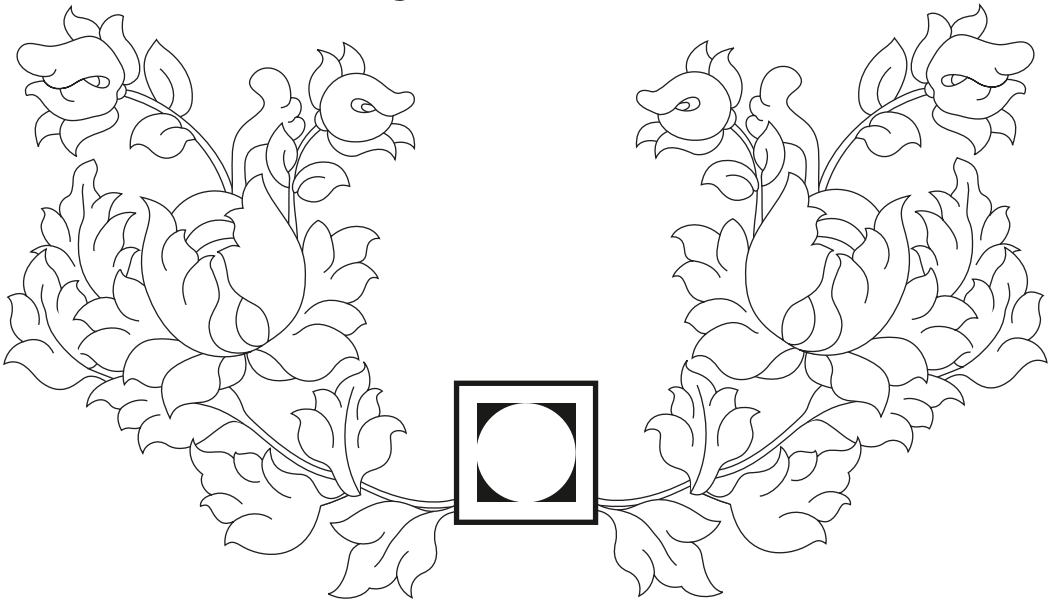


NATURAL AWAKENING

An Advanced Guide for
Sharing Nondual Awareness



Peter Fenner, Ph.D.

Extracted from

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Peter Fenner

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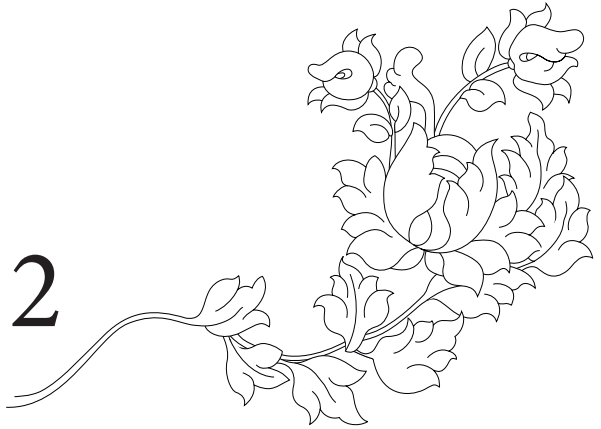
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Presencing unconditioned awareness

Beginning a session

Within a few seconds of beginning a therapy or coaching session or a workshop, you see there is no beginning because nothing is happening. The experience that nothing is happening, and that nothing is needed, can crystallize very quickly. Still, some form of acknowledgement and introduction might be appropriate.

I usually welcome people. I make a conditioned connection by saying something like, “Welcome. It’s a pleasure to share this time with you, exploring the experience of real fulfillment. The work we’re doing unfolds in a contemplative dialog. I don’t have a lot to say from my side. The aim is to taste and rest in the state of natural fulfillment.” At some point I find myself being silent.

If I’m working by telephone, people often ask, “How do these calls begin?” I reply, “Like this.” They might say, “Do you have something you want to do? Can I ask you some questions? How does this happen?” I reply, “We will see how this unfolds as we move along. Many different things can happen. Where would you like us to go?”

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In subsequent calls I may just say, “How are things going?” I’m very open ended. I am happy with a “fine.” That is a complete response. I am not looking for more. There is no work to be done. I am connecting with an absence of a point of reference within me. I check to see if I feel I am here to do something. I let that dissolve.

Discovering your own process

You can find yourself moving quite quickly into the space where there’s nothing you have to do. You are transported through whatever issues might be challenging you and you’re quickly established in pure awareness. Even though you’re aware that people are probably expecting something from you, there’s nothing that you need to do. You’re not going anywhere, just being, available, there’s no pressure coming from inside or outside, no moving anywhere. It is completely effortless, no pressure at all. Natural koans can begin to move through your mind, acting to confirm and stabilize you in the space where there’s “no one being nowhere.”

Thoughts can arise such as, “Who is doing this?” “Who is doing what?” And your mind doesn’t go anywhere with them. You might think, “Are we moving? No. Are we going anywhere? No. Have we arrived? I can’t say that either. Who are we? I don’t know.” You become used to the presence of these types of thoughts. You find yourself quietly in the space where there’s nothing you need to do. Concepts pass through your awareness without producing any disturbance. You are just with this process, then at some point—you don’t know *when*—either someone says something and you are off and moving, or you begin to distinguish the unconditioned. You might say something like, “The focus of our work together is to connect with the unconditioned dimension of being. Actually, there’s no *work* involved in this because we’re already here.” You start at the end.

