” by Longchenpa, translated by Barron, 2001). Meanwhile, what we see in the creation and application of the NETI—and to some extent in the discussion of the NADA—is

the notion of nonduality as something to be cultivated, wherein nondual awareness is just another quality that more spiritually attuned folks have developed to a greater degree, not some absolute way of experiencing the world from whence there is no recourse to again see otherwise. In this regard, the pursuit of nonduality seems but one avenue toward some higher, more ultimate tier called spiritual awakening, rather than as an immediate outgrowth of this moment of awakening.

## **Imprints on The Psychotherapeutic Landscape**

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The increasing popularity of the NADA and the NETI in recent years are demarked representatives of the now tangible interest in the concept of nonduality within psychological literature. Such psychometrics, however, are certainly not the only type of scientific project exploring this construct (Berman and Stevens, 2015; Tzu et al, 2015; Costeines et al, 2021; Cooper et al, 2022; Sanved-Smith et al, 2024). Considering that nondual awareness is often spoken of as an atypical and highly prized state, there lies the allure that a trove of wisdom concerning the heights of the human mind awaits any psychological researcher who is willing to consider the phenomenological accounts and probe the brains of contemplative experts. This is particularly true of nondual mindfulness, considered to be the distinctive faculty of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā traditions (Sheehy and Deroche, 2022). Where engaging in practices intended to stabilize nondual awareness can be transmitted only after years of earnest preliminary meditation training, and as these traditions' emergence represent one of the latest significant developments in the thousands of years after the time of the Buddha (Dunne, 2011; Dunne, 2015), this capacity seems to be the acme of Buddhist practice. Thus, as so-called 'Classical' forms of object-oriented mindfulness practice have been extensively incorporated into modern therapies and continues to find increasing favor among clinicians

and patients alike, this next-level class of mindfulness practice appears to promise largely untapped and perhaps richer psychological benefits. Presented as the sanctified instructions that only exceptional meditative adepts are entrusted with (who, by virtue of their monastic lifestyles, must already be among a community of exceptional minds), the psychological researcher may be easily convicted that nondual awareness demonstrates the upper bounds of human cognition. Researchers Matthew Sacchet and Judson Brewer consider this blossoming area of interest the ‘third wave’ of meditation research following the scientific interest in medical benefits and mechanisms (Sacchet and Brewer, 2024). After decades of research on the wider products of classical mindfulness (Davidson and Goleman, 2017: p. 6-7), cognitive scientists, having mastered these metaphorical, therapeutic preliminaries, may be persuaded that it is finally the time to investigate the deep internal landscape of the buddhas, the mind of nondual awareness (Loy, 2019: p. 40-43). In the psychological study of nonduality, then, there seems to be a scintillating appeal for researchers to opt for enigmatic phrases like “nonduality” over intentionally neutralized terms like “peak experiences” (Yaden et al, 2017), if for no other reason than its rhetorical resonance with Asian and ancient psychology, offering a subtle legitimacy for those, like scientists, who aspire to control and observe a universal phenomenon. Nondual awareness presents the intriguing case of presenting as a universalistic phenomenon for proponents of consciousness research as well as the amateur enthusiast of comparative religious studies.

Such a position renders me cynical and, perhaps, a hypocrite to my own critiques. In truth, while I may myself be a victim of undue fascination towards imagining something pristine and superior in Asian contemplative ideology, I believe that the appeal to nonduality is often well-meaning and is influenced by several inexplicit strands of cultural pressure, those of which I wish to map out and extend. Borrowing the stance of influential humanists whose focal interest is to trace the conditions that give rise to intriguing phenomenon within

meditative culture (e.g. Wilson, 2014, pg. 8), I proceed by inquiring, ‘What historical developments, cultural allowances, and evidence-based theories have led to psychological scientists taking an interest in nonduality and related phenomenon to the point of devising scales like the NADA or NETI?’” Symbolically defending the integrity of hard-fought contemplative insights from erasure by naturalization projects, I will argue that the use of the term “nonduality” in the wider literature is often misleading as it steers away from the inherently unmeasurable idea of nonduality in traditional contexts. However, demonstrating a degree of tolerance for progressive developments in this area, I will attempt to distinguish between two possible understandings of nonduality, what I call the Absolutist and the Therapeutic, the latter paradoxicality made possible by the recent surge in interest among psychological scientists.

