

Unity and Responsibility

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Is it really true that there is an underlying unity, that we and our worlds are all part of a single web of existence, a web which allows a myriad relative differences while retaining the same absolute oneness? If not, how so — where can we find the absolute differences which preclude an underlying unity? But if it is true, what is the meaning of this oneness — and what can we do with it?

Questions like these are among the oldest philosophical problems. But they only acquire meaning when we struggle with them ourselves, in an honest inquiry, in an honest desire to find out for ourselves. And if we accept the challenge to start from scratch, to try to leave behind all our prejudices and conditioning, only then can we taste the freshness of these age-old problems. Only then can the old plum tree begin to flower.

There is a paradox here. At the one hand we have to embark on our own personal quest. At the other hand, without any help it is unlikely that we are able to perceive and identify the many layers of conditioning and prejudice we have acquired. Therefore, reading and listening have their place: they can help us to begin to see the limitations of our usual thought patterns, and the extent to which we have wrapped the whole world of our experience in plastic, in the form of the conceptual overlays over everything which appears to us.

We have been extremely successful in wrapping up our world. We have neatly separated our world in many little packages: one subject surrounded with very many separate objects; our body as separate from our mind; our current activities as separate from our goals; our present society as separate from the ideal society; and so forth and so on. All these differences and polarities are so much part and parcel of our life, that it is difficult even to begin to see an alternative way of experiencing.

How can we begin to see? By questioning. And it is here that philosophy and religion and art can help us. We can read Socrates, Nagarjuna, or Lao Tse. Each of them tell us, in a different way and in a different context, that “the only thing they know is that they do not know anything”.

I have struggled with this question of unity for a long time, and I certainly haven't reached any particular conclusion. Nor do I expect to reach a particular end point. But I am beginning to understand a bit more what all these people may have been pointing at, all those who have been talking about non-duality, and about emptiness. It is a real challenge to try to put my understanding into words. But let me try.



For a long time I have had an intuitive feeling of “wouldn’t it be wonderful if somehow there would be an underlying unity, which could be directly experienced, and which could show us how we can live in this world without being trapped in all its conflicting opposites?” It was so appealing and touching to read how Saint Francis could talk about ‘brother Sun, sister Moon, brother Wind and sister Water’; how Ramakrishna could give the milk meant for the Goddess Kali to a stray cat in which he recognized Mother Kali; how Seng Tsan¹ could write:

Just calmly see that all is One
and by themselves false views will go.

and

Do not go searching for the truth
just let those fond opinions go.

and

The Great Way is without limit
beyond the easy and the hard.

Appealing as these writings were, I found it very difficult to find a connection with my daily life. And looking back, I now see how most of my difficulties were caused by an uncritical acceptance of a world view based on dualities. Of course I was separate from other people and other things: if someone steps on my toes I feel it, and not if that person would step on someone else’s toes. Of course objective and subjective experiences are completely different: just ask someone else to check — they agree with you that a particular table is round, but they are unlikely to share your particular sentimental feeling towards this type of table. Of course a dream world and the real world are different: just try to fly by flapping your arms.

All these ‘of course’s’ were so much a matter of course, that it seemed very hard to find an entree, an opening into a more poetic or mystical or whatever-you-want-to-call-it way of experiencing unity. Thinking rationally, I would ask myself “Unity of what? Where? How?”, even though my intuition remained fascinated by these curious examples of individuals in so many diverse countries and cultures, who seemed to know what they were talking about, when talking about unity. Somehow, I had a mental block, a set of prejudices in the form of these ‘of course’s’.

In order to get around these prejudices, I first had to identify them. Madhyamika literature, as well as many other types of books, proved helpful and inspiring to some extent, but somehow it always remained very difficult to apply the views I read directly to my own life, trying to bridge the distances in time and place and culture and language.

¹ Bodhidharma’s grandstudent; translation from *Zen, merging of east and west* by Kapleau

In this sense, I was grateful to find the book *Time, Space, and Knowledge*, written in our time and for our culture, and containing practical exercises as well, to complement the text.



Over a period of time, in which I read and reread and reread the three books in the TSK series and attended several TSK workshops, I began to get a somewhat more tangible sense of non-duality—or at least I began to see some directions in which to look. Occasionally, this sense would make itself felt more strongly, but it always felt like a haphazard occurrence, just like having unusually nice weather or finding yourself in a specially good mood.