Distinguishing nondual awareness

In the next sections I’d like to layout the way in which I introduce people to nondual awareness, particularly in terms of how I initially differentiate the nondual state from our empirical experience. There are different ways in which I invite people to “leap into” nondual awareness, as it were, to realize that we are naturally awake. Having made that leap, I then dissolve the dualistic construction that the nondual can be different from our everyday experience. If people then reduce the nondual to the flux of their conditioned experience, which often happens, I redistinguish the nondual as a space that is radically different from anything we can possibly “experience.” I cycle through a process of collapsing the difference, redistinguishing the nondual, dissolving the difference again, until there is a more consistent presencing of the nondual *within* the context of our embodied, everyday life—our thought-world, feelings, relationships, and activities.

I’ve arrived at this process by seeing what seems to work best “on the spot” in terms of introducing people to the basic state of nondual awareness, while being open, receptive, and responsive to whatever arises in the inner and outer environments.

I'll explain what's behind the moves as we progress through these sections. I use the process I describe in group facilitation and also in one-one-work, especially when this is clearly focused on the recognition of, and familiarization with, nondual awareness. The process I describe shouldn't be viewed as a roadmap. It shouldn't be viewed as a series of steps that are systematically followed. The actual process is organic, free-form, and dynamic.

Is the nondual an experience, state, or space?

At this point I'd like to say just a few words about my use of the term "nondual awareness." There is some discussion these days about the best term through which to point to the nondual state. What we are looking for is a term that doesn't let us create differentiations. This is why many people object to talking about the nondual experience. There are many different types of experiences, and also in an experience there are objects that are experienced and a seeming experienter. So experience isn't the ideal term. This leads some people to prefer the phrase "nondual state." But this isn't perfect either because there are different types of states and the nondual state is neither the same as, nor different from other states.

Another possibility is to talk about the "nondual space." This has some merit because at one level we can't differentiate one space from another space. There is nothing in space itself to let us do this. Also, there is a connection with the conditioned. We talk about the workshop space, or the space we are in. In general, in this *Guide* I'll use the term "nondual awareness" because it is in quite common usage. I also use terms like no-mind, centerless awareness, nothing, and nothingness.

You will find when teaching that some people object to the use of terms like "nondual," "awareness," and "nondual awareness" altogether. It is strange. They will come to an event because it is called "nondual." Then they will object to using the word "nondual." They correctly point out that "This" is not "nondual" in contrast to the "dual." They might also point out that "awareness" can't be found or qualified, so we can't see "This" as awareness. All this is true, and this is the precise meaning of these terms. These terms have been used for thousands of years to point to the unfindability of the self, mind, awareness, ultimate reality, and so on.

It doesn't make sense to reject the use of simple code words that have been used effectively for millennia. This misses the critical recognition that there is nothing to reject! The idea that a word—any word—could obscure "nothing" is itself misleading. We should heed Vimalakirti's injunction to rely on the intention of whatever words are used to point to the nondual, and not on the specific words themselves. (Thurman, 1976)

I'll also often use the term "This," without spelling this out further. In fact, "This" is a technical term to refer to the nondual in Tibetan Buddhism. The term "*de nyid*" means "just (*nyid*) this (*de*)."*De nyid* means thisness, not this as something in particular but "This" as "This" no matter who we are or what, or when "This" is happening. When I use the term "nondual awareness," it is like a code word for the basic or primordial state; what is also called "*ka dag*" or alpha purity, or

just the “A state.” When people are in the know—when they can directly recognize this state—it’s sufficient to use “just this.” A phrase like “nondual awareness” is no longer necessary.

Entering a different paradigm

I usually begin by presenting nondual awareness as being completely different from the mind that compares, differentiates, and makes contrasts. I say that we will be giving our attention to the nature of awareness itself, in contrast to the “objects of awareness”—thoughts, feelings, and sensations. If we weren’t aware we couldn’t be aware of our thoughts, my words, or this room. We are exploring “*That* which is aware, not *what* we are aware of.” I point out that if we “knew” what awareness was, it would be an “object of our awareness,” not awareness itself.

I present “abiding as awareness” as something that is radically different from our usual mode of being in which “we are someone who is engaged with the world.” I point to nondual awareness by saying that, unlike our conditioned experience, it can’t be known, isn’t a thing, etc. Nondual awareness is indivisible and unconstructed, in contrast to conditioned experience which is composed of different elements: the different sense fields, feelings, and thoughts. This is important because we can return to the idea that “our experiences are constructed,” built out of different elements, when we begin to deconstruct limiting identifications.

When I begin a presentation I often say something like:

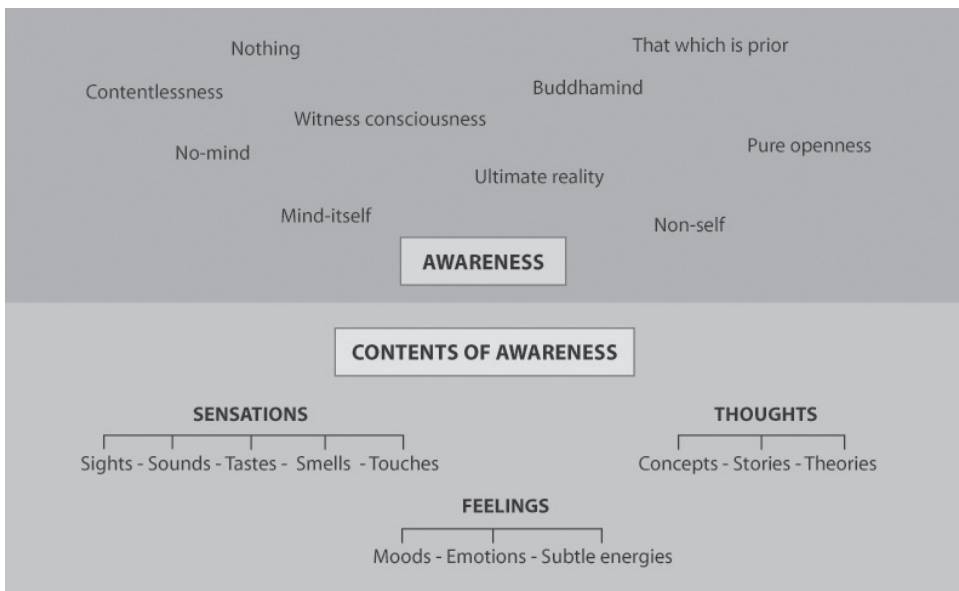
This evening we are here to explore contentlessness. It’s easy to explore content, to get involved in ideas, viewpoints, and opinions. But, my invitation for us this evening is to explore—no, actually to access—a dimension of reality that’s been very well known to sages in the East and West, but which is relatively inaccessible in our modern, busy, highly distracting lives. When I say “explore,” it’s not really an exploration because there is nothing to discover or reveal!