The most obvious place to look for those conditions that allowed the likes of the NADA, NETI, and other scientific research projects interested in studying nonduality is in the preamble of many introduction sections that proceeds these studies with near necessity. The ability to effectively communicate the viability and measurable benefit of a certain intervention is the currency of science in both senses of the word: the critical ability to address gaps in clinical literature is what drives the innovative character of scholarly institutions forward, and it also ensures that external agencies and institutes will want to provide monetary support to fund these projects. Particularly for the leveraging of psychological transformations that are meant to target healthy, not diseased, individuals, the empirical literature and theoretical argumentation for a chosen program needs to be quite robust, lest those non-private sector funds be redirected elsewhere. The arguments around

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defusing nondual (and, more broadly, deconstructive and constructive; Dahl et al, 2017) styles of meditation into accessible treatment programs have been particularly ambitious as they often attempt to link outcomes from research fields ranging as far as public health to social and environmental crises (Ryan, 2012; Josipovic, 2016; Mills et al, 2020; Chopra and Castle, 2024). Said arguments rest upon a totalizing conviction of nonduality that extends beyond cognitive perception and considers an enactive approach from which one's being in the world stands both as an agent and a receptacle of change (Meling, 2022). In this regard, the application of nonduality to social as well as meditative awareness recognizes this interdependency, and, when made manifest in one's actions, should result in people caring for one another and the natural world as an extension of oneself (Lim et al, 2015; Hanh, 2021; Macy, 2021). As noted before, salutary benefits for the individual can be expected as this broadened self-concept locates them in a more integrated, supported, and non-isolated web of relations.

Where much of the force of psychological literature is directed towards specified areas of healthcare research, however, many of these manuscript preludes build a less encompassing argument that is made available to incremental, experimental testing. For instance, thus far in the scientific study of nonduality we have seen the philosophy of nondual awareness invoked to address clinical issues of chronic pain (Hudak et al, 2020; Hanley and Garland, 2022; Hanley et al, 2024), addiction (Garland et al, 2020; Garland and Jinpa, 2024), and psychiatric stress (Parisi et al, 2021; Jain et al, 2023). The contrast of nonduality is compelling in these cases not because it proposes that the diseased individual and their disease are forever inseparable (i.e. the individual and the disease are 'not two'), but because it allows for the deconstruction and then reconstruction of one's self-concept (García-Campayo et al, 2023). This outline resonates with my conceptual elaboration of the emptiness of self upon the theory of not-self in the first chapter: Here, it is critical to recall that the



Buddhist argument is not that there is no self which is experienced to be psychologically continuous over time, but that there is, in principle, no fixed self that endures unchanged. Where proponents of Vedanta might also make claim to the utility of nonduality in clinical models, the argument might loosely suggest that the patient is to identify with some higher and unadulteratedly whole sense of Self. Either way it is spun, the general framework of nonduality could be valued in psychotherapy. What nondual awareness is argued to do in psychotherapeutic contexts is to allow for the unraveling of maladaptive cognitive patterns about oneself, such as the hindering notion that one's identity is defined by a certain clinical diagnosis (Garland and Frederickson, 2019; García-Campayo et al, 2023; p. 2). Importantly, this disidentification with one's pain, cravings, distress, and beyond is seen to extend to all phenomena, not just negative appraisals in one's experience, where the contours demarcating one's 'self' from the rest of the world are dissolved (e.g. '*I do not have back pain. There is just pain, in this way and at this level of intensity, in this moment*'). Such related capacities as psychological flexibility, decentering, and mindfulness-based cognitive reappraisal facilitate what psychological researchers may wish to call the 'Therapeutic view' of nondual awareness, where one intimately, though perhaps momentarily, knows themselves to be neither the same nor different from their sensations, a form of perception that defies egoic self-identification (Cherup et al, 2025 in preparation). Integrating this dynamical outlook into everyday perception appears to provide relief from psychological tensions around self-perception, the impetus to esteem oneself with greater intrinsic value, and the hope that one's experience can become increasingly less dominated by their clinical affliction (Hanley, Dorjee, and Garland, 2023).

