

# The nondual nature of consciousness

## -hypothesis of a special case of spiritual practice

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The title contains controversial claims – and they need to be explained. At first a bold statement about the nature of consciousness and as an appendix the assumption that this should be the core-hypothesis of a to be proposed special case of spiritual practice.

The first statement needs to be explained because of the problematic implications of the terms *nonduality*<sup>1</sup> and *consciousness*<sup>2</sup> – and how they could belong together. The second statement seems to imply a contradiction because we are inclined to suppose that creating hypotheses is a domain of scientific thinking – which is always in search of objective facts and empirical evidence. Therefore the word hypothesis implies an attitude of critical rationalism that keeps up an assumption just as long as it seems plausible. If one finds convincing arguments against the hypothesis a critical thinker has to refuse it as a no longer acceptable concept of reality. But spirituality is usually understood as a part of religion and therefore based on “supernatural” experiences and a belief-system that cannot be proven using empirical evidence. Hence spirituality is expected to be the opposite of scientific thinking.

Thus the aim of this article is to give answers to the following questions. The first of which is: What is the meaning of the nondual nature of consciousness – and is it describable in an acceptable philosophical way? The leading questions of the second topic are: what is meant by *special cases of spiritual practice* – and can there be an intellectually acceptable possibility for integrating science and spirituality? Or to put it

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this article nonduality means every thinkable aspect of nonduality, as the nonduality of subject-object or body-mind or live-death or being-nothing and so forth. A very recommendable book about the topic of nonduality has written David Loy, an US-American professor of Philosophy and ZEN-teacher. He develops in his book a core-theory of nonduality, as he displays in a systematic way the deconstruction of our usual way of dualistic thinking and willing by Buddhism, Vedanta and Taoism. He also refers to western thinkers like Wittgenstein, Heidegger and William Blake. The main argument is that these three Asian systems may be understood as different attempts to describe the same experience. The categories of Buddhism (no-self, impermanence) and Advaita Vedanta (all-self, maya) are “mirror images” of each other. Ultimately it becomes difficult to distinguish a formless Being (Brahman) from a formless nonbeing (shunyata). Buddhism seems to be a more phenomenological description of nonduality, Vedanta a more metaphysical account. (David Loy: A Study in Comparative Philosophy. New Haven. Conn. Yale University Press. 1988)

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Metzinger illustrates “that today, the problem of consciousness – perhaps together with the question of the origin of the universe – marks the very limit of human striving for understanding. It appears to many to be the last great puzzle and the greatest theoretical challenge of our time.” Thomas Metzinger: Conscious Experience. Exeter 1985, pp. 3.

another way: is there a contemporary concept of spirituality that is compatible with the philosophical and scientific attitude of critical thinking and *intellectual honesty*?<sup>3</sup>

As these are big questions in the framework of a small article I will try to reveal the following thoughts as straight and as simply as possible and therefore not on the level of systematic academic philosophy. Nonetheless I think it is possible to formulate some results of complex theoretical systems in conclusions that are generally understandable.

Before we discuss the first statement about the nondual nature of our consciousness it is necessary to clarify the controversial implications of the second statement. Is there a form of spiritual practice that is compatible with the philosophical and scientific attitude of critical rationalism?

### **About the compatibility of science and spirituality**

According to the philosopher of mind Thomas Metzinger scientific and spiritual attitudes arise from the same basic idea. In both we can find an unconditional will to truth. When we take this thesis for granted that an “ideal” spiritual and scientific attitude arises from an unconditional will to truth then it is possible to conclude that science and spirituality are guided by the same normative ethical root-idea. A concept labelled by Metzinger *intellectual honesty*. From there it is possible to consider spirituality as an epistemic attitude – concerned with the matter of self-awareness free from dogma and belief-systems, realized by a spiritual practice. And as *meditation*<sup>4</sup> can be considered as a special case of spiritual practice to maximise the benefit of insight about the “inner world”, science is led by rational methods to maximise the benefit of knowledge about the “outer world”. Both should be guided by the normative ideal of absolute truthfulness.

Here there is the de-reflective methodology of letting go all thinking and willing and as a consequence of that “letting-go everything” a special mode of experience of

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<sup>3</sup> The term “intellectual honesty” is a translation of the German expression “intellektuelle Redlichkeit” what is an important concept in the German history of Philosophy. The meaning of “Redlichkeit” is not easy to translate but it is possible to describe it by the terms honesty, truthfulness, fidelity and integrity. In a public lecture on an interdisciplinary conference of meditation and science the philosopher of mind Thomas Metzinger gives a systematic answer how science and spirituality can be integrated by this concept. (Berlin, 2010-11-27). The here presented article tries to display the essential results of it. This lecture is publicized in German on: [http://www.philosophie.uni-mainz.de/metzinger/Metzinger\\_Berlin\\_2010.pdf](http://www.philosophie.uni-mainz.de/metzinger/Metzinger_Berlin_2010.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The meaning of the term meditation and the thesis that this special case of spiritual practice is an epistemic method will be analyzed in the next chapter.

