

Nonduality and the Psychodynamics of Samsara
(from *The Sacred Mirror: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy*)
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In the Heart Sutra of the Prajna Paramita tradition, one of Buddhism's most renowned teachings, the great bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara says to Shariputra:

Form is emptiness;
Emptiness itself is form;
Emptiness is no other than form;
Form is no other than emptiness.

His words, which may seem incomprehensible at first, point to the nondual nature of reality. But what do they actually mean? Are they something that can be understood in terms of our everyday human experience, rather than as an abstract, esoteric philosophy? And what does understanding nonduality have to do with psychological dynamics?

As in the above lines, nonduality is traditionally spoken of as an indivisibility of form and emptiness. This indivisibility is said to be both the nature of our own minds and the nature of reality. Emptiness here does not mean a vacancy or sterile void, but rather an open expanse that is not in itself a concrete "thing"—it is empty of "thingness." It is also empty of concepts, in that it is neither made up of concepts nor knowable through concepts. It is self-existing, and can only be known directly.

If we investigate this in relation to our own minds, we discover that when we look directly, we find a basic open awareness that is always there. Usually we do not notice this open awareness, because our habit is to give our attention to objects of awareness—the outer objects of our sense perceptions, such as sights and sounds, and the inner objects of our subjective experiencing, such as feelings and thoughts. But even a little introspection reveals that all of these things occur in a larger space of awareness, or else we could not be cognizant of them. This larger space of awareness points to the empty quality of mind.

But at the same time that our mind has this empty quality of open awareness, it also continually generates forms—a whole spectrum of thoughts, feelings, images, sensations, perceptions, and qualities and states of being arise continuously. Yet when we look deeply into any of these forms, we find that they are also empty,

because they do not exist in a way that is solid, unchanging, continuous, or permanent. They appear at some point in time, abide for a while, fluctuate in the course of their abiding, and disappear at some other point in time. They have some kind of existence in the moment, but they are empty of intrinsic existence in that their existence is not fixed or eternal—they change during the course of their existence, and at some point they cease to exist. So we find that form is permeated with emptiness. And when we look deeply into the emptiness that permeates form, we find that that emptiness is always giving rise to form. Particular forms are not unceasing, but the potency of emptiness to dynamically express itself as form *is* unceasing, and is inseparable from emptiness.

The phenomenal world also reflects this indivisibility of form and emptiness. Physics has shown us that apparently solid forms are comprised of vastly more empty space than they are of matter; and empty space is the birthing ground of form, from galaxies to planetary systems to living beings to subatomic particles. Even intergalactic space, once considered virtually empty, is increasingly revealing itself to be permeated with form—dark matter and energy, fields and forces, a sea of quanta that contains and conveys information, and mysterious things that we can detect but not yet name.

So in both the inner and outer worlds, whenever we look deeply into emptiness we discover form; and whenever we look deeply into form we discover emptiness. This is the sense in which form and emptiness are inseparable, indivisible, and nondual. In tantric language we could say that they are lovers joined in eternal embrace—distinct yet not separate; not one, not two.

This understanding has a poetic beauty that can be appreciated for its own sake, but its significance to our human experience goes way beyond that. We can begin to see this when we explore the implications of not knowing our own nature and the nature of reality as nondual, and we can then extend that understanding to the ways that this manifests in our psychodynamic structures and plays out in our relationships—giving rise to the phenomenon that Sartre so aptly described when he said that "hell is other people."

When we don't recognize our own nature as nondual, what tends to happen is that we see emptiness as something that form has to work against in order to maintain itself. Taking ourselves to be some kind of solid form, we see emptiness as something that could undermine or annihilate us. Rather than recognizing emptiness as the open, spacious expanse of our own nature, we see it as an enemy that we have to avoid or defeat. And rather than seeing form as the natural expression of emptiness, we see it as something that we have to fabricate or defend or promote. So when we fail to recognize the nonduality of form and emptiness they become divided, and rather than being inseparable from one another as lovers, they become opposed to one another as antagonists. We have to avoid emptiness

and we have to fabricate form. And this attempt to avoid emptiness and fabricate form is one way that we could define the activity of samsara, deluded existence based on ignorance of our true nature.

To our psyche, then, emptiness appears as any experience that threatens or disrupts whatever form we're trying to hold onto at a particular moment. Any experience that we don't want to have, anything that's not the way we're trying to get it to be, becomes an emptiness experience for us.

If what we're trying to be, for example, is a good person, then that would be the form that we're promoting—some version of ourselves as a good person, based on our concept of what "good" means. And then if feelings of anger or aggression arise, those would be an experience of emptiness for us, because they threaten the form that we're trying to maintain. Or if we're trying to be someone who is strong and capable, then an experience of emptiness for us might be where we feel weak or vulnerable or helpless. In both instances, we don't trust that our basic openness naturally contains qualities such as goodness and strength; we misunderstand our basic openness as a *deficient emptiness* that we have to override in order to manufacture goodness and strength.