Of equal interest, this theory lends itself to research in positive well-being, where the interest is not so much in physical or psychopathological disorders but in improving qualities like happiness, meaning, and ethical responsibility (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000;

Duckworth et al, 2005; Gable and Haidt, 2005). This is particularly evident in the application of the nonduality measures on individuals with the affordance to go on meditation and/or psychedelic retreats (Zaccaro et al, 2021; Meling, 2024; Ehmann et al, 2025), the creation of complementary technologies for augmenting conscious perception (Liu et al, 2022; Ng et al, 2023; Melo and Echarri, 2023; Ehmann, 2024), and in the development of brief interventions that can be incorporated into daily routine (Hanley et al, 2023a; Hanley et al, 2023b; Hanley et al, 2023c). The Therapeutic view of nonduality could serve dual purposes, where the disassembly of rigid and destructive patterns in self-perception gives way to the fortification of a dramatically reversed view of oneself, one that is rooted in interdependence and sustained by recurring recognitions of the co-constituent relationship between perceiver and perceived (Garland, 2024, p. 11-12). Indeed, recent efforts have been made to develop what is known as nondual therapy, where individually recognized problems are reappraised as impersonal, not occurring from any one point or targeting any one person but thoroughly diffuse and multiply implicated (Johnson, 2019).

Having demonstrated material, measurable benefits from which the scientific capital that is data can then persuade the invisible hand of the scientific market, nonduality and nondual states of awareness have been issued legitimacy in psychological research circles in recent years. By appealing to influential outcomes such as the remission of symptoms or induction of positive emotions, we see that a term can become scientifically authoritative without much critical vetting so long as it appeals to the indisputable rhetoric of descriptive statistics. This may make sense for a term that is born internally of scientific demands, like the notion of dark matter, a pervasive but previously unassumed force that makes sense of observations among cosmic phenomena. We do not, however, always see this same impulse to necessarily translate and transfer every term from non-Western sciences into the Western scientific vernacular, even though for intellects of old these terms helped to make sense of,

say, mental phenomena. Yet the study of nonduality is particularly compelling because it demonstrates a challenging resolve to maintain conceptual fidelity when being cross-pollinated from the lands of religious studies to the mounting legions of progressive psychologists. In doing so, it forces nonduality to take the shape of a scientifically domesticated phenomenon, subject to the whims of positivist probing. However, in its Absolutist, metaphysical view, nondual awareness is final and immeasurable, meaning that the scientific project is fundamentally misguided (Hartelius, 2023). Therefore, in claiming to advance correlations between mental health with a measurable phenomenon that is claimed to authentically represent nondual awareness, the integrity of nonduality in its strict religious understanding necessarily becomes compromised, and a novel, implicit understanding about its less dramatic consequences (i.e. health benefits, not soteriology) is assumed.

Taking a wider angle beyond the incentives that would lead to such a misconstrual of nonduality, the innocence of these clinical researchers might be preserved by understanding the direct scholastic trends that they were responding to. In doing so, I will begin to make sense of this amphibious construct in meditation research as though its unfolding was neatly influenced by linear strands of academic and pop cultural forces and its operationalization were unambiguous and unchallenged. As recent historiographic work would attest, the narrative of nonduality in psychological research lacks this consensus, and the contestation of theories and methods in the study of nonduality demonstrates its active evolution (Stephens, 2023). Choosing to view this discourse as progress rather than regress, I see the mounting interest in nonduality as an authentic turn toward a more complete engagement with Asian contemplative traditions. By setting the backdrop of religious and psychological dialogue over the past century or two, the impulse to scientifically define and measure nondual states of

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awareness will appear as part of a larger project to acclimatize non-Western concepts of interest.