This dimension of reality has been called: natural awakening, objectless awareness, centerless awareness, the mind-itself, buddha mind, and so on. This state is acausal; it is unproduced. We don’t need anything more than what we already have in order to be “here.” There is nothing we need to know or do. This is effortless. Nothing could be simpler. Nothing needs to change in order to be here—resting in nondual awareness.

Our conditioned experience unfolds in time—it is always changing. We can touch, feel, sense, and think about it. Nondual awareness, on the other hand, doesn’t have any of these characteristics. It’s not a “thing.” We can’t see it, we can’t even think about it because there is nothing to think about. Nondual awareness is completely unrelated to you and me as different embodied minds. It’s unrelated to the circumstances of our lives or the condition of our bodies and minds. We are born and we will die. We have gender, age, race, etc. Nondual awareness has none of these. It is ahistorical, transpersonal, and transcultural.

I make this radical departure from our usual way of “being someone in time and space” because (1) people come specifically for the nondual; and (2) nondual awareness is far less accessible to most people than our ordinary, everyday world of effort, struggles, thwarted ambitions, and periodic accomplishments. People have no difficulty accessing their conditioned existence. It confronts us; it assaults us; it seduces us. Also, for people who have little or no idea of what this state is, it can be useful to initially present “This” as something completely different from what we “know.” When people are immersed in their conditioned minds, they need to be eased, or ejected, out of their identification with the contents of awareness, in order to recognize the nondual.

1. Distinguishing NONDUAL AWARENESS as DIFFERENT from CONDITIONED EXPERIENCE



In the language of Buddhist hermeneutics, this presentation of nondual awareness “as different from the contents of awareness” is provisional. It isn’t the most refined way of languaging the nondual. When I present it in this way, I’m aware that we are *en route* to a more refined presencing of the nondual. This way of distinguishing the nondual is a skillful process (*upaya*). It isn’t the “truth.” I know there is further to go. The language of “not this, not that” (*neti neti*) is a pedagogical device that can be used to reveal a dimension of reality that is inaccessible to most people because it is invisible and nondual, i.e., beyond the categories of being and non-being.

The diagram 1, above, shows how I draw a line between awareness and the contents of awareness. It also lists some of the common names used in different traditions to identify the same state that I am calling nondual awareness in this *Guide*.

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Here is an example of a dialog with two different participants in which I am clearly differentiating awareness as unconditioned. I am not collapsing the distinction. I'm not showing how awareness is inseparable from the contents of awareness. This comes later.

S: When you say contentlessness I just don't get it.

P: Most of the time we are only connected with the conditioned dimension of experience with everything that's happening—black and white, good and bad, closer and further, etc. But there is also something that's invisible that's happening at the same time. It's not happening, as such, but present as an absence. [In order to distinguish the unconditioned, I move in the opposite direction. I point to this as being nothing. It's not nothing, but at this point I say it's nothing in order to distinguish it from content.]

S: Then we can't say what it is?

P: Exactly, because we don't know what we're talking about.

S: I've no clue what you're talking about. Unconditioned awareness is far away for me. What you are talking about sounds big or vast. It's very elusive.

P: Not really because nothing is hidden. This is absolutely precise and indefinable. People can think that things lose their definition, their distinctness in the nondual. People can fear that this form of inquiry undermines our everyday reality. But this isn't so. Look what's happening here. Everything is intact and functional.

S: I find this very intellectual.

P: This isn't intellectual *at all*. There's absolutely nothing to think about. It's only intellectual because you're still not convinced that there's nothing to understand here. Your mind is still struggling to make sense of this.

S: But those are words....

P: Yes, they are words—we're talking about what's happening, but what's happening isn't an event, or even an experience. At the same time I am talking, nothing is happening at all.

S: But you are still talking, that's why I think there's something to understand!

P: If I'm silent, there's a good chance that you'll still try to work this out. The point is that I'm not talking about anything. You need to listen to this carefully.

There's nothing to see, nothing to do, nothing to think about. This is totally non-intellectual. You're doing the thinking. I'm not. There's nothing to think about. I'm not trying to work this out. I'm talking but it's effortless. I'm not going anywhere.

S: I'm laughing, because my mind is fried! Maybe that's the best thing that can happen! I want to say, "I give up!" At some level I think I understand what you're saying, at some other level I can't.

P: Of course you can't. You cannot understand this. No one will ever understand this because there's nothing to understand. Our "knowing mind" is quite persistent and resilient. Often we have to return to the point of giving up many, many times before we finally, clearly, and cleanly see that there is nothing to understand in the domain of pure awareness.

S: Thank you.

P: Thank you.