So when we fail to recognize our nature as nondual, not only do form and emptiness become divided, but each also becomes a distorted version of itself. Rather than emptiness being an open expanse whose natural potency generates form, it becomes a negative deficiency that we have to work against in order to maintain form. And rather than form being that which arises naturally out of emptiness, it becomes something that we have to fabricate as an avoidance of emptiness. If we don't make form arise, it won't arise naturally, as an expression of emptiness. Emptiness has to be avoided as a threat to form, and form has to be fabricated in opposition to emptiness. And we can see that this is a state of suffering.

To further complicate matters and to bring in the full vividness of samsara, the very way that we attempt to grasp a particular form, that very activity of form-grasping, actually undermines whatever form we are striving for—propelling us to attempt to grasp it even more intensely. This creates a vicious circle in which we go around and around, caught in a cycle that is self-undermining and self-perpetuating at the same time. This is another way that we can understand the suffering of samsara—we're caught in these cycles that undermine and perpetuate themselves simultaneously, and we don't notice that and we don't know how to get out of it.

For example, say that we're trying to prove that we have value through some activity of earning it. Perhaps we try to earn our value through achievement and productivity, or perhaps we try to earn it by being excessively oriented and accommodating toward others—whatever fits our concept of having value. But the

more that we try to earn our value, the more that that very project reinforces the underlying premise that we don't intrinsically have it—it forever remains something that we have to earn, something extrinsic to who we are. And then that premise propels us to keep trying to earn it, and we are caught in our samsaric loop.

This phenomenon manifests with particular vividness in relationship dynamics. Perhaps we are drawn to someone, and so we try to get them to love us. The problem is that who we become in that attempt usually isn't very appealing. We're trying to make something happen rather than allowing it to happen naturally, so we're constantly manipulating ourselves, or the other person, or both. We may present ourselves in a way that isn't completely open or authentic, or we may try to pressure or control the other—none of which are likely to evoke their feelings of love. Our attempt to get the other to love us actually makes them less likely to love us, and then we feel even more desperate for love, even more convinced that love won't arise unless we make it arise—and the cycle continues.

Or perhaps we are trying to maintain our sense of space in our relationship. Perhaps we see our space as something that could be easily consumed or usurped by the other. So we assert our need for space in a way that is hard-edged or hostile, that has a quality of pushing the other away. The very way that we go about promoting our need for space makes it hard for the other to welcome giving us our space. And then we feel even more convinced that the other doesn't want us to have our space, and we all the more antagonistically go about asserting our need for space.

Samsara is a psychologically brilliant term for this activity, because in Sanskrit it literally means going around in circles. Someone once said that insanity is believing that we can keep doing the same thing and get different results. That points directly to this cyclic phenomenon: we keep doing the same thing in order to avoid some experience of emptiness, and when it doesn't work, rather than recognizing that it doesn't work, we keep doing it harder. We think that if we try harder at the thing that doesn't work, we can make it into something that works. This is the fundamental situation of samsara, and it is the way that the conditioned mind operates in general.

The Psychodynamics of Samsara

We'll look now at the particular psychodynamic structures that make form-grasping inevitably self-undermining—we could call this the psychodynamics of samsara. Then we'll extend that understanding into relationship dynamics.

From a developmental perspective we could say that at the beginning of our

existence we are completely open, simply because we haven't yet developed the mechanisms to close ourselves down. This openness allows us to have some connection with the basic ground of our nature, because that basic ground *is* openness. Our connection with this ground is neither conscious nor fully developed—one reason we so easily lose it—but there is at least some initial presence of it.

But we find ourselves in an environment that does not support our full openness. As human beings, we cannot remain open in some ultimate sense unless we are able to remain open in a particular sense, that is, to the particularity of our experiencing at each moment. We cannot maintain some state of transcendent openness if we have lost our capacity for immanent openness. And our family environment does not support our immanent openness—our openness to the full spectrum of our actual experiencing—because our parents did not embody this in themselves, or receive this from their parents. So our environment supports us in staying open to some parts of our experiencing, but not to others. This inevitably leads to loss of openness and loss of being.

Say, for example, that our environment does not support our staying open to our feelings of pain or sadness. Perhaps our environment remains stable as long as we are happy and doing well, but begins to unravel if we are having a hard time and don't get over it quickly.