As has been rearticulated for a number of audiences, we can establish the EuroAmerican intrigue with wisdom tradition concepts, including nondual thought and practice, in colonial encounters with native South and East Asian communities (Lopez Jr., 2010, p. 10-13; McMahan and Braun, 2017: p. 5-15; Dunne, 2022: p. 613-615). Particularly by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there began to swell a rapturous new appreciation for the promises of Eastern thought that is made possible by the translations of scriptural texts (Silk, 2004). Among these were the German Idealists and American Transcendentalists, who, though blind to the prescriptive tensions and semantic fallacies of these literal translations, initiated influential rejections of post-Industrial norms that have sent ripples into today's psychology (Clarke, 1997: p. 67-69). In particular, we see evidence of the Hindu formulations of nondualism as early as the year 1801 through the dissemination of the Upanishads in the English language (Renard, 2005: p. 177). Within these texts was espoused radically different orientations towards the self, the divine, and the cultivation of the good life that accredited self-improvement to individual responsibility. Along with other formidable trends that I do not have the space to elaborate here—including, but not limited to, influences from Romanticism and Theosophy in Europe, and, later, psychedelics and the counterculture movement in America—Japanese Zen and other Mahayana characterizations would have permitted the exchange of the Buddhist characterizations of nonduality (McMahan, 2008: p.97-107; Seager, 2012: p. 39-50; Fields, 2013; Jaffe, 2022).

Naturally, this discourse co-evolved through the theory and praxis now afforded by this liberal and enculturated zeitgeist. On the one hand, a grassroots blend of American psychologists were revolting against the deterministic air of operant conditioning and psychoanalysis, opting for a more hopeful, empowering view of human behavior. This

reaction is encapsulated in humanist psychology and the Human Potential Movement, wherein one's higher values could be incurred by the diligent work of self-actualization (Grogan, 2013). Among these methods of personality change were the endogenous strategies of cognitive reappraisal, mindfulness, and flow states, so readily incorporated by this burgeoning brand of psychotherapy. Demonstrating dissatisfaction with gains in contemporary psychology further still, the 1970's saw the birth of transpersonal psychology, where the ability to meet one's potential in the guise of self-actualization was exceeded by the very capacity to transcend the limitations of the self (Grof, 2008). Particularly informative to the spirit of psychological practice that would provide fertility to my concept of interest, transpersonal psychology more than its predecessor, humanistic psychology, admonished metaphysical objectives of defeating the ego, experiencing mystical states, and transforming one's dispositions, thereby integrating religious ideas with psychological language in perennialist, New Age fashion. Importantly, this maneuver melded together spirituality and consciousness research within a non-exclusive frame, such that certain spiritual objectives like recognizing one's innate qualities were seen as informative to scholarly models of the mind (Taylor, 1999). Mimicking an evolution in thought from the gradualist approach to sudden awakening, we might come to see these two schools of thought in modern folk psychology, the humanistic and the transpersonal, as the one arguing that our higher nature needs to be effortfully cultivated and the latter supposing that our higher nature is to be realized.

Meanwhile in the supposed land of origins, a sensational derivative of neo-Vedanta was gaining steam under the likely name of Transcendental Meditation. Made accessible to the devout Hindu and uninitiated Western seeker alike, these mantra-based techniques were touted with unflappable admiration for their healing potential, leading to some of the earliest practices studied in the contemplative sciences (Wallace and Benson, 1972; Benson and

Klipper, 1976; Dillbeck and Orme-Johnson, 1987). Importantly, a particular rhetoric developed atop the practice of TM, as it was known, where such exoteric procedures could facilitate personal and reliable investigations of cognitive life, the laws of nature, and the concurrent intertwining of consciousness and cosmology, affirming contemplative practice as its own kind of science (Chandler, 1987; Travis, 2020). Receiving considerable criticism over the years as having overstated its therapeutic potential (Sedlmeier et al, 2012), along with the knee-jerk reaction that complimentary, integrative, and alternative medicines induce for the dominant physicalist attitude in the scientific community (Ng et al, 2023), research on TM creates the context from which the scientific investigation of nondual awareness comes to be crystallized.

Maintaining fidelity to the supposed ‘second wave’ of meditation research that delineated the cognitive mechanisms of these multivalent practices (Sacchet and Brewer, 2024), several papers by Antoine Lutz and colleagues (2008) proposed a classification system for studying traditional meditation systems along the continuum of attentional deployment (Lutz et al, 2007; Lutz, et al., 2008a; Lutz, et al., 2008b). In response, researchers from an institution dedicated to a so-called ‘Vedic science’, Maharishi University, suggested a third category, automatic self-transcending, in addition to the attentional binary of focused attention and open monitoring. This third style of practice appealed to the distinct effects of the cognitive faculty of working memory, where attentional fixation eventually becomes transcended and awareness becomes effortless (Travis and Shear, 2010). Though the extension of this typology recognizes the historical significance that overcoming subject/object dichotomies had in traditional objectives for meditation training, Zoran Josipovic, a faculty member of New York University and principal investigator of the Nonduality Institute, quickly responded to the proposal of Travis and Shear (2010) by foregrounding the experiential aim of practice, rather than the cognitive mechanism, as the