This is how I felt, when I was asked to offer a few workshops at the Nyingma Institute. I chose the topic “Simplicity”, since that seemed to be an essential ingredient in my questioning. In the first workshop, I experimented with a Socratic type of dialogue, probing for the definitions behind the terms we naively use without realizing how restrictive and self-contradictory these terms often are. This approach lent itself very well to making contact with the style of inquiry offered in the TSK books.

During the workshop, I began to realize more than before how ungrounded our dualistic thinking really is. Different things, be they material objects or ideas or feelings or whatever we can experience, are obviously not different in any absolute sense — otherwise they could not share being present in our awareness. So, being different only in a relative sense, we can explore wherein the difference lies. Can we find a clear demarcation between two objects? On a relative level, yes; two cups in front of me may or may not have different colors or shapes, but at the very least they have different positions. But at the same time, they appear to me together as experiences in my mind. Or, more accurately, the only direct evidence I have is the experience of me-seeing-the-cups. And any *interpretation* in terms of material cups and/or mental events is just that: an interpretation. So perhaps the interpretation of my lived world in terms of a fundamental separation between me and the cups is false.

After the workshop, in the plane back home, I began to think again about an example from Madhyamika. We cannot separate the dance from the dancer, even though we can talk about a dance as a phenomenon and a dancer as a person performing an action. Try to picture a dance without a dancer! Try to picture a dancing person without there being a dance! Reflecting back about my own situation, me looking around, me thinking thoughts, I wondered what a ‘me’ would mean without experiences, and what a sight or a thought would mean without a seer or a thinker. And somehow, I began to see some of the absurdity built in into our usual dualistic thinking. How simple! And I began to get some sense of how unity is always present, not as a monolithic unity like that of a single crystal, but as a given-togetherness, an interwoven intimacy.

I felt as if I was finally coming home, and I began to see how I could begin to experience the whole world as my home. I am struggling with words here, and I am using many

‘began’s’ to indicate that it was not at all an earth-shaking experience or anything like that; on the contrary, I didn’t feel that different. And the sense of peace, relaxation and intimacy, although very pleasant, was not *that* unusual. What was new, however, was the feeling of a quiet confidence, of a recognition of these feelings as being a more natural state, a more natural orientation. And with this confidence came a sense of responsibility. A natural responsibility for everything around me, simply because there was no line which could meaningfully be drawn between what was supposed to be ‘my business’ and ‘not-my-business’.

Simply put, me-experiencing-something has an atomic character, in the original sense of the word as something which cannot be cut up into pieces. In a relative sense I can talk about me and about something or someone as if each somehow had an independent existence. But that is only a form of bookkeeping, of using a conceptual overlay; in reality the concepts of me and something have no independent operational meaning. Beginning to feel this new sense of responsibility, I was amazed how positive it felt. Before, I had often viewed responsibility in a more negative way, as something useful and necessary, but often more as a form of duty. Now I felt a sense of responsibility as an ongoing challenge, a task and a celebration. A challenge to interpret what this new feeling of confidence means and implies. A task to express the sense of felt unity in my every action, word, and thought. And a celebration, a celebration that I am already home, that I am part of my home, and that I can participate in taking care of my world, my home.



Curious, how one’s lived world can change without any change taking place. Objectively speaking, the world is at was before. Even subjectively speaking, things are not that different, really. But at the same time they are. I feel a lot closer than ever before to St. Francis’ ‘brother Sun, sister Moon, brother Wind and sister Water’. Where would I be without them? Where would they be without me, *as they are as lived experiences for me*? It is so obvious, that me-feeling-the-wind is one experience, in which we cannot arbitrarily cut out one or two components of the interwoven set of {feeler, felt, and feeling}. So we are brothers and sisters, after all, all sentient beings and all insentient beings as well, for that matter. It is so simple.

And, of course, I am convinced that these insights, or better infeelings, are just one more step along the road of shedding my complexity, and finding my simplicity. But even so, this step has been important for me, in that it has taught me something of what I had heard and read so often: that each step, while being progress from a relative point of view, already expresses the goal and the whole path, from an absolute point of view. Indeed, to let Seng Tsan speak again:

Just let go now of clinging mind,
and all things are just as they are.
In essence nothing goes or stays.