

GREEN TEA LEAVES
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Friends,

In our world of religious pluralism where each religious tradition seeks to garner more adherents to their fold, there can be areas of teaching and practice that seem irreconcilable. One such area is the idea of a personal God versus that of a non-personal reality called by many names — nirvana, suchness, emptiness, consciousness, brahman, saccidananda, atman, buddha-nature, dharmakaya, and dao, to name a few.

On surface comparison, these two ideas cannot be further apart. Take for example, a personal God. Such a God is a person albeit divine with whom one can have a personal relationship, with what amounts to something like mutual conversation in times of prayerful communion. Contrast this to an impersonal reality such as pure infinite consciousness which final nature is emptiness or nirvana. There is no relationship, no mutual conversation, no room for prayer especially in the form of supplication and devotion. These two notions of the ultimate seem so disparate and irreconcilable. But are they really? Can we find a deeper unity amidst the apparent discontinuity of ideas, to uncover a creative tension between two presentations of truth that can be reconciled at a meta-level? This is possible. And this is so because reality is not fossilized and concretized but fluid and processual by nature. Beliefs and assumptions about the inherency and

permanency of persons and things stumble us. When we probe deeper into this state of affairs, we can come to a radically different though counterintuitive realization of the nature of reality, which is none other than the reality of experience. In the end, nothing but experience can be known and spoken about.

Is God Personal?

When we say and feel that God is personal, what are we doing? We are simply giving expression to an experience of ultimate reality as relatable, personable, even intimately so. There is a living taste of felt caring and loving, embracing and connection, communication and communion. Is there anything wrong or erroneous about this? None whatsoever. This is an integral part of being relationally human, that's how we are. There is no need to judge or condemn this experience and discourse of a personal God as somehow inferior or laughable. That would be a blatant case of intellectual and spiritual pride.

That said, is there a way of experiencing and speaking about a personal God that does not lead to reification and clinging that creates suffering? Can we love and devote ourselves to God without stumbling into emotional and dogmatic hyperactivity? Similarly, any idea or ideology is open to the same clinging, hyperactivity and dogmatism, even so-called nonduality teachings and what we might call the Dhamma. This is a human problem of ignorance and delusion, not the fault of the reality of God or Spirit or Dhamma.

Coming back to my question, the answer is yes. How so? By way of wise discernment and insight into the constructive nature of language and the reality-shaping power of concepts. Seeing thus, we can understand God in theologically safe and wise ways that lead away from dogmatic clinging and towards direct realization into that ineffable translinguistic and transconceptual dimension — in other words, “mystery.” Given its nature that defies human self-grasping and self-driven controllability, such realization can be seen as in effect an act and initiative of grace beyond self-effortful striving. We can describe this as a “revelation from above,” which is an inbreaking from the ultimate dimension that so suffuses us that we are irrevocably transformed. Thus, one relates to a personal God as an expression of lived reality that reveals the personable, relational, and intimately loving nature of nondual consciousness that transcends binaries and dualities: an effulgent response and outpouring love of truth that is ceaselessly compassionate without reference point or duality, yet felt and sensed as intimately real, relatable, responsive, and giving. This felt realization has the power to inspire and renew, purify and sanctify, empower and uplift in bountiful and beautiful ways. God is thus personally real and effectual.

Impersonal Reality?

Nondual teachings whether Advaita Vedanta or Zen or Dzogchen constantly stress that their conception of ultimate reality is impersonal. There is a strong tendency towards monism, the idea that everything is made up of the same substance which is pure, infinite,

and nondual consciousness. Philosophically exquisite and contemplatively precocious, nonduality as a teaching can feel liberating and expansive to many. It is thus easy to slip into the trap of elevating one's own insight as "higher wisdom" while caricaturing devotionality to a personal God as "lower mythology" or worse a "false dogma" and "sick delusion." Needless to say, such derogatory statements are unwarranted and untrue, symptomatic of spiritual pride and self-righteousness.