delimiter of meditation classes (Josipovic, 2010). Further highlighting the complexities inherent in the language of self-transcendence, Josipovic draws on some of his early research done in concert with Lutz (Kozhevnikov et al., 2009), eliciting that the form of Tibetan practice that they name ‘Open Presence’ is, from the start, free of this duality: while beginner meditators would need to train in object-oriented practices before progressively learning to dissolve, or transcend, their sense of subjectivity, those with a substantial command of Open Presence can commandingly enter this category of experience also referred to as nondual awareness. Dr. Josipovic’s work, spanning 22 articles from 2006 to 2024, represents critical engagement with the philosophy and methods of nonduality as he has attempted to map the neural correlates specific to these practices (e.g. precuneus network; Josipovic, 2014) determined its defining features (e.g. non-propositional; Josipovic, 2020), teased it apart from related concepts (e.g. minimal phenomenal experiences; Josipovic and Miskovic, 2020), and drawn out the individual and societal implications of domesticating this advanced form of meditation (Josipovic, 2013).

Wider still, my coverage of the increasing appeal of nonduality and related concepts should be analyzed under the lens of contemporary historical precedents and affordances that has influenced academic scholarship from the outside-in. In this final endeavor to situate the study of nonduality within a particular epoch in time, I move beyond the concrete dates, figures, and movements specific to the fields of psychology and contemplative research. Instead, I consider the metaphysical presuppositions that underlie Western approaches to the appraisal of mental and spiritual life, where I begin by considering some implicit theories about our constitution as human beings within the material world.

Anil Seth, in his book *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*, begins to describe the medieval and Enlightenment philosophies that shaped the dominant perspectives on consciousness up until recent decades (Seth, p. 178-181). These paradigms ultimately led to

the conundrum in consciousness research that has produced a seemingly insurmountable impasse in understanding the nature of the mind, namely the foundational divide between body and mind. Given the cultural sway on intellectual institutions that had been for so long steered by theistic reasoning, it is a wonder that the scientific community would ever show as much interest in Eastern approaches to consciousness as it does today, including the value of notions founded in direct experience. The possibility of there being a nondual reality—and an awareness that could know this reality self-reflexively (Josipovic, 2021)—seems axiomatically impossible under a creationist cosmology: If there is a willful Creator whose nature is transcendent, which the Abrahamic religions that have deeply informed Western thought declare, then He/She is utterly distinct from creation. What is more important, these theologies (in their conservative form) propose that this Creator is the source of all good virtues, whereas humanity is fallen and removed from this perfect nature. As a result, it would be a grave error to conclude that one can be, or is, inseparable from all other beings and the ground of being itself—one can be the child, servant, or chosen one of God, but one is not God in the same sense that Atman is Brahman or non-self invokes Buddha-nature. On top of this ontological humbling, the Cartesian proposal of a fundamental difference between the domains of mind and matter took hold in the seventeenth century (Seth, p. 180). With this came the crisis of ever fully reconciling body, soul, and mind within a unitary framework that could share a fundamental essence. Against a Dharmic model of mind that situates no central apparatus but instead posits consciousness as the emergent contact of mental faculties and physical objects (Waldron 2023: p. 55-59), nonduality cannot function with the same integrity in a Western worldview where brain gives rise to mind in a unidirectional manner. Ultimately, these notions about human nature portray our condition as complicit with the conceits of a

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deterministic deity and damningly estranged from ever fully knowing what gives our lives color— conscious awareness.