The nondual isn't a subtle affective experience or meditational state

I also distinguish nondual awareness in a clear and precise way when people confuse this state with different types of subtle conditioned experiences. For example, people often think that nondual awareness is a state of bliss, or serenity, or love. These experiences can accompany the presencing of the nondual, but they aren't nondual awareness itself. They are conditioned experiences. This is clear because they come and go in the conventional sense. They are refined experiences that arise as epiphenomena when people's reactive responses settle down and the habitual need to understand and interpret slows down. These experiences can be, in fact often are, confused with the nondual.

H.H. Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje (1904-1987) of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism is clear about the potential distraction that such a confusion can cause when he writes:

Now while you are on the path, it will happen that this [*rig pa*—pure awareness] will become mixed with some form of the three temporary experiences—bliss, clarity, and no thought—so when that does happen rest without a whisker of the hope and fear that believes in and grasps at these as special attainments and just that will cut the possibility of the experience turning into a sidetrack. (Duff, 2008)

Purity

A significant focus in group facilitation is to ensure that people receive nondual awareness cleanly and purely. This need is compounded these days because the terms nonduality and nondual

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awareness are being used quite loosely. They are often used to refer to states that still have some content and structure to them. If there is any association between feeling peaceful, clear, or accepting, and nonduality, this isn't nondual awareness.

There is often a lot of scope to purify an experience so it really becomes nondual, and stays that way. A lot of the work in nondual transmission is "cleaning work." People can enter the nondual, but over time it can become sullied. People begin to identify with the pleasant feelings, sensations, and authenticity that naturally enter the nondual field. Many people have a strong need to attribute some basic qualities to nondual awareness, for example, that it is a state of profound intimacy, unconditional love, sourceless bliss, or imperturbable serenity.

To assess the purity of a state of nondual awareness, we look for the existence of structures within the state. The structures I'm referring to are ideas, beliefs, feelings, interpretations, and reference points. An ordinary, conditioned state is densely structured. With increasing familiarity with nondual awareness, we also experience more lightly structured states of awareness. Structures still exist, but there is an overall sense of more immediacy and less interpretation. The structures become more and more transparent.

It's as if there is a spectrum of states that have a progressively lighter structure along the way to a clean presencing of nondual awareness. The states that we experience can become increasingly pure or structure-free. Ultimately in the state of nondual or centerless awareness there is no structure; so it cannot be described as being positive or negative, ordinary or sublime, useful or useless, as nothing or something. Unlike conditioned states of mind, nondual awareness cannot be lost or gained, because there is nothing to arise or disappear.

Foundations, bridges, and resting places

When people enter a nondual workshop space they quite quickly feel that something different is happening. As a facilitator I have nothing to communicate from my side. My job is simply to clear away all the obstructions (viewpoints, ideas, fears, unmet expectations, etc.) as efficiently and effortlessly as possible. There are no themes, topics, or any subject matter I wish to share. This becomes obvious quite quickly. Sometimes I ease people through the transition that's happening by saying:

We are entering a different paradigm with this work. The main way it's different from our normal paradigm is that there's nothing to understand and nothing you need to be doing. I'm not asking anything from you. There is no pressure here at all. There is no need for you to be here. We aren't going anywhere. I'm not looking for something to be happening. "This" isn't *a* happening. A need brought you here. But now that you're here you don't need that need. In fact, we are exploring what it's like to not need anything: to be free of the need to learn, understand, gain resources, and so on. We're discovering how to be totally complete with things exactly as they are.

If this is too much I may go back a little bit and simply present our time together as an opportunity to give ourselves a break from trying to change things, fix things up, even if we only do this for a few minutes. For a few minutes we give ourselves permission to accomplish nothing! When I make this offer, many people will say, “Wow, what a relief. There’s no pressure. That feels really great.” After a few minutes this can even mature into great bliss.

I create a foundation for inquiry by bringing people into the present moment and slowing down their thinking by giving them nothing to think about. This creates an atmosphere of ease and tranquility. This is a foundation upon which it’s possible to inquire into the reality of “This” as awareness and not be able to find anything that lies behind the term. Nondual awareness is revealed through the unfindability form of inquiry that is integral to Advaita (Katz, 2007; Maharshi, 1988, 1989) and Mahayana. (Nagarjuna, 2005; Chandrakirti, 2005)

If people still can’t connect with this radical presentation of the nondual, we can always go back and talk about it as a state of effortless being, total equanimity, a space that’s free of attachment and aversion, and which connects us with ourselves in a totally natural and uncontrived way. We can, in fact, use the epiphenomena that arise, such as feelings of deep peace, acceptance, love, and connectness as resting places *en route* to presencing nondual awareness.

Starting at the end: working at the result level

Another way I help people to leap into the unconditioned dimension is by explaining that we will be working at the “result level.” This means that the result (abiding as awareness) is the path. In other words, we begin with the baseline position that nothing is wrong or missing. Everything is complete just as it is. Everyone is complete. There are no problems, nothing to work out, no work to be done. In the midst of everything that’s happening, “nothing is happening at the same time.”

I am quite up front in presenting this possibility. Sometimes I’ll start a workshop by saying, “Well, let’s just start at the end. Let’s just skip straight ahead. Let’s not waste time. Our objective in being here is to arrive at the end of the path, to find what we are looking for in terms of discovering deep contentment, beyond which there is nowhere further to go.” I introduce this possibility in a light way. It’s a suggestion, but I’m absolutely serious about it at the same time. I don’t want to waste people’s time. If I’m being asked to think, I’m looking for traction in terms of how to take people beyond the mind.

