

## **Illusion and Reality: a commentary on C.G. Jung's introduction to the classic Chinese text, "The Secret of the Golden Flower."**

Many teachers of oneness, of "advaita", have appeared on the Western scene in recent years. A number of these are in the lineage of two of the twentieth century "godfathers" of the advaita (non-duality) tradition, namely Sri Ramana Maharshi, and, the perhaps slightly less known, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj.

The essence of the teaching is that all is one. All is one consciousness, one being. Furthermore you are that being, that consciousness. All perceptions, all thoughts, feelings, sensations and images arise within and as an expression of this one consciousness, this one source. Follow your experience to its source, to its arising and you will find that you are that source, that field of awareness.

All that arises within this field is born and dies. All arises and passes away. All forms – that is bodies, sensations, feelings, images, thoughts – appear and disappear, are born and die. From the perspective of non-duality this means that they are unreal. They appear and disappear, therefore unreal. Only the empty space is permanent and thus real.

The tradition says, and the teachers rooted in the tradition say, that this source, this spaciousness is your true nature. This source, this emptiness, this silence, this awareness is in fact who you truly are. When this is known it no longer matters whether this is understood as a transcendent external presence (God), or as a transcendent inner presence (Self). In fact the duality of inner and outer has been transcended. Ramana Maharshi said "God, Self and Guru are one and the same."

This is the reality as described by Ramana, Nisargadatta and others.(1)

However we need to remember that this is not a rational truth. Not something apprehended by the dualistic mind. These truths are conveyed by those who have broken through into the absolute non-dual reality.

However, most of us live (most of the time) in a relative (dualistic) world. That is to say we live in a bubble of thoughts and reactions that produce an apparent "I" moving about in an apparent world, like an actor in a stage set. We inhabit the world of identification. The sense of self (ego) identifies with the perceptions, sensations, feelings and thoughts that appear in awareness and says "that is me." Because your experiences are so close to you, because they appear to be located in your head or your body, you assume that that is you. Things are too tight. The gaps, the space between isn't noticed. We come to believe in a separate self, which appears to be real, by clinging to this flow of perceptions as "I."

The Buddha taught that our sense of self is based on illusion. This mistaken belief about ourselves gives rise to desire and aversion – in other words to duality.

Ignorance of our true nature leads us to believe in, identify with, a separate self. Ramana and Nisargadatta refer to this as the "I am the body" idea.

Once we see ourselves as separate the engine of desire is ignited. We must get what we want/ need – that which gives survival and pleasure – and avoid what gives pain and non-survival. Thus the duality of desire and aversion is born.

## **Identification**

As we grow and develop from infancy we pass through stages of identification – I am my body; I am my emotions; I am my thoughts; I am my morals; I am my creativity; I am my power and authority.

There's lots of research on these developmental stages of the identified self. Much work has been done, and many versions of the basic developmental stages mapped. By far the most complete meta study of the data has been created by Ken Wilber. His work gives a thorough overview of these stages.(2)

Wilber has also created a meta study of how the world's wisdom traditions have described and mapped the transpersonal stages of consciousness – the transrational, transegoic stages of consciousness.

This brings me to my main point. We cannot avoid the ladder of identification. We cannot jump to non-dual consciousness, even when we've been told about it, or because we like the sound of it. We have to live deeply into our own experiences, even though, from the perspective of non-dual awareness, they are unreal, illusory.

We cannot bypass what we feel, think and experience. In fact it is precisely through our experiences, especially the most painful and troubling, that we gradually realise "not this, not that" and it dawns on us that we are the experiencer, not the experience, the movie projector and source of light, not the projected image.

The way out of the wheel of samsara, the endless round of desire and aversion, is not through avoidance or transcendence. We can only live in the freedom beyond the opposites when we have truly arrived there, not just because we'd like to.

The door into emptiness and freedom is continually shown to us in the form of our experiences, thoughts, feelings and sensations. Our sensations and feelings are "evidence of clarity."(3) They arise from openness and show us openness. So can we experience these as deeply as we can? Let's not label our fears and painful sensations, and thus distance ourselves from them. When we really let them in, feel their full force, we find that they "spontaneously liberate" (4), leaving us once again in the obvious and natural openness and clarity that is our true nature.

But there is no avoiding the steps on the way. In his introduction to the ancient Chinese classic text "The Secret of the Golden Flower", Jung warns us against such premature transcendence. He writes:

"So it is better for western man if at the start he does not know too much about the secret insight of Eastern wise men, for it would be a

case of the 'right means in the hands of the wrong man'. Instead of allowing himself to be convinced once more that the daemon is an illusion, the Westerner ought again to experience the reality of this illusion. He ought to learn to recognise these psychic forces again, and not wait until his moods, nervous states, and hallucinations make clear to him in the most painful way possible that he is not the only master in his house. The products of the disassociation tendencies are actual psychic personalities of relative value. They are real when they are not recognised as such and are therefore projected; relatively real when they are related to the conscious (in religious terms, when a cult exists); but they are unreal to the extent that consciousness has begun to detach itself from its contents. However, this last is the case only when life has been lived so exhaustively, and with such devotedness, that no more unfulfilled obligations to life exist, when, therefore, no desires that cannot be sacrificed unhesitatingly stand in the way of inner detachment from the world. It is futile to lie to ourselves about this. Wherever we are still attached, we are still possessed; and when one is possessed, it means the existence of something stronger than oneself. ('Truly from thence thou wilt ne'er come forth until thou has paid the last farthing.') It is not a matter of indifference whether one calls something a 'mania' or a 'god'. To serve a mania is detestable and undignified, but to serve a god is decidedly more meaningful and more productive because it means an act of submission to a higher, spiritual being. The personification enables one to see the relative reality of the autonomous psychic fragmentary system, and thus makes its assimilation possible and depotentiates the forces of fate. Where the god is not acknowledged, ego-mania develops, and out of this mania comes illness.