“myself” in the “world” takes place. By contrast we have the critical process of science that over and over again deconstructs theories about the world, by generating new data and new perspectives for the construction of new theories about the world – which in turn will be de-constructed by new data and other perspectives of the world.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is possible to talk about meditative and scientific practice as different forms of deconstruction. Special cases of spiritual practice deconstruct the common-sense concept of a substantial, isolated and self-existing self; and the scientific approach deconstructs the assumption of a pre-existent and objective world.

To take this “great doubt” for granted and to reflect seriously on the assumption that there is perhaps no such thing as a self-existing “self” in an objective pre-existing “world” might seem ridiculous at first glance. But in the light of the discoveries of quantum physics and insights of modern brain sciences these doubts are legitimate.

Quantum physicists state that an appropriate understanding of nature is not possible by dualistic operations, because the world is not completely understandable by empirical methods and logical thinking. Instead of that, nature baffles scientific thinking with strange contradictions. The “world” appears as a dynamic and indivisible wholeness that embraces its subjective observer. Observation itself influences the observed matter. Max Born asks in this context “then how can we talk about an objective world?”<sup>6</sup> and answers: “the time of materialism is over. We are assured that physico-chemical methods are in no way sufficient to display the matters of fact of the world; how could we thus talk about the facts of mind.”<sup>7</sup> Nils Bohr said: “From a contemporary standpoint the function of physics isn’t the observation of something that is a priori given, but it is the development of methods to order and summarize human experiences....”<sup>8</sup> For modern physicists this cancels the concept of an objective observer who observes a pre-existing “world”. It seems that the presuppositions of the common-sense idea that there is a clear distinction between the observer (subject) and the observed (object) cannot be maintained any longer.

To the question if there is, in the human brain, an autonomic, central control-instance – a “self” that judges, coordinates, decides and acts creatively, Wolf Singer

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<sup>5</sup> Karl R. Popper – the celebrated philosopher of science – claimed that we are in contact with truth exactly in that moment, in which we falsify a hypothesis. This deconstructive act of breakdown is the moment in that we are in contact with truth.

<sup>6</sup> Max Born: Physik im Wandel der Zeit. Braunschweig 1966. p.50. 4.edition. (Translated from German to English by the author)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.55. (Translated by the author)

<sup>8</sup> Nils Bohr: Atomphysik und menschliche Erkenntnis II. p.9. Braunschweig 1964. p.9. (Translated from German to English by the author)

(director of Max-Planck-Institute of brain sciences in Frankfurt) replies that the common-sense-idea of a self-existing self stands in crass contrast to what neurobiological research has found out. According to Singer it seems clear that such a superior instance in the brain does not exist. There is no such thing as a self, there is no observer and no mover. About the impression of an objective phenomenon (for example a dog) Singer says that there is, except the hearing-, seeing-, touching- etc. – consciousness and the emotional reaction of it, no representation of a “dog“ in the brain, just the relation of different areas in the brain that create the imagination of a coherent perception, in a mysterious way.<sup>9</sup>

According to this quotation it is possible to conclude that brain sciences and quantum physics deconstruct the subject-object-duality from different ends. Quantum physics deconstructs the concept of an objectively and material “world”. Brain sciences deconstruct the concept of a separated and self-existing “self”. And as we will see it is possible to understand special cases of meditative practice also as methods of deconstruction; as the meditative person de-reflects the common-sense idea of an isolated “self” in a separated and objectively given “world”. Hence the deconstruction of subject-object-duality seems to be a good guiding-line of interdisciplinary discourse.

Of course there are still obvious differences between the spiritual and the scientific approaches to truth: Since the main-methods of the spiritual traditions could be labelled as “meditation” they can be categorized as non-intellectual and non-objective ways to “truth”.<sup>10</sup> For science it is critical thinking and empirical proof by collecting objective data. The practice of meditation is typically individual, silent and the approach to truth is intuitive. In contrast to that science maximises the gaining of knowledge in a systematic way, by spreading knowledge and organizing networks and schools.

Furthermore it is not evident that spiritual practices are in general a good example of *intellectual honesty*.<sup>11</sup> There are plenty of anti-rational or dogmatic expressions of “spirituality” in the realm of conventional religions as well as in different

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<sup>9</sup> Wolf Singer: Out of a public lecture, given at the university of Leipzig, 2007-02-08. DVD, Auditorium-Netzwerk. 2007 (Translated from German to English by the author)

<sup>10</sup> At this point it is important to clarify that “truth” in this context is not an objective fact one can grasp like *anything* in the realm of space and time. It is not an intelligible idea of *anything*. More than this it is a totally different mode of experience that offers a qualitatively new kind of (nondual) knowledge free from subjective standpoints and perspectives – as it is a performance of transcending the “common-sense”-mode of “subject-object”-duality.

<sup>11</sup> We could easily add “and as well science” is not a good example. But in that matter the attitude of science and philosophy towards critical rationalism and intellectual integrity seems to be less doubtful than many cases of spirituality – knowing that there are, in the realm of science and philosophy, “black sheep” as well.

esoteric and new new-age movements which are not able to stand up to a critical analysis by philosophical and scientific examination. Therefore we speak in the context of this article about “*special cases*” of spirituality.