This existentialist severance was relieved by the elaboration of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, where it could be conceived that mental life naturally spawns from a particular composition of our material biology (White, 2008: p. 68-70). However, in an ironic twist of demotion, this egalitarian view of all species brought with it a loss of our special place in the universe. And with the myriad factors that has driven the decline of organized, monotheistic religion and the poor substitute that state-sponsored social ideologies has proven to be, the modern, or perhaps postmodern, person has been forced to seek truth in solitude, apart from institutions and hierarchies (White, p. 208-211; Wilson, p. 39-42). In a Western world that is as individualized and free-thinking as ever, yet simultaneously globalized, polarized, and materially disenchanted, there is a vacuum that only a universalistic spirituality can fill, one that promises to inextricably unite us as it threads together the progressive voices of the world religions while calling itself the *true* nature of sentient beings. The mending of the wound between our self and our Source or our mind and body rests on the same appeal that for scientists interested in nonduality as a practice, state, and principle of ecology is the solution to social, emotional, and spiritual health. A nondual approach to ourselves as conscious entities presupposes that our belief of being separated from our original Source is an illusion and that mind and life are mutually reinforcing because these principles rest in the eternal law of co-dependent origination. Indeed, cognitive scientists have been increasingly coming around to the key premises anticipated by Buddhists of old in the frameworks of embodied cognition (Varela et al, 1991), the enactive approach, (Di Paolo et al, 2010) and active inference (Parr et al, 2022), which ultimately endorses a receptivity to theories grounded in collectivist cultural frames and opposes dominant theistic narratives.

Assuring us that fulfillment is intrinsic to our being, the rhetorical power of nonduality and this general lexicon of Eastern thought offers promise for achieving self-sufficiency, supports us in feeling like an integral member of the universe, overcomes prejudices born of greed, hatred, and delusion through a self-sustaining social ethic, lessens external clinging for material goods, and motions a shift inward towards our innate, eternal goodness. Whatever name it goes by, there is, in the American collective unconscious, felt to be an experience, a way of being, and a simple yet sensible theory which insists on equal concern for other beings while maintaining one's own sanctity and capacity for self-transcendence. Having been reinvented from religious debates to a secularly constructed, therapeutic device, nonduality is that polysemy. Representing both the Advaitin emphasis on oneness and the Buddhist inference toward going beyond concepts entirely, nonduality is but a more novel, esoteric, and legitimate sounding term for the indescribable, rivaling the psycho-scientific and pseudoscientific appeals of flow states (Lynch and Troy, 2021), bare attention (Bodhi, 2011), selflessness (Canby et al, 2024), etc that have impressively come to resonate with Americans. The psychological researcher need not possess a high degree of engagement with these terms in their conservative understanding before supposing that such a conjunction as *nonduality* offers a useful catchphrase for a phenomenon that goes against Western society's apparent dualistic foundation. Better yet for the audience of these psychologists, the progressive sentiment gleaned from a term that suggests both an authenticity to Eastern wisdom and coherence with modern fascinations indicates something sacred, syncretic, and transformative about knowing our most intimate feature, consciousness, as nondual.

# Conclusion

Citing an authoritative taxonomy on the matter, there presents at least five loci from which the nondualist traditions, including but not limited to those that I thoroughly investigated herein, circumambulate around (Loy, 1999, p. 9-17). When discussing nondual awareness, we are most readily primed to consider that capacity for experience to lack the acknowledgement of a subject apart from the objects which it could apprehend. I consider this casualty a product of the common enemy said to be responsible for human suffering, the mental fabrication of “me”, that the wisdom traditions tend to mobilize against. Yet the coinage of ‘nonduality’ is a transmittable adverb of sorts, not a stance on a fixed topic. Nonduality has, therefore, been popularly applied to describe the nature of thought, relationships between objects, the standing between God and man (in the theistic traditions), and the veracity of empirical phenomena and their Absolute, nondual reality. Surely, more nondualities could be erected were they to present serious dilemmas of soteriological and existential import among contemporary or ancient communities. Yet the important matter is that the nondualities brought to light here represent alternative metaphysical positions that Western institutions do not assume or, otherwise, outright reject. I have described in detail two offerings from the Indian subcontinent that expound upon the nonduality of the subject and object, namely, where the subjective self is deconstructed and the objective existence of the mind is the ground of all being (as in Tibetan Buddhism), or where the objective phenomenal world is diminished as illusory and the subjective awareness is revered as the incarnate (as in Advaita Vedanta). Certainly, I fell short of the ability to provide a fuller picture of nonduality, not only across the many traditions—both Eastern and Western—that arrive at the conclusions of its premises, but also across the many nondualities that I could have chosen to engage with.