At first we might simply register that fact—the environment can't handle it when I am feeling pain or sadness. This in itself isn't a problem; it is simply an accurate perception. But if this occurs again and again, at some point the mind of the child will decide, "my feelings of pain and sadness are bad"—not in a conscious way, but implicitly. And because that experience is too distressing for the child to tolerate for very long, eventually a strategy will develop: "I'll try not to feel pain or sadness." This *is* a problem, because such a strategy brings with it a loss of unconditional openness, and therefore a loss of connection to the ground of being. As this strategy becomes solidified by years of practice, eventually the child's "I" lands on it: "*I* am someone who doesn't feel pain or sadness." For the psyche this is the ultimate solidification of form. And whenever we take a particular form—in this case, a self-concept—to be the truth of who we are, we defend it with the same intensity with which we would defend the physical survival of our bodies.

At this point we've developed a conditioned identity. We could say that the conditioned self is a psychic structure that is made up of many such conditioned identities. And with every conditioned identity we're doing several things simultaneously: on the one hand we're grasping or holding onto some concept of ourselves that we think we're supposed to be, along with all the parts of our experience that support or confirm that. And on the other hand we're rejecting or

warding off any parts of our experience, inner or outer, that threaten or disconfirm that. And we're continuously referencing ourselves to a mental construct that is based on the past, and on how we reacted to our inability to remain open in the past. All of this fabricated mental activity completely obstructs our capacity for openness and presence, which means that it obstructs our capacity to abide in our deeper nature.

So we begin by having some connection with our deeper nature, but then we lose that connection because we are unable to stay open to the full flow of our experiencing. And then because that disconnect is too painful to stay with, we develop a strategy for covering it up. And then we solidify that strategy by identifying with it, which cuts us off even further. We lose the true support of our deeper nature and seek refuge in the false support of our conditioned identities. This is how our samsaric confusion manifests at the level of psychodynamics.

From this perspective, our "wound" is not what happened to us in the past; it is that we were unable to stay connected with our deeper nature in the face of what happened to us in the past. This understanding allows us to directly relate to our problem in present time, which is our disconnect from the truth of who we are. It also helps us avoid the common therapeutic pitfall of fixating on the past in a way that solidifies rather than liberates it.

Looking more closely into the phenomenology of our loss of being, we can see that our conditioned identities always come in pairs: one that is more conscious, and underneath that, one that is less conscious. The more conscious identity—the one that we create to cover up our loss of being—could be called our *compensatory identity*, because its basic function is to compensate. The less conscious identity—where we have identified with our loss of being—could be called our *deficient identity*. In the above example, the deficient identity that goes with not having pain would be something like: "I am someone whose pain is *too much*; if I allow it, it overwhelms and alienates those I need and love." So underneath "I am someone who doesn't have pain" is "I am someone whose pain is too much."

For every conditioned identity, then, there are always two poles: the pole of who we're hoping we are, and the deeper pole of who we're fearing we are. This is an intrinsically untenable situation, because what we're trying to be does not rest on any actual confidence that we really are that; we have to continually work against the deeper fear that in fact we aren't that. This is why our intrapsychic samsaric loops—our "bi-polar" conditioned identities—are inevitably self-undermining. There is nothing we can ever do to prove that we *are* something as long as our deeper belief is that we really *are not* that—especially when our activity to disprove that deeper belief only reinforces it. When we reject our pain as too much, for example, then when it finally does break through it probably will

seem like too much—both to ourselves and to those around us. This is the self-undermining part of our samsaric loop. But then because we cannot tolerate the experience of our pain as too much, we are thrust back into our strategy of repressing it. This is the self-perpetuating part of our samsaric loop. And the momentum created by this mind activity that both defeats and perpetuates itself is inexhaustible, until we begin to bring awareness to it.

The Samsara of Relationship Dynamics

While our own personal samsaric loops can create tremendous suffering and bring us to the outer layers of hell, to really go all the way down into hell requires another human being. So we'll look at what happens in a relationship when two partners' intrapsychic samsaric loops interact to create an interpersonal samsaric loop.

For this I'll use the example of a couple I worked with, whom I'll call Linda and Greg. They were both in their forties, had been together for about two years, and for a year had been completely mired in a cycle characterized by Greg's chronically showing up late and Linda's deep distress about that.

After exploring both their current situation and their backgrounds, we discovered that Linda had a compensatory identity of "I don't need much." She had learned to win her father's approval by being strong and self-sufficient; her stance was that she didn't really need anything from others, but from a motivation of generosity was willing to relate to others.

Greg's compensatory identity, on the other hand, was "I don't give much." His stance was that he wanted nothing to do with codependent entanglements, and that it was not his job to make other people happy.

And so when Linda and Greg first met there was an alliance: "I don't need much" meets "I don't give much"—and it's a match! Many relationships are initially forged in this way, based on a contract between both partners' compensatory identities. And like many couples, Linda and Greg were content in their mutual collusion for a while.