The suggestion that we can begin a workshop at the place we might hope to be at the end, without needing to do any intermediate work, immediately throws people into inquiry. Some people will protest internally, or out loud, “But I’m here to learn how to get this. There is work to be done. It can’t be that simple!” Others will be enticed by the idea, but genuinely feel incomplete. People start to play with the idea that “nothing is wrong or missing.”

We can see how this applies right now. You might be reading this *Guide* hoping to gain some insights or additional resources for your work as a coach, therapist, or facilitator. It’s possible for

me to be writing this thinking that I have some wisdom that could help you, that I need to explain my process clearly, and so on. Yet, if we connect with primordial awareness in this moment, that is all that's needed, now and at any time in the future. If we are "here" we don't need anything more, and this is what is communicated to those around us—friends, clients, partners, and colleagues. "This" becomes the fuel, the essence, of your work as a facilitator or therapist.

If you are "here" I don't need to write anything more. You have all the resources you could possibly need in terms of sharing nondual awareness with others. Nondual awareness will come through you naturally and automatically. You won't be able to stop it! You will activate this recognition in others through the way you listen without judgment, through the quality of your silence, through the way you don't condition the space, through the precision of your questions, and love that is shared because you don't need anything for yourself. (Fenner, 2003, 2006, 2007)

By introducing the possibility that we can be "here" in the ultimate way, without needing to do any psychological processing or make any corrections or additions to our intellectual understanding of the path and goal, we set a benchmark, as it were. The benchmark we establish doesn't preclude the processing of emotions or deepening our understanding of who we are. But, it lets us see how easily we fall into the habit of thinking we need to do more work before we can truly rest and abide in our natural state. With this benchmark in place we can easily see how we habitually create work for ourselves. When someone says, "Yes, that sounds great, but first I need to..." they are re-creating a path. They are effectively saying that something needs to happen *before* they can be complete. Once we've shown people this pattern, we can continue to point it out, each time it occurs. This is how we "take the result as the path."

Undoing the path

Another way I introduce the idea of working at the result level is by pointing out that for as long as we are "on the path" we can't be at the destination. So the work we will be doing consists of dissolving the path. In a sense we are always on a path, moving (forward or backward), resting for a while, or just waiting for something to happen. When we're on a path we are sometimes entertained, having fun, feeling a sense of accomplishment because we are making progress. But often we feel there is a gap between where we are and where we'd like to be. In the spiritual arena we are on an explicit path. Often it is well laid out with stages or levels. People enter nondual work because they are on a path.

Working at the result level involves undoing the path. It consists of identifying and taking away the reference points on which a path is constructed in someone's mind. When there is no path, there is no goal, just pure awareness. Nondual inquiry dismantles the path, and keeps dismantling it whenever it begins to reconstruct through the habit of believing that things could be different from what they are. Sometimes the path begins to be reconstructed through the simple thought, "Now what?" We notice such moves and take them away. "There is no what. There is just this."

We are talking about “This”!

Often I initiate inquiry through an exploration of “This.” I dispense with terms like “nondual awareness” about which people can have different ideas. I begin by saying, “What we are sharing together is ‘this.’” This is particularly effective in phone work because there is no shared “This” at the visual level. If we don’t elaborate on what “This” is, or say, “‘This,’ right now, in this second,” the “This” must be something different than our physical environment. It’s not clear what “This” is referring to, and that is the intention. We’ve made a break within the stream of conditioned experience and we can use this lack of clarity to distinguish the unconditioned.

The powerful thing about inquiring into “This” is that it gives us a lot of freedom in how we move. We can use the word “This” to point to this as “contentless awareness,” or as the undifferentiable co-arising of contentlessness and everything that is arising in the moment.

For example, in relationship to this moment right now, when I say I am talking about “This,” I’m not talking about what you are reading right now. I am not talking about your awareness of your computer screen, or printed words on a piece of paper in front of you. When I say I’m talking about “This,” I’m pointing to awareness itself which has no content or location. We can’t even say “This” is here, because we don’t know what it is that we would be saying is here, or not here. We can’t say that “This” is or is not, because we don’t know what it is that we would be saying exists or does not exist.

The very fact that we can’t say what it is that we are talking about means that we are talking about the nondual. If we *knew* what we were talking about, it wouldn’t be the nondual. It would be something we could know or not know. By the way, the language I am using now is definitive, because there is nothing to misinterpret; there is nothing to get right or wrong.

Paradox and nonduality

You will notice that in order to talk about “This” we have been compelled to move beyond the language of negation and into the structure of paradoxes. (Fenner, 2007) The paradox right now is that the words that I am writing and that you are reading are unrelated to nondual awareness. They are just symbolic images that have a semantic reference appearing on a screen or paper. Yet, these words allow us to be right here, presencing the nondual as a state that is totally inexpressible because it has no characteristics. In fact, we can’t even say that “This” has no characteristics because we don’t know what it is that we are characterizing in this way!

At this point unstructured, nondual awareness ceases to be something different from our ordinary, everyday consciousness, because we simply don’t know what “it” is that we are saying is different (or the same for that matter).