Authentic nonduality in contrast is able to perceive with skill and insight that personal devotional spirituality is as valid and effective an approach as the nondual one. How so? A nondual perspective sees discourse on personal God and loving relationship between believer and God as a concession to our human experience of relationality, mutuality, conceptuality, and linguisticity. In other words, our human speech, ideas, and felt experience of mutual communication point to a valid albeit relative truth of consciousness. This personality and relationality can be seen as a refraction of the light of nondual consciousness into the drama of person-to-person interactions and thus shared histories. This is not a falsity but a reality, one that is conventionally and relatively real.

Devotional Nonduality

Prayerful relationship between believer and God is correctly an instance of person-to-person communication and mutuality. Personal devotional language as such is a verbal concession to human lived reality and an adroit convention of speech. That said, this hospitable view is inadequate in that it nevertheless privileges nonduality as ultimately real and relegates dualistic mutuality to a position of conventional reality. In effect, the latter is not only conventionally real but concessionally so. Hence, it is at best a second-rate truth. This admission of concession is one-sided and neither entirely fair to the faithful devotee nor accurate to the facts of devotional experience.

Conversely, for the devotee deeply in love with their God, the nondual expanse of consciousness points to the deep essence of Godhead beyond words and ideas. For sure, this nondual expanse is not a thing or a substance of any kind. This caveat needs to be explicitly stated as many nondualists fall into the hidden trap of reifying even this pure consciousness to become self-identified with it. Avoiding this trap, devotees can receive profound insight into and revelatory illumination on the final nature of pure nondual consciousness — as naked emptiness connate with sheer lucidity or luminosity that shines in effulgent responsiveness.

With the absolute interiority of God recognized as this ineffable emptiness, there is thus a spontaneous self-emptying and outpouring of love that is not self-fixated but effortlessly all-encompassing. This is the fullness or plenitude (Greek. *pleroma*) of God inseparable from his emptiness (Sanskrit. *sūnyatā*). While *seeing and knowing and being* this ultimate emptiness that is plenitude, one nonetheless does not privilege it over and above personal

relationality and devotional communion. Both prismatic facets are equally validated and affirmed in meta-nondual mutuality. I term this perspective “devotional nonduality” transcending both simplistic monism and problematic dualism. This is a more balanced view that considers the facts of devotional experience.

Mutual Recursive Fulfilment

In short, what I suggest is this: personal devotionalism to God and impersonal abidance in nondual nirvanic consciousness are not contradictory but complementary truths. One does not need to sublimate one paradigm to the other. Nor does one viewpoint need to be subversively fulfilled in another, where one is seen as lesser to the other and thus finally completed in the other. No, that would be clearly colonialist in attitude. I propose that each spiritual paradigm — the personal and the impersonal — mutually fulfils the other. The personal God is the intimately relational effulgence of primordial consciousness that is empty and lucid; and nondual consciousness is primordially the lucid emptiness of the personal relational God who is self-emptying love. This mutual fulfilment is recursive, in that they fold back onto themselves to keep enriching and deepening each other’s perspectives unto ever more profound levels of complementarity and nonduality. We just need to be open and courageous to try this. Will we?

Everyday Wisdom

Try out these ideas for the next month:

1. *With loving openness and self-honesty, find a good devotional book whether Buddhist or Christian or some other tradition to read and reflect upon in light of your own experience. Write to me if you want my suggestions for Christian or Buddhist ones.*
2. *Continue your deep questioning, probing with curiosity into the heart of experience free from the weight of assumed dogmas, doctrines, and beliefs. In addition, see if you can allow yourself to embrace either a nondual perspective (if you are already steeped in devotionalism) or a personal devotional stance (if you are a hardcore nondual contemplative). Try it on for size. Be curious.*
3. *Be open to exploring and experimenting with contemplative or worship experiences normally outside your comfort zone. You might want to check out an authentic and credible spiritual community online as a first step. They may have YouTube videos or the like that you can access on demand at your own leisure.*

I pray that all sentient beings and you, my friends, will be able to move beyond old binaries to penetrate and participate in this festival of blissful freedom of mutual recursive fulfilment — where plurality and singularity entwine in empty lucid transparency without measure. Amen.

Blessings,

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