But what is the criterion of these *special cases of spirituality*? As already said the core of spirituality can be considered as an epistemic attitude, which means that it is guided by an unconditional will to truth. A spiritual practice, based on that attitude, is therefore in search of knowledge. And it is precisely this epistemic attitude that is the connecting point between spirituality and science – guided by the Kantian leading question “what can we know for certain?”

A very obvious example of this epistemic orientation of a spiritual practice is Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> In Buddhism the central concern of practice is the transformation of ignorance (avidya) into knowledge (vidya). Today maybe the most common forms of spiritual practices to realize this transformation are for example the awareness-meditation of the Vipassana tradition that is more or less free from any ideological orientation; or the totally secularized variation of it like the MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction). Of course there are also plenty of different spiritual practices in the Hindu-traditions like the three ways of the Yoga (Karma-yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Jnana-Yoga); or the Contemplative Prayer of the Christian tradition, or the practice of Zazen in the Zen traditions.

In different spiritual traditions we can find different methods for the realization of insight into the true nature of the self and the world. And - as we will see – it is possible to subsume these different spiritual ways into the term “meditation”. Typical of those different approaches is the idea that a continual systematic practice is

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<sup>12</sup> There is of course not “the Buddhism” as we can find a plurality of Buddhist movements. And among them as well plenty expressions of spirituality that do not fit into the criteria of spirituality proclaimed in this article. Just like some fantastic and antirational stories in the Bible there are as well plenty fantastic and antirational stories in the realm of Buddhism. For example there are the Jatacas of the Pali-Canon in Theravada-Buddhism or the iconography of the Book Of The Dead in (..)Tibetan Buddhism. It’s possible to read them in different ways. One mode of reading is on a level that claims those fantastic stories as empirical and historical true. This is the approach of fundamentalism - that claims fixated and closed-up meanings of the Holy Scriptures. As a consequence of that approach it is not possible to accept different views, as they are necessarily less true or wrong or sinful because they deviate from the eternal truth of the holy words. A different mode of reading these Holy Scriptures is on a symbolic level. This approach is based on the assumption that the stories of the Holy Books contain messages they can’t be expressed in a direct way – as they offer space- and timeless truths they cannot be fixated as empirical facts. For that these stories are seen as metaphors for anything abstract that can’t be expressed in a direct way. And because these symbols are not closed up they are able to deliver to different people and to different epochs new meanings. Some “spiritual people” prefer to refuse the mode of symbolic and critical reading and take all stories for historically or empirical true. This mode of reading of “spiritual texts” is of course not compatible with the ideal of intellectual honesty, because plenty of them do contradict to temporary scientific insights.

fundamental for the transformation of consciousness – to create the capacity of a totally new quality of experience and knowledge. And this delivers an important definition-aspect of those *special cases of spirituality*: in these cases of spirituality it is all about practice and not that much about theory. The emphasis is on inner activity and not about adapting and believing in any dogmatic claims or institutionalized systems. More than that it is a vital performance of an immediate experience.

Guided by the ethical root idea of absolute truthfulness and its epistemic attitude, meditation can be considered as a science of the inner (subjective) world (which is more common in the eastern traditions); academic philosophy and science are focussed on the empirical (objective) side of the world (which is more common in the secularised western culture).<sup>13</sup> In other words: it is possible to take these apparently radically different approaches to reality as two sides of one coin belonging basically together. The meditative way tries to find out something true about reality from an “inner” (subjective) perspective and the scientific way tries to find out something true about reality from an empirical (objective) perspective.

The central concern of this article is to make the hypothesis strong that different mystic traditions can contribute something essential to philosophical and scientific perspectives about the *nature of consciousness* – still one of the greatest mysteries of science. The scientific approach to the matter of consciousness is from an outside perspective – focussed on empirical data; and in addition to that the practice of meditation enables to look at consciousness from a “first-person” perspective and might therefore deliver interesting insights to that topic – form a level of immediate experience.

In fact this article claims that the spiritual core-hypothesis of mind could deliver a matrix that is able to embrace the whole amount of data, collected by different ways of scientific and philosophical research – what still does not exist in science. But this matrix will be dissatisfactory for scientific and philosophical thinking. Why? The postulation of this matrix gives no adequate answer to the Kantian question “*what can we know for certain?*”: as this question has two implications they cannot be fulfilled by meditative insights into the to be proposed nature of consciousness. Because the question “*what can we know for certain?*” presupposes that there is any *thing* what we could

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<sup>13</sup> More about the “touch-points” of Western science and Eastern spirituality you can find for example in the Journal of Dharma. Science and Religion by Mathew Chandrankunnel. 2011. Vol.36. No.2; further: Matthieu Ricard, Wolf Singer: Hirnforschung und Meditation. Ein Dialog. Frankfurt am Main. 2008.

(objectively) know and that this knowledge should be intercommunicative. It should be a knowing of some thing that we can grasp. Hence it should be possible to share this knowledge. But the knowledge of “it” is neither objectively nor subjectively available since this matrix – guided by the core-hypothesis of spiritual practice – can only be experienced as subject-object-nonduality.