The nondual is a totally transcending state, but at the same time it isn’t rarified, disembodied, or in anyway disconnected from the rich and complex worlds in which we live. This becomes

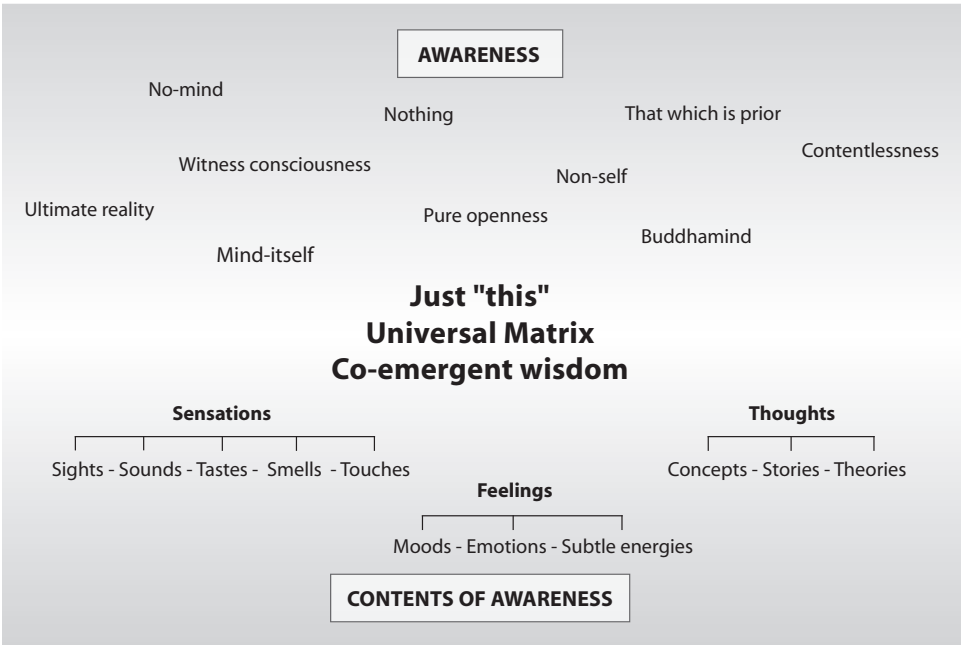
palpably clear when we are in this state: “it” is neither the same as the dualistic mind, nor in any way different from it.

Collapsing the distinction

To summarize, then, my approach is to distinguish the unconditioned as being radically different and keep doing this until someone says, “But it can’t be different. It’s right here.” I then bring this realization into the foreground. It cannot be different from this very moment because the unconditioned is not a thing, as illustrated in diagram 2 below. It’s inseparable and indistinguishable from the conditioned experience. In Buddhism this is called co-emergent wisdom (*sahaja-jnana*).

I then move between these two, at times differentiating the unconditioned from the conditioned, and at other times collapsing the distinction, explaining that the distinction or identification of the two is only made by the thinking, dualistic mind. When there is an over-identification with the conditioned—with thoughts and feelings—we re-distinguish the unconditioned. When the unconditioned is reified as something that is intrinsically different from our moment-by-moment, embodied experience, I dissolve the possibility that they can be different.

2. The INSEPARABLE UNION of
UNCONDITIONED AWARENESS and CONDITIONED EXPERIENCE



The progressive presencing of co-emergent wisdom

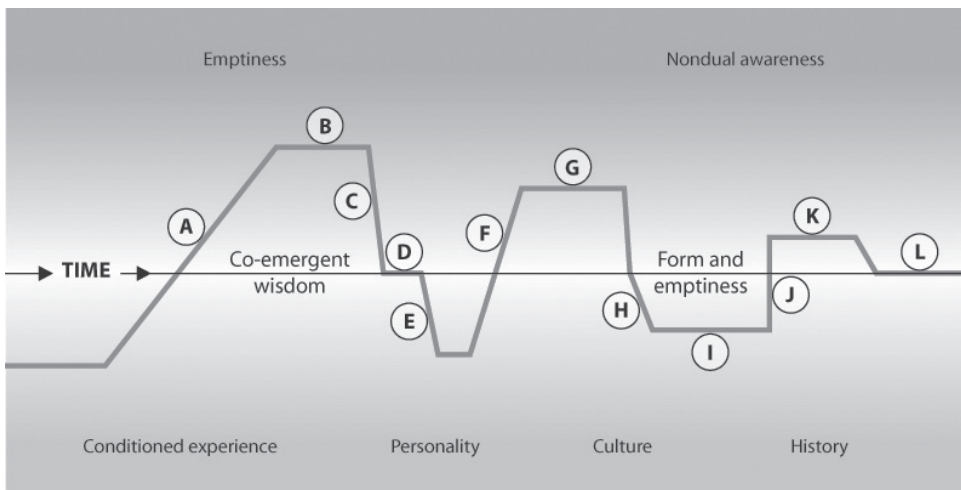
The diagram 3 below shows how this presencing of co-emergent wisdom can occur in time. The horizontal straight line is a time axis moving from left to right. It also represents the point where

someone is resting in nondual awareness at the same time that we are thinking, perceiving, communicating, etc. In this respect it is like the previous diagram. The positions and angles of incline and decline of the stepped line shows how people can move from presencing the nondual in a way in which they are relatively disengaged with the complexities of life, toward a presencing in which the unconditioned and conditioned experience co-arise.

The notes below are like a time-line summary of the process I have been describing above.

- A. This initial upward incline indicates how we move from a place where we are identified with conditioned experience—our feelings, fears, aspirations, beliefs, perceptions, and preferences—through to a clear recognition of nondual awareness as something that is pristine and unstructured. In order to produce a clear recognition of that which hasn't yet been seen, or which has been lost sight of, the nondual is distinguished as being contentless, a non-event, a clearing, without a center or periphery. It is an absence (*med pa*).

3. The PROGRESSIVE PRESENCING of CO-EMERGENT WISDOM



The rate of the incline is significant here. It indicates how quickly and definitively we reveal the nondual as a radically different reality. As a facilitator, if you move too fast you lose people. They get left behind. The space and language in particular becomes too weird. People become confused and disoriented to the point that they'd prefer to be somewhere else. On the other hand, if you aren't willing to leave some people behind, if you feel compelled to make sure that everyone makes it to the end of the journey, you might not even bring one person through to a clear recognition of nondual awareness.