The reason these kinds of contracts are not tenable is the same reason that our conditioned identities are not tenable—they are fabrications with no basis in reality. They require ongoing effort and vigilance to maintain, and cannot withstand any movement toward real intimacy. With Linda and Greg what happened was that Greg's "I don't give much" began to manifest in ways that were painful for Linda—his chronic lateness—and she could no longer deny her pain by fleeing into her compensatory identity of "I don't need much." Instead, her recurring pain began to catapult her into her deficient identity, which was "I can't get enough." For Linda, seeking her father's approval had been a substitute for

feeling truly nurtured in her family. So underneath her stance of self-sufficiency was a tremendous hunger for real human contact; underneath her identification with "I don't need much" was a deeper identification with "I can't get enough."

Once Linda became mired in her deficient identity of "I can't get enough," she began to trigger Greg's deficient identity, which was "I can't *be* enough." Greg had spent much of his childhood trying to make his depressed mother happy, with no success. He even remembered the precise moment, at age eleven, when he gave up all hope of ever making her happy. But with this giving up came a terrible sense of inadequacy, which became solidified into a self-concept of not being enough. His strategy of "I don't give much" was a compensation for his deeper belief that "I can't be enough."

As Linda's deficient identity of "I can't get enough" became uncovered in their dynamic, this elicited Greg's deficient identity of "I can't be enough." And the more that Linda reacted from "I can't get enough"—usually by demanding and blaming—the more that Greg reacted from "I can't be enough"—usually by withholding and withdrawing. This became a self-escalating cycle in which the reactive habit of each partner triggered the reactive habit of the other. From the "heaven" of the mutual support of their compensatory identities, Linda and Greg were now in the "hell" of the mutual antagonism of their deficient identities. Their intrapsychic samsaric loops had expanded into an interpersonal samsaric loop, and anything they did from within that loop only intensified it. This is the template that usually underlies painful, repetitive relational dynamics.

In working with this couple, I helped them recognize the deficient identities that were being triggered for each of them, so that they could begin to hold them in awareness rather than react from them. This included helping each of them experience their sense of deficiency as a *feeling* rather than as a truth about who they were, and then learn to allow the feeling without reacting to it. Once they became more aware of and present with their underlying vulnerabilities, they were able to begin having a different kind of dialogue with each other, based on self-disclosure rather than defensiveness. This was the way out of their samsaric loop. Rather than losing awareness within their reactive patterns, they began to bring awareness to bear on those patterns. And their greater transparency with their own experience allowed them to be more transparent with each other, which is what allows for intimacy.

As Linda and Greg each learned to stay open to and present with their experience and to tell the truth about it, they also reconnected with their own ground of being—which *is* openness and presence. And then from that ground of being, other qualities of being arose naturally—even when what they were initially opening to was extremely painful. Strength and groundedness arose, kindness and compassion arose, humor and lightness arose. They experienced an innate sense of

okayness, simply by being open. Rather than the fabricated okayness of their compensatory identities, they experienced the true okayness of their deeper nature, which arises from openness, naturally and without fabrication.

At these moments in the work they discovered something else of great significance: When they were simply present, with themselves and with each other, they experienced a profound sense of connection. This was a revelation to them both. Greg had always seen connection as something he had to provide or generate in some way, and this had contributed to his wariness of connection. And Linda had seen connection as something that required one person to be in the role of giver and the other person to be in the role of receiver—which also made it into a project. Usually she tried to fulfill this project as the giver, until her underlying sense of need broke through. Discovering a different basis for connection freed them both from these old constructs, and allowed them to experience connection as something that arises naturally from openness.

Of course this was a major piece of work for both of them, and it unfolded over many months. For a while Linda and Greg would trigger each other again outside of our sessions, and could only come back to openness with my guidance. But this was not surprising, because their core deficiencies were being activated. For all of us, this is where we are the least conscious and the most likely to be hijacked by our conditioned patterns. Eventually, though, they stabilized in their capacity to shift from reactivity to openness, and to tell the truth about their reactivity when it arose.

For Linda and Greg, then, we could say that they were caught in their samsaric predicament as long as they believed that their nature was really a deficient emptiness. And they became freer as they began to experience their nature as nondual—as a self-existing openness that naturally gives rise to qualities of presence. The true resolution of their relational difficulties was to become more porous to their deeper nature, which then also gave them a basis for discovering real intimacy.

This is the doorway for all of us—to recognize that all of our suffering, relational and otherwise, is a symptom of our loss of being and our confused attempts to remedy that. From the perspective of the conditioned self this is extremely bad news, because it means that all of our identity projects, which we have been invested in all of our lives, are doomed to failure. But from the perspective of our wish to awaken it is extremely fortunate, because we finally understand that, in the end, nothing will work unless we realize our deeper nature.