Therefore we get two disappointing problems: The first one is that the nondual experience is no “thing”. Thus it cannot fulfil the criterion of the Kantian question (what can we know for certain?) as “what” implies that we need an object of philosophic and scientific considerations. But as the nondual experience is an experience of no-thing-ness “it” does not fit into the subject-object-structure of philosophic and scientific knowledge. As a consequence we have a second problem for we cannot communicate the immediate knowledge resulting out of this experience of no-thing-ness, because we cannot transfer the nondual experience directly to the dualistic structure of words and numbers.<sup>14</sup>

From a philosophical point of view we can only say something about the necessary pre-conditions of the possibility of that insight. But we cannot communicate the nondual experience itself. It is a qualitatively different mode of knowledge that does not fit into the structure of our common habit of dualistic thinking, speaking and willing.

However the good news is that everyone should be able to verify the nondual nature of consciousness on their own – by the immediate experience of “it”. And if the proclaimed core-hypothesis of the mystic traditions is true, everyone should be able to realize an absolute certain knowledge about the nondual nature of reality, because everybody should be grounded in this “groundless ground”<sup>15</sup>. The knowledge that arises out of this nondual experience can be labelled as “absolute certainty” because it arises from the immediate presence of consciousness by its very nature. That means that all separating relations between an isolated subject and distinguished objects disappear.

In the light of this core-hypothesis (that the nature of reality is nondual) and orientated by the statement that there is an intellectually acceptable way of integration between science and spirituality (both are guided by the normative ideal of absolute truthfulness) it is now possible to describe the characteristics of a prototype of such a

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<sup>14</sup> In other words: This fact is problematic insofar as the rational reductionism of scientific thinking accepts only a reality that is empirically evident (objective) and therefore communicable. But the qualitatively totally different mode of nondual experience is neither the perception of any “thing” (object) nor is possible to transfer this immediate experience into the dualistic structure of language.

<sup>15</sup> The “groundless ground” is just another metaphor of the nondual nature of reality, like the words God, Nirvana, Oneness etc. – ciphers of the indefinable.

spiritual practice. Such a special form of spirituality accepts a wide spectrum of different methods and theories about the world, because every concept can be considered as a construction of reality, but not as reality itself. This secular spirituality, based on freedom from any ideological orientation, implicates a pragmatic attitude that has the capacity to be open for all kinds of critical thoughts and questions and methods to resolve the “core-problems of existence”<sup>16</sup> – motivated by intellectual honesty and truthfulness towards oneself.

The attitude of the mind of such a spiritual person is just in search of truth. But as already displayed and according to the postulations of the mystics of different traditions “absolute truth” is not any *thing* one can grasp. Furthermore it seems to be an experience of forgetting oneself and realising that “I” am not (like in Buddhism) or “I” am everything (like in Advaita-Vedanta) which is in the end the same as the act of deconstructing the duality of subject-object just from different ends. Thus these are just different ways to perform a nondual mode of perception. Or as Sri Nasargadatta Maharaj, a famous teacher of Advaita Vedanta, put it:

When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that’s wisdom.  
When I look outside and see that I am everything, that’s love.  
Between these two my life turns.

For a pragmatic reason this special kind of a spiritual person has the possibility to use the hypothesis of the nondual nature of mind (in a propaedeutic way). Since it might be helpful to trust in that proclamation of the nondual nature of reality and to go for it in a meditative way – to check if the realisation of that insight can be verified or not. To be able to perform this act of truth one needs a spiritual practice and philosophical scepticism – to gather experiences and to proof them critically. And just in case there is something true in the claims of the mystics like Buddha Gautama, Meister Eckhart, Plotinus, Shankara, Rumi etc. it should be possible for everybody to verify the claims of the nondual nature of reality by oneself, because nobody can be separated from that groundless ground of everything. But depending on various terminologies of different

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<sup>16</sup> According to Irvin Yalom – the US-American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst and one of the most important founders of existential psychotherapy identifies four core-problems of existence as: the problem of death, the problem of isolation, the problem of freedom and the problem of meaning) of life. A systematic description of these topics you’ll find in his very recommendable book: Existential Psychotherapy. New York 1980.

metaphysical systems and cultural contexts, these experiences are named Oneness / Nonduality / God / Brahman / Nirvana – and may be just different terms of different mystic traditions referring to the same quality of (nondual) experience.

Of course, from a standpoint of radical criticism, one could always be doubtful about the possibility of the nondual nature of reality. From this perspective it is possible to deny those meditative visions as a kind of illusion, generated by a self-manipulated state of consciousness. And indeed I cannot find any certain philosophical or scientific argument to prove the correctness of the hypothesis of nondual nature of mind. But on the other hand one can criticize this scepticism as it refuses a possibility of insight in a similar way the clerics of the Middle Ages' refusal to look through the telescope of Galileo just because they did not want to accept a reality that could not be true under the conditions of their own belief system.

But if one tries to go for it – how does it work? And what is meant by a spiritual practice that shall realize the nondual nature of mind?