- B. Here we rest or abide in nondual awareness for some time appreciating

centerless awareness, with little active involvement in what's happening within and outside of us. The nondual may be being presenced while in a deeply interiorized state—a natural *samadhi* with very little happening in thought and feelings. Whatever is arising liberates by itself (*rang grol*). Thoughts dissolve at the very instant they begin to form. Or, the nondual may be being presenced with eyes and other senses fully open, receiving everyone and everything in the environment, but in a state of total equanimity that's free of preferences and judgments. However, at some point one of three things can happen:

1. People can begin to add qualities to awareness such as bliss, serenity, intimacy, etc. This is not to say that such feelings aren't arising. But people begin to think that awareness is a state of tranquility or interconnectedness. There is a strong impulse to make the "nothing" into something. If this happens we point out that these are conditioned experiences and not awareness itself, as a way of inviting people back into the nondual state.
 2. A second possibility is that a thought, memory, feelings, anticipation, etc. arise in awareness and distract someone from continuing to abide in awareness itself. In this case we create space around what's happening. We may invite the person to let things be as they are, without interference or judgment. Or we might engage in an inquiry that dissolves the distraction by seeing that it (the distracting event) can't be found when we look for it using the wisdom mind of nondual inquiry. Or, we can point out that nothing can get in the way of nondual awareness. As a "non-thing" nothing can obstruct it.
 3. A third possibility is that people can reify nondual awareness as a reality in its own right. They begin to think that nondual awareness is "nothing," is "contentless," is "unrelated to the personal," etc. We can sense this by listening to the way that people are listening to themselves when they talk about the nondual. People acquire the *via negativa* language of nonduality and begin to listen to their own thinking and words as though they were really saying something when they are talking about the nondual.
- C. If and when the nondual becomes reified, I point out that "This" can't be different from everything that's arising because the nondual isn't a "thing" that can be the same or different from anything else. When we say "This" is different, we don't know what it is that we are saying is different, so we can't say that "This" is different from the thoughts, feelings, and appearances that are arising moment-by-moment. This is how I collapse the difference. Usually, the idea that nondual awareness and the dualistic mind are different collapses in an instant, like a deflating balloon. For some time, I may let people think that contentless awareness and the objects of awareness are the same, even though they are neither the same nor different.

- D. Here we rest in the co-arising of emptiness and appearances. If people start to think that there are two things that are actually co-arising, we can point out that “This” goes beyond even notions of co-arising or union (*lhan cig*). Clearly there aren’t two different things, so it’s impossible to talk about “union” or “inseparability.”
- E. While presencing the nondual in the context of being aware of our body and surroundings, at some point a thought, feeling, or sensation arises that pulls us out of nondual awareness into an identification with the conditioned event that arises. Typically people become involved in their thoughts (carried away by a story), caught by a sensation (a sound, an image of a person, etc.), or overtaken by a feeling (a pain, some fear, excitement, and so on). A conditioned event comes into the foreground, reactions of attraction and aversion come into play, until at some point we recall nondual awareness. We think, “Ah yes, wow, I just became engrossed in worrying about my future!”
- F. How we move on at this point depends on how deeply we’ve become involved with a conditioned event and our familiarity with the primordial state. If we’re very familiar with nondual awareness, if we’ve made the journey many times from being caught up in a fear or worry through to being totally complete without any change in our conditioned circumstances, it might be as simple as thinking, “I’ve lost my connection to the nondual. But what is it that I’ve lost. Ah, yes! I remember. It’s ‘This,’ this thing that I can’t lose or hold onto. Wow, that is simple. Here I am back in the place where I can’t say what it is. How wonderful!” We retrace a journey we’ve made many times. In fact, often the journey happens automatically. It is like being in a dark basement, in the underground carpark, hitting the elevator button, and presto, within a few seconds we are in the lookout tower, enjoying our lives from a totally different perspective. (This is why the incline back to the nondual is steeper here.)

If our clients or workshop participants are new to nondual work, they may need some support in the form of unfindability inquiry that lets them dismantle the construction that creates a feeling of lack and contraction. We will help them identify a core construction in their narrative, for example, “I am worried that I won’t be able to retain this experience when I’m at home with my family.” We will inquire into this construction. We could look for the “I,” the “worry,” or the “experience that will be lost” and not be able to find any of them. We only need to “see through” one of these concepts for the entire construction to dissolve and allow for a re-presencing of the nondual.

- G. Over time we presence the nondual while retaining a more intimate involvement and connection with the ever-changing flow of conditioned experience. Ever-present awareness begins to pervade our spiritual life, our work, and relationships. Nevertheless, we are still prone to reify awareness, perhaps

by creating some theory about how it relates to emotions, relationships, or psychotherapy, or politics. Or, we might feel that the nondual is love or bliss, i.e., something that is conditioned and which can arise and dissipate. So at some point we again see that nondual awareness isn't a conditioned experience, nor is it different from the experiences that are delivered to us through our mind and senses.

- H. Even though we may be quite familiar with nondual awareness and able to easily access this space in *satsang*, on a Dzogchen retreat, or with a nondual therapist, in most people's lives events arise that effectively block access to our primordial state. Perhaps our marriage starts to break apart, our children go off the rails, a parent suddenly needs full-time care, our guru dies, or we become seriously ill. Even for people who are very familiar with the nondual, it's easy to go on a family vacation for two weeks and the nondual takes leave as well!
- I. In these cases it is easy to become engrossed in ourselves for weeks or even months. We either forget about nondual awareness completely, or "know that it's there" but are unable to taste the ease and freedom of nondual awareness even for a few seconds. The journey could be short or long. Perhaps we are identified with a thought for just a few seconds. Or the journey might take several weeks. The challenge in these times is to take the journey we are on. We might think, "I know there is no one making this journey. I know (intellectually) that there is no one who suffers." But still we ache and suffer. If the gateways to the nondual all seem closed, we take on board the first noble truth of the Buddha. Yes, we suffer. If we have needs and preferences then yes, we are bound to suffer. "Clearly, what's happening for me now isn't what I want to be happening. That's the problem. That's why I'm suffering. And there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it." So, we suffer. We accept the inevitability that we will suffer for as long as we can't accept things as they are.