The nonduality of subject and object in these two traditions is arguably of the highest order for a dialogue with the empirical scientific literature because it is these communities and

this particular philosophical export that has been fashionably leveraged by Western psychologists in their turn towards non-domestic sources of therapy. My second chapter has documentation to prove this, wherein nearly all of the literature that recruits this term does so in the context of addressing the holistic needs of clinical populations or to inform the methods of psychotherapists. The benefits specific to attenuating, plasticizing, or dissolving the sense of self commits to the rhetoric of positivism in that a numerical value can come to validate the mental, spiritual, and embodied value of living outside of the command of an inner conscience justified by dualist assumptions. My third and final chapter tracks the conditions that promote and sustain such cultural phenomena.

There are still wider consequences that the demystification of nonduality speaks to which have thus far been absent from my study and may be rectified in these concluding lines. As I attempt to reckon with those motivations that have led me over the years towards this study, I remark that the strategic power of nonduality as a pedagogical device is to complicate and then simplify the phenomenon under investigation. For instance, when applying nondual awareness to the nature of thoughts, our initial response may be to revise our impression of the self, which invites all sorts of tensions relating to how and when the self is defined, before we come to the realization that there never was a conductor of one's train of thought, only the spontaneous and impersonal occurrence of mental proliferation. In this, there is freedom to see cognitive identification for what it is and let go of the urge to control thought. As I had hoped that nonduality might also speak to my topical interest in the social psychology of selfhood, nondual awareness similarly provides a timeless wisdom to the perennial inquiry of what the self is. A core axiom that a nondual mode elevates is that the self is always in a social predicament, by which it is meant that the self is constructed against the non-self, say another human, human group, animal or plant life. Without this comprehension, the self is unbound by morality, free to act as an independent agent on the

world without concern for equal and opposite repercussions. But this is not veridical to the laws that govern the universe. As I have come to appreciate in my contemplative ponderings, our dependent reality means that all perceptions, thoughts, and actions are linked along some indeterminate causal sequence, and, consequently, my erroneous acts of will harm myself in the larger, cosmic sense. Once internalized, though, the principle of nonduality does not serve as a signpost by which we must align our actions; nondual embodiment means that, in the realest manner, our way of being and interacting emanates from knowing how, not who, we are because we are not “in” the world, we are fully of it.

While I did not have great language to weave these insights together then, I realize now the fallacy in studying individual health apart from social, environmental, or any other conceivable category of collective well-being: our subject-subject delineations are, in fact, tethered, and our subject-object paradigm is untenable. From the nondual prerogative, we can understand, appreciate, and sympathize with the dualistic presuppositions that might lead one to be trained exclusively as a social psychologist, environmental scientist, scholar of religion, or what have you. Yet nondual awareness, as a purview from which we recognize, reflexively, the systems, ecologies, and institutions that living beings co-dependently create, must be the only truly comprehensive approach to either clinical or collective affairs. And though such statements can be recited at the cerebral level as common intuition about the interconnected, intrinsic value of any one being, the call of nonduality, as we have seen for Tibetan Buddhists as well as Advaitics, is not to intellectually grasp this truth. The language that nonduality calls from is not a verbal language, it is the language of direct experience. By taking hold of nonduality not just as a construct to measure conscious changes against but as a method, an attitude really, from which holistic treatment starts and ends, we upend the Western scientific mode of reifying our concepts (e.g. individuals, wellbeing) as objects of study, and, at least it pertains to such a special framework as nonduality, we gain previously unimaginable

perspective on our conditions and conditioning. With this new imaginaire, this most considerate imaginaire, the selves that are the researchers and inheritors of treatment are further accounted for in the social, cultural, and related factors that influence these chains of transmission. The invitation is to *see* with grace and clarity the non-duality between subject and object, me and you, us and them, by which this corresponds to both our tendencies towards material objectification and subjective dissociation. Therefore, whether nonduality takes on an adapted operationalization in the psychological lexicon is of secondary importance to whether the rubric of nonduality as a way of being, including both a critical lens through which science and scholarship can be done, comes to permeate our psychologies.

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## Conclusion References

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