### **Meditation – a special method to realize a special kind of knowledge**

As the word meditation has its roots in the Western culture it is important to clarify if it is intellectually acceptable to use this term in the context of different cultures. The English word *meditation* is derived from the Latin word *meditatio*, from a verb *meditari*, meaning “to think, contemplate, devise, ponder”. The pre-Christian Latin term “*meditatio*” describes a preparing consideration. Therefore the practice of meditation tries to consider an experience that is not (yet) present. This preparative character of “*meditatio*” gives a crossover to a different significance of *meditatio* that is familiar with the first one: a practice that shall prepare “anything” which is not yet present. Thus “*meditari*” can be translated as “practice” or “exercise”. In the Christian tradition the Latin word “*meditatio*” has transformed to an extended significance, in the sense of a religious practice as a reflexion towards the presence of God.

From there the word meditation refers to the possibility of envisioning the truth – in the Christian tradition a synonym of God.<sup>17</sup> Postulated by the Christian mystics this immediate insight of truth is the experience of divinity. Or to put it in more philosophical

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<sup>17</sup> According to the Neo-Platonic System the “One” – as the absolute origin of everything - is the Truth, the Beauty and the Good. Christian theology integrated this metaphysical concept as a basic model but replaced of course the “One” by the word “God”. The Christian Mystics considered this “One” very consequently as a nondual “One” transcending all differences between all beings. But the conventional theology considered the “One” as a personal God and creator and therefore as a radical different “One” opposite to the world.

terms: the praxis of meditation leads to the possibility of a nondual experience that is phenomenologically experienced as *nothingness* as there is (in the mode of no thinking or willing *anything*) no longer any object that is perceived by a subject – but the immediate presence of consciousness by its self.

At this point it becomes clear that the term “meditation” is in its significance not bound to Christianity. Furthermore it is – in that meaning – placeable in different religious or secular systems. And even if the imaginations of that calmness of mind (a totally relaxed state without intending or grasping *anything*) are different, it is always about resting in timeless presence without reaching out for anything in the future or sticking to something of the past. It is a mode of just letting go everything, what liberates the consciousness from its de-finitions.

But in contrast to that plenty of works of *philosophy of mind* postulate that self-awareness is basically *intentional*.<sup>18</sup> In order to that it is the intentionality of a consciousness that creates a sense of self, by reaching out for any “thing” of interest and the tendency of grasping itself as a “subject” in a (dualistic) world of separated “objects”. Thus the central implication of that statement lies in the assumption that a subject can only exist by reaching out for any object – to manifest itself as a subject. A sense of self needs an object to become aware of itself as a self. Even if a self is just aware about itself there is a separating relation between the observer (subject) and the observed (object).

From a standpoint of an ego-self there remains always an inescapable distance. It seems our normal (dualistic) mode of consciousness generates always the perception of isolated subjects/objects in the realm of space and time. Hence the compulsion of intentionality avoids the possibility of living in immediate presence and a relaxed state of mind – as every act of perception reaches out to grasp any object of interest in the distance of space and time. Living in immediate presence is on that level of perception not possible.

*If intentionality is the medium of the consciousness of a self then it is possible to conclude that the cancellation of the compulsion of intentional activities could erase the experience of being a separated self in an objective world.* Thus it seems that the sense of self “just” exists as a construction – generated by a purposive (dualistic) mode of perception. And this construction can also be deconstructed, by de-reflecting the

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<sup>18</sup> The hypothesis that intentionality is necessarily constitutive for human consciousness is displayed in plenty of theories in the history of philosophy. An overview on that topic gives: Caston, V. : 2007: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/intentionality-ancient>

intentional acts of thinking or willing *anything*.

Every intentional act of dualistic thinking generates a separation between thinker (subject) and thought (object); and every act of dualistic willing generates a subject who wants and a separated “thing” as an object of its desire. But a meditative person, in search of the postulated nondual nature of reality, calms down its restless and intentional mind, which opens it up to the act of nondual experience. In the calmness of mind the experience of *nothingness* enters, as an immediate presence of consciousness by its own nature, without reaching out to grasp *anything*. Just a totally relaxed state of mind – resting in its nondual ground.

If the hypothesis of the nondual nature of mind is correct, the advance of the realisation of a nondual mode of experience would be – as already said – the solution of an important aspect of the epistemic question “what can we know for certain?” Since the nondual experience offers a knowledge that is immediate (=nondual), it is possible to label this insight absolutely *certain*. Because it is a knowledge of non-relating to any distinguishable object, “one” realizes in this nondual mode of acknowledgement the presence of the nondual ground of everything. In other words: *The epistemic problem (object) is dissolved as the questioner (subject) disappears – because the nondual nature of reality enters.* “One” realizes that he or she never really existed as an isolated and separated subject in a world of external and distinguishable objects; “one” realizes his or her profound and immediate connection to everything.

This insight into the immediate connection of everything to anything leads to an existentialistic and psychotherapeutic dimension of meditation.

### **About the existentialistic and psychotherapeutic dimension of meditation**

The core-problem of existence can be addressed as dualism between life (being) and death (nothing). And as this should be the most fundamental problem of existence it must be possible to deduce every other existential problem from this one. To put it concretely: We do suffer from illness because our health is gone... we are lovesick because our beloved is gone... we are frustrated by getting old because our youth is gone... we are sad because someone dies... we feel fear (Angst)<sup>19</sup> because we will

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<sup>19</sup> The German term “Angst” refers to the indefinable, indeterminable, indescribable that is an inescapable part of our lives. Because anything will end up as nothing and because we do not always know how... why... or when? “things” appear out of or disappear to nothing, the mental state of “Angst” is – according to Martin Heidegger – an ontological state of human existence. A human being (Dasein) has the capacity to reach out to a future that is vague, uncontrollable and not intelligible. And as death is an inescapable

certainly die. Just because time goes on *everything* that is turns into *nothing* – just like everything that will be in the future was not yet in the past.