The teaching of yoga takes acknowledgement of the gods for granted. Its secret instruction is therefore intended only for him whose light of consciousness is on the point of disentangling itself from the powers of fate, in order to enter into the ultimate undivided unity, into the 'centre of emptiness', as our text says. 'To hear such a teaching is difficult to attain in thousands of aeons.' Clearly the veil of maya cannot be lifted by a mere decision of reason, but demands the most thoroughgoing and persevering preparation consisting in the full payment of all debts to life. For as long as unconditional attachment through cupiditas exists, the veil is not lifted and the heights of a consciousness free of contents and free of illusion are not reached; nor can any trick nor any deceit bring this about. It is an ideal that can be completely realised only in death. Until then there are real and relatively real figures of the unconscious." Jung: commentary to the Secret of the Golden Flower pp113-115 (5)<sup>1</sup>

In this passage Jung shows us that he is aware of the non dual reality that lies beyond the realm of psychology. However he is also at pains to point out in no uncertain terms the fact that, like it or not, we are mostly ruled by psychic contents more powerful than ourselves. These are the unconscious complexes which the psyche still pictures as gods, as powers, just as it has done for millennia.

Those who have attained to the deepest insights into the nature of consciousness, tell us that these are phantoms, illusions. This is all well and good but does not deal with the fact of their power over us.

As Jung says, they are "real" when entirely unconscious and thus projected. That is to say when our own characteristics remain unconscious, and are thus seen as attributes of external events, other people and so on. They are "relatively real" when these projections are taken back and it is understood that these things are not happening to us as events over which we have no control, but are in fact forces within our own psyche.

They only become "unreal" when it is seen fully that they are contents of consciousness. They are reflections or images that arise in the pool of empty awareness. This emptiness, this primal ground, is in fact our true and permanent nature, in which the play of images (the play of the gods) arise. This is the highest experience and teaching of the wisdom traditions of the East.

But this last can only be real for us when we've truly come to it. If we act as if all is illusion, but are not truly seated in the state of empty awareness (in the witness state), we will certainly suffer from dissociation and the powers of the psyche will continue to be real and relatively real, thus ruling our lives. We will not truly be in the "centre of emptiness", but disembodied and dissociated, only imagining that we have dealt with our stuff.

To live in "undivided unity" (advaita) it is necessary to completely accept and include all that we are, without avoidance and without pretence. We must feel into and fully experience all that arises.

### **Staying with conflict**

When we are stuck in negativity it is always because we are in some way conflicted. Conflicted between what is and what we would like. The "what we would like" is mostly rooted in the longings, desires and needs of infancy.

When we find ourselves in this place, the teaching is to rest in awareness with what is. That is to say to sit in and with the conflict, along with all the ensuing negativity for as long as it takes.

This means to sit with the opposites for as long as is needed. This is not the same as sitting above them, or just knowing about them, or trying to fend them off. We sit in the conflict between opposing parts of ourselves, or the conflict between "I" and "world".

It is to sit right in the middle of them in the heat of the pain, anger, disappointment, fear or despair and do *nothing* about it. This is the key. What you *do* is to try and stay conscious and commit to not acting. Which means not to be driven to action by all the demands spilling from your wounded self that you should resolve this problem, sort it out, do something, be in charge.

If you do this – sit in the experience – feel the sensations and emotions just as they are, without categorising or judging, they will go. They will “spontaneously liberate.”

Why? Because they are not real. They are shadows, spooks, from the childhood nursery. Like the shadows in Plato’s cave, they have no intrinsic reality. Thus when exposed to the light of consciousness in this way they spontaneously liberate. Because they are simply forms in the “One” which have become hardened only through our belief in them.

1 See works such as “I AM That” by Sri Nisargadatta, and “The Spiritual Teachings of Ramana Maharshi”, an anthology of Raman’s teachings.

2 See works by Ken Wilber. “A Brief History Of Everything” is a very good introduction, which itself is based on a much larger work of scholarship, “Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: the spirit of evolution.”

3 This is a term used by Candice O’Denver, a realised teacher of non-duality and founder of the “Balanced View” school. See [www. balancedview.com](http://www.balancedview.com) and [www. greatfreedom.org](http://www.greatfreedom.org)

4 This is a term used by Dzogchen master Namkhai Norbu. See “The Crystal and the Way of Light: sutra, tantra and dzogchen: the teachings of Namkhai Norbu.”

5 The Secret of the Golden Flower: a Chinese Book of Life. Translated by Richard Wilhelm, with a foreword and commentary by C. G. Jung. Penguin Arkana, 1984