But we also know that our suffering is a conditioned experience. Our preferences aren't being met at the moment. But everything changes. At some point our suffering will dissolve. We don't know when. But, for sure, it will change. We might suffer more before we suffer less. But the sun will shine in. At some point we will feel better. That is great, but it is also an opportunity to recognize that "feeling better" is still just a conditioned state. We are still in the cycle of pleasure and pain.

- J. Often, all that's needed here is a code word like "centerlessness," or "just this," and instantly we are back here, where nothing is missing and it's impossible for things to be better, because we're in a domain where ideas of better and worse make no sense at all. The sheer vertical movement of this line shows how we can move from a point where we are identified with a conditioned aspect

of experience back into full recognition of awareness itself, in an instant. It occurs the moment we recognize that “This” is beyond presence and absence, and hence can never be lost or gained: the moment we see that the gateway to the nondual is always exactly where we are.

- K. Here we are presencing the nondual with an increasing inclusion of conditioned experience.
- L. Here we abide in the nondual, with our senses fully open and actively engaged with the world. We are a clearing—a centerless space—through which our unique life-world moves. Whether we are in deep meditative absorption or actively engaged with the world, we receive everything that arises without any glitches—without any movements of attachment or rejection. All thoughts, feelings, colors, and sensations arise as the play of contentless awareness—like paintings in the sky.

The reliances

Buddhism offers us a useful way to distinguish the paradigm we are working in. It’s a framework that points to a different emphasis when we work at the result level—the place where we begin at the end—and only move away from this if students can’t directly enter nondual awareness. The great lay Buddhist Vimalakirti describes this paradigm in terms of the four reliances. These are:

1. Rely on the transmission, and not on the teacher.
2. Rely on the intention [of the transmission], and not on the words [that are used].
3. Rely on teachings which are definitive, and not those which can be interpreted.
4. Rely on nondual wisdom, and not on conceptual knowledge.

1. Rely on the transmission, and not on the teacher

One way we take care of the first reliance in this work is by deconstructing projections that people might have about the level of insight of teachers and coaches. If students or clients project that their teachers have something that they don’t have, we invite them to inquire into what this is in a way that they cannot find what it is that they think a teacher may have. We deconstruct the projection that the teacher is resting in a special place. We reveal that the only thing that’s unique about their experience is that ultimately they have nothing to share or communicate. This allows students to share a space in which they cannot say that they are in a different space from their teacher(s).

NATURAL AWAKENING

We see this all the time when students talk about a teacher's personality, level of realization, lifestyle preferences, private life, etc. None of this is nondual. Some people want a teacher to be fully realized—abiding in the nondual continually, day and night, without a break. It's great if someone can make a close connection with such a teacher, but it's not necessary. All that's needed is for a teacher to be clearly presencing nonduality when they are offering nondual transmission. Typically, most teachers move in and out of nondual awareness. If they lose it when their children come home grumpy from school, it doesn't invalidate their capacity to offer transmission at other times. Most teachers are like us. They are gradually increasing their capacity to abide in nondual awareness.

What's important is that a teacher knows when they are presencing the nondual and when they aren't. If we are caught up in any identity (being someone)—for example, a nondual teacher or wise mentor—at that time, we can't offer a clear nondual transmission.

2. Rely on the intention of the transmission, and not on the words

The reliances recommend that as much as possible we go directly to the ultimate state, bypassing unnecessary involvement in ideas, concepts, and practices that can be easily misunderstood or misapplied. We rely on transmissions that come from, and lead directly into, the state of nondual awareness. This is sometimes spoken about as “teaching at the level of the result.” When we teach at the level of the result, there is no time lag between the transmission and its realization.

There is a tendency that may arise when you consider going directly to the ultimate state. This tendency creates an imagined need for time in order to be prepared to be present. Understanding this as an unnecessary step eliminates the time lag that stops us from being at the level of the result now.

3. Rely on definitive transmissions, and not those which are interpretative

Definitive transmissions point unambiguously to unconditioned awareness. These are gestures, words, questions, etc. that can directly and immediately reveal the unconditioned. Since this approach eliminates the need to sort through all of the explanations about the ultimate, we're only working with that which is definitive—unconditioned awareness. If we try to use the conceptual mind to understand unconditioned awareness, then we become caught up in interpretive discourses, which lead us further from the actual experience of the unconditioned.

Effectively this reliance is saying that it's only when we are offering no content that we can't be misunderstood. So long as we are talking about nothing (not talking about any *thing*) we can be completely confident in what we are saying because there's nothing that can be misinterpreted.

This reliance isn't saying there is no role for provisional guidance or things to do. These may be relevant if people are blocked and can't readily see that the nondual can't be blocked by anything. Sometimes people feel a strong need to do something and can't see that nothing is needed.

Provisional methods are simply transitional steps we create when someone can't instantly see that they are "no one needing nothing."

4. Rely on wisdom, and not on conceptual knowledge

The practices and techniques used in *Radiant Mind* and *Natural Awakening* revolve around unconditioned awareness. This paradoxical space of unconditioned awareness is the source of wisdom. The primary technique is deconstruction, therefore conceptual cognition is eliminated in every moment.