But, what could be the contribution of a meditative practise to cope with the core-problems of life? Meditation is learning to “forget” the self by allowing oneself to be absorbed into the meditation object (mantra, breath and so forth). Thus meditation could be understood as a kind of “dying” before “I” (physically) die – by the realisation of a nondual mode of experience (which means the end of being a separated subject by no more attaching to objects). But why should it be desirable at all to realize such a nondual consciousness – that sounds like erasing our ego and the whole diversity around us? Or to put it in other terms: is meditation like escaping the world by doing some kind of social suicide?

The ZEN-Teacher and Philosopher David Loy pointed it out this way: “If the ego-self is the result of consciousness attempting to reflect back upon itself in order to grasp itself, meditation is an exercise in de-reflection. Enlightenment or liberation occurs the moment that usually automatized reflexivity of consciousness ceases, which is experienced as a letting go and falling back into the void. Suddenly consciousness stops trying to catch itself, stops trying to make itself real. I become nothing, and discover that I am everything – or, more precisely, that I can be anything. When I no longer strive to make myself real through things, I find myself actualized by them.”<sup>20</sup>

Needless to say, this cannot save the body from aging and rotting. But if meditation cannot save us from physical death, does it really solve the existential problem? Based on the hypothesis that the nature of consciousness is nondual it does. Because if our ego-self is not really real – as a separated, substantial and independent entity – death cannot actually be our deepest fear and the desire to become immortal cannot be our deepest hope. The practice of meditation shifts the existential problem of life, which is death, to an even more authentic problem and offers a solution for it. When our deepest fear is that we, as everything else, will certainly end some day in the future, meditation enables us to understand that we are right now *no-thing* that really exists as an isolated and separated “thing”.

Hence the meditative (nondual) experience of *no-thing-ness* is qualitatively

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matter of our future; and as we do not know anything certain about “it”, the mental state of Angst refers to that “groundless ground” of our life, that we cannot see, touch or hear... and what we cannot control, manage or account... but what we can experience by the temporal process of annihilation.

<sup>20</sup> David Loy: The Nonduality of Life and Death: A Buddhist View of Repression. In: Philosophy East and West. Vol.40. No.2. April 1990. pp.169

different from the (dualistic) common-sense perception of *nothingness*. In the dualistic mode of experience “nothingness” is, as an opposite of “being”, the core-problem of life; but in the nondual mode of experience “no-thing-ness” seems to be the solution of the existential problem, by realizing the real nature of reality.

Referring to the “psychoanalytic theory of repression”<sup>21</sup> David Loy offers in that context an illuminating interpretation: The fear of death and the desire to become immortal are symptoms that represent something else. “What do they symbolize? – the desire of the sense-of-self to become a real self, to transform its anguished lack of being into genuine being. Even the terror of death, with all its anguish, represses something, for that terror is preferable to facing my lack of being now, for death fear at least allows us to project the problem into the future. In that way we avoid what we are (or are not) right now.”<sup>22</sup>

This implies that our ultimate desire is ontological: we do suffer for being not what we really are. Hence that ultimate desire can be satisfied by nothing less than becoming what we really are. Which in the terms of the nondual systems (like Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta or the Christian Mystic of Meister Eckhart) means realizing that the nature of my body and mind is actually nondual with the whole Cosmos. This is the significance of what Nasargadatta Maharaj said, as quoted before: “When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that’s wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything, that’s love. Between these two my life turns.”

This liberation is only possible if the core of my ego-consciousness is grounded in a groundless ground (no-thing-ness). And the problem arises when consciousness wants to ground itself, to make itself real as a separated entity. Hence the ego-self is the attempt of awareness to objectify itself by grasping itself as “me”. The consequence of

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<sup>21</sup> Freud always emphasized that repression is the key psychoanalytic discovery, which underlies the whole edifice. The concept is basically simple: something (it can be almost any experience – usually a thought or a feeling) makes me uncomfortable, and since I do not want to cope with it consciously, I choose to ignore or “forget” it. This clears the way for me to feel more comfortable and concentrate on something else, but at a price: part of my psychic energy must be expended in resisting what has been repressed, to keep it out of consciousness, because the repressed can never be “forgotten” successfully. The repressed “stuff” tends to return to consciousness anyway, but as a symptom which is therefore symbolic – because the symptom re-presents “it” in distorted form. Sometime the secondary effect of this dynamic becomes even more problematic than the primarily repressed, because the repression of the undesired thoughts and feelings consume a huge amount of psychic energy. Hence there is not enough energy left to cope the challenges of life what can lead to “breakdowns” in different kinds – labelled by different terms of psychopathology. Freud traced the psychopathologies of his middle-class Viennese patients back to repressed sexuality, and he concluded that sexual repression is man’s primal repression. Today neo-psychoanalytic attention (as a cross-fertilisation of Heideggers “Being and Time” and Freuds Psychoanalysis) is more primarily focussed on the argument that “a considerable portion of one’s life energy is consumed in the denial of death” (Yalom: Existential Psychotherapy. p.41)

<sup>22</sup> David Loy: *ibid.*

this dualistic way of self-realisation is that the “sense of self” always has, as its inescapable shadow, a “sense of lack”, which it always tries to escape by all kinds of distractions. It is here where Loy brings in the psychoanalytic concept of repression. For the idea of the “return of the repressed” *nothingness* in a distorted form shows us how to link this fundamental yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real in the world.<sup>23</sup>

According to Loy this insight reduces our *striving for immortality* and our *fear of death* to symptoms of the repressed nothingness – the most common symbolic ways that this unrecognized ontological problem surfaces into our consciousness. The repressed *nothingness* in the core of our being returns to our consciousness as the feeling “that there is something wrong with me” – because we are not really in tune with the (nondual) nature of our real being. As long as I yearn for immortality I am still trying to run away from my shadow “sense of lack” right now, and whether or not we survive physical death in some form becomes, if not irrelevant, at least not the main point. But to “get the point” we can use Meditation to end up the never satisfying wish to become real as a self-existent self. Hence meditation is not about a physical or social death but it is the death of identifications to that separated, private, little “thing” we call “I”.

To make a Buddhist point in psychoanalytic terms, our choice is between a repressed metaphysics, which disguises itself as the objective commonsense system we normally place ourselves within, or a more explicit approach, which brings the repressed (no-thing-ness) back into consciousness and allows us to see how we ourselves have constructed the “subject-object” and “time-and-space”-schema that now constricts us.<sup>24</sup>

“Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvana. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death.”

(Dogen)

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<sup>23</sup> Common symbolic ways to make “myself” real in the world are e.g. through *money* (to become someone important, powerful etc.); or *fame* (to become someone interesting, unforgettable etc.).

<sup>24</sup> As so many philosophers have noted, “time is generated by the mind’s restlessness, it’s stretching out to the future, its projects, and its negation of ‘the present state’” (Hanna Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*. New York. 1978. p.45, in: Loy: *ibid.* p.26)

## Conclusion and Outlook

The aim of this article is to introduce the thesis of the *nondual nature of consciousness* and to discuss if this assumption could be considered as a core-hypothesis of *special cases of spiritual practice*. In a first step I have tried to clarify the meaning of *special cases of spirituality* in contrast and comparison to *science and philosophy*. Guided by Metzinger's concept of "intellectual honesty" (unconditional will to truth) and the methodology of "deconstructing dualities" it came clear that there are various touch points between science and spirituality and I have tried to make the hypothesis strong that cross-fertilising them could offer interesting insights and new perspectives on the matter of consciousness.

The next step was about a short analysis of problematic implications of the core-hypothesis – guided by the Kantian question "what can we know for certain?" I've tried to respond to this philosophical problem by introducing a model of two qualitatively different modes of experience – a dualistic (conventional) and a nondual (absolute) mode of experience.

According to that model the dualistic level corresponds to the every-day perception of life, based on a more or less unconscious metaphysical system, which implies that there is a self-existing self in a pre-existing and objective world. On that level, we can also find the rational methodologies of science and philosophy, which is a mode of critical thinking, quantitative data collection and the search for empirical evidence – to maximise our knowledge about the world in a systematic and intercommunicative way. For that reason this approach to truth is also on a dualistic level of reality. Why? Scientific research always needs an object to research. Even the philosophical discipline of *deconstruction* needs any object to deconstruct. The scientific and philosophical ways of thinking and researching cannot escape from the subject-object-dichotomy, because there is always a thinker (subject) who thinks or measures *anything* (object) or a researcher who researches *anything* that matters. In the process of philosophical and scientific thinking and researching we cannot find any "clôture" – as Jacques Derrida put it, because critical thinking and scientific researching cannot reach a final end... it keeps on thinking, researching and deconstructing... because it is always possible to find new standpoints and new perspectives to undermine other standpoints and perspectives.

In contrast to that the spiritual (meditative) deconstruction of thinking and willing offers the possibility of a "clôture" (wholeness) – as it is the experience of

immediate presence of consciousness by its nondual nature (Oneness). In that nondual experience all distinctive relativisations between subject and object **cease**. Thus, the performance of this special case of spiritual insight offers a knowledge that we can call absolute certain – because all distinctive relativisations between “me” and the “world” disappear.

The disadvantage of that nondual knowledge is, guided by the Kantian question, that we can get no acceptable (objective and communicative) answer to the problem of consciousness – as it became clear that the immediate experience of “it” is neither *objective* nor *communicable*. It is not objective because the “matter” of insight is not a “thing” but vital experience, which we can phenomenologically describe as the perception of no-thing-ness; and therefore it is not about grasping a well-defined idea or any other object of thinking or willing.

This distinction of the two levels of reality exists certainly only on the dualistic plain of perception – as the mode of nonduality transcends all differences. And in the last consequence the nondual activity transcends even the distinction between duality and nonduality. Hence on the level of philosophic and scientific (dualistic) reflexion this immediate presence of the nondual nature of reality is not to be grasped, because it is an experience of *no-thing*.

But what we can do on the level of critical thinking is to discuss the necessary preconditions of the possibility of the nondual nature of consciousness. We can, in other words, rationally understand that we cannot grasp nonduality under the conditions of our normal (dualistic) ways of thinking, speaking and willing. To get the immediate knowledge of that truth it is necessary to perform that insight by special cases of spiritual practice.

In this context I introduced – based on the reflexions of David Loy – the concept of *spiritual deconstruction*; because the meditative practice deconstructs our commonsense metaphysics, which takes self-existing “things” in the realm of space and time for granted. And the most important and problematical of these supposedly self-existing “things” is, of course, the self. Thus the core-hypothesis of the nondual nature of consciousness is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian notion of an autonomous, self-grounded consciousness.

According to Nagarjuna,<sup>25</sup> the famous Buddhist philosopher, I have tried to perform a “linguistic turn” by showing that the vehicle of this commonsense metaphysics, creating and sustaining it, is language, which presents us with a set of nouns (self-existing things) that have temporal predicates and they do relate to objects. Therefore the experience of subject-object-nonduality is not communicable in a direct way, because of the inherent dualistic structure of language itself, which always creates the imagination of subjects that are or do *anything* in a world of objects. But the problem is not merely that language acts as a filter, obscuring the nature of things. Rather, terms are used to objectify appearances into the self-existing things we perceive as books, tables, trees, you and me. In other words, the concept of an objective world with material things, interacting causally in space and time, is metaphysical through-and-through. It is this dualistic metaphysics that needs to be deconstructed, because this is the metaphysics, disguised as commonsense-reality, which makes me suffer, especially insofar as I understand myself to be one such self-existing being in time that will nonetheless die.

At this point the existentialistic and psychotherapeutic dimension came in, as it appeared clear that, based on the hypothesis of nondual nature of consciousness, our most problematic duality is life (being) against death (nonbeing) – or more precisely: self versus nonself.

By bringing psychoanalytic and Buddhist concepts together I’ve tried to display, inspired by the philosophic reflexions of David Loy, that our primal repression is not fear of death – which still holds the feared thing away, by projecting it into the future – but the sense-of-self repressing its suspected no-thing-ness right now, which we become aware of as a sense-of-lack that shadows our sense-of-self.<sup>26</sup>

As a consequence of this assumption it is possible to solve our (dualistic structured) existential problems by the coming-to-rest of our dualistic thinking and willing. Thus special cases of spiritual practise are able to de-reflect this automatized construction of inside-outside duality between our sense-of-self and the “objective” world around us. The practise of those special cases of spirituality is learning how to become nothing by learning to forget the sense-of-self, which happens when I become absorbed into the meditation-exercise.

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<sup>25</sup> Nagarjuna is widely considered one of the most important Buddhist philosophers after the historical Buddha. He is credited with founding the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism.

<sup>26</sup> More about that topic, in: David R. Loy: *Avoiding the Void: The Lack of Self in Psychotherapy and Buddhism*. Journal of Transpersonal Psychology. Vol.24. No.2. 1992. Pp.151-180

If the sense-of-self is a result of consciousness attempting to reflect back upon itself in order to grasp itself, realize itself, objectify itself – the realisation of the nondual nature of consciousness occurs when our automatized reflexivity of consciousness ceases, which is experienced as a letting-go and falling into the no-thing-ness. “This process implies that what we fear as nothingness is not really nothingness, for that is the perspective of a sense-of-self anxious about losing its grip on itself. According to Buddhism, letting-go of myself and merging with that no-thing-ness leads to something else: when consciousness stops trying to catch its own tail, I become no-thing, and discover that I am everything – or, more precisely, that I can be anything.”<sup>27</sup>

Nowadays we are, at least in some privileged world regions, free enough from political and religious restrictions to learn from different scientific, philosophical and spiritual traditions, methods and insights. Hence we have the possibility of freeing ourselves from any ideological and indoctrinate tendency that seems to be inherent to conventional belief-systems. We now have the chance to find a neutral realm of interreligious, intercultural and interdisciplinary discourse, orientated by an epistemic attitude of intellectual honesty, truthfulness towards oneself and the religious, existential and psychotherapeutic questions about the possibility of salvation from the core-problems of life. Thus it could be possible to develop new forms of knowledge about our self and the world, because it is possible to explore the self and the world by different spiritual and scientific methods.

Such a liberal spirituality should be able to respect pluralism, as it should have no ideological tendency; it should be free for the possibility of finding synergetic effects by learning from different ways of responding to the epistemic and existential problems of life. This special case of spirituality might be open for an emancipated intercultural, interreligious and interdisciplinary discourse. Hence the central virtue of this kind of spirituality could be more than tolerance, as tolerance just endures differences. The central virtue of this orientation should be *respect*. These special case of spirituality should therefore be open for the worth and gift that the other might offer; it might open the realm of immediate experiences and the public use of rationality that transcends all religious and cultural limitations.

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<sup>27</sup> David R. Loy: Avoiding the Void: The Lack of Self in Psychotherapy and Buddhism. Journal of Transpersonal Psychology. Vol.24. No.2. 1992. p.173-174