



Introduction to the Special Issue on Non-duality and Cross-Cultural Philosophy

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In the wake of perennialist approaches to non-duality, which linked the concept to a metaphysical core of all religions, scholars have tended to shy away from foregrounding the issue in cross-cultural philosophical work. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a resurgence in the study of non-duality. Indeed, this issue of the *Journal of Dharma Studies* on the theme of non-duality grew out of two different panels held at the 2022 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. One, developed by James Madaio, was held under the auspices of DĀNAM (Dharma Academy of North America), and was titled “The Plurality of Non-Duality: Theological, Contemplative, and Ethical Approaches to Identity and Non-Difference.” The other, developed by Jeffery D. Long, met as a session of the Theology without Walls group. Its title was “Dualisms and Nondualisms.” Our Introduction to this themed issue attempts to lay out some contours for establishing non-duality as a global field of study, which will no doubt comprise of traditions and approaches beyond what is included here.

Non-duality literally indicates the state of not being twofold. Strictly speaking, it is the negation of distinction between two entities that comprise a duality (from Late Latin *dualitas*). Scholarly approaches to the issue have typically pursued non-duality within metaphysical contexts, such as that the world and/or “self” or “soul” are explained as non-different to the ultimate reality. While there are non-dual positions that assert absolute non-distinction, there are also a myriad of approaches that entail a sliding scale of non-dualism, which posit some degree of non-difference and difference. Metaphysical approaches to non-duality often scrutinize the apparent divide between subject and object, which is largely the focus of David Loy’s (Loy, 1988) comparative work on Asian forms of non-dualism published over thirty-five years ago. Others examine the ethical and socio-political implications of non-duality, such

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as Anantanand Rambachan's (Rambachan, 2015) work, which critiques patriarchy and caste from a non-dualistic perspective rooted in the Advaita Vedānta tradition. While ontology remains fertile ground in the study of non-dualisms, including how such views implicate varied forms of soteriology, psychology, ethics, ecology, etc., it is important to emphasize that this is not the only arena wherein non-duality is operative. Analyses of subject and object may bracket ontological considerations, focusing instead, for example, on phenomenology. Issues of epistemology, and the analysis of perception, also involve non-dual positions of various kinds, just as they are found in approaches to the problem of universals, resemblance theories, and so on. Further, non-duality functions in various aspects of meditational, devotional, and ritual praxis, which often implicate the role of imagination, iconography, and aesthetics.

An exhaustive list of the various contexts wherein non-duality functions is not the aim of the present Introduction; rather, we intend to underscore the broad scope and potential of this burgeoning field. Within the pan-Asian context, shades of non-duality are evident in our earliest textual archive. While the view is often associated with the variety of philosophical contemplations evinced in the Upaniṣads, which were later systematically developed within Vedānta, our collection of articles here helps draw attention to the ways in which non-duality is integral within Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophies as well as tantric Buddhist approaches, which gained currency in various regional and linguistic contexts.

Jan Vihan's article on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (c. first century of the Common Era) examines one of the most important and extensive analyses of non-duality (*advaya*) in Mahāyāna scriptural sources. Working with the newly discovered Sanskrit version of the text, and various Chinese commentaries, Vihan offers a close reading of key passages related to *advaya* and sameness (*samatā*), exploring how Vimalakīrti employs therapeutic methods to offset the duality inherent in perception and language. Vimalakīrti does not reify non-duality as an ontological reality but sees the concept itself as a strategy imbricated in the overcoming of dichotomies. Situating a term and its negation as two, non-duality, on this account, means "the non-duality of duality and no duality."

Perry Schmidt-Leukel's exploration of the work of Shinran Shōnin (1173–1263), the founder of Jōdo-Shinshū, a Japanese branch of Pure Land Buddhism, likewise positions non-duality not in terms of metaphysics but as a "cipher that points beyond all conceptual categories." Drawing out similarities between Shinran's account of a transtemporal Pure Land and Madhyamaka philosophy, the article explores the co-presence of ultimate and conventional reality within Shinran's thought, which holds that ultimacy does not manifest by the disappearance of conventional reality but through a different way of experiencing. By retaining both perspectives, Schmidt-Leukel argues that Shinran "translates this epistemic second order dualism into a spirituality which realizes non-dualism in a dualist way."

The next two articles in this issue are focused on different aspects of the Great Perfection or Dzogchen, a form of Buddhist *tantra* that developed within the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Kali Nyima Cape examines how the *yab yum*, or iconographic *buddha* couple in sexual embrace, functions in *The Seminal Heart of the Dakini*, a revealed scripture that rose to prominence after its adoption

by Longchenpa (1308–1363), a key systematizer and teacher of Dzogchen who takes center stage in Eran Laish’s article in this issue. Cape pursues how the *yab yum* serves as an interpretive structure through which the inseparable union of numerous pairs are illustrated within the Great Perfection’s non-nihilistic ontology, which holds gnosis and emptiness as non-dual. Cape also explores how *yab yum* semiotics involves a non-dual aesthetics, linked to embodied contemplations, and an extended sense of corporality. In his philosophically productive reading of Longchenpa, Eran Laish explores whether the world of lived experience is necessary or contingent. In accord with Longchenpa’s position that Awareness (*Rig pa*) “self-arises as samsara and nirvana,” Laish demonstrates how the qualitative world of lived experience is a necessary, inherent expression of the dynamic energy of Awareness, which spontaneously radiates experiences. Given that the arising of spatial and temporal distinctions is inherent to Awareness, the soteriological aim is to discover the ground of lived experience rather than to transcend it. From this vantage point, non-duality is best positioned not as the negation of dualities since “the nondual source is already and always present within and as dualistic modes of being.”

Finally, Patrick Beldio provides a theologically constructive reading of the work of Meher Baba (1894–1969), who was born an Irani Zoroastrian in Maharashtra, India, and is considered one of the most controversial spiritual teachers of the twentieth century. Beldio examines various strands of Baba’s *yoga* of “you go,” which culminates in the lover becoming the Beloved in an undifferentiated unity. In doing so, Beldio examines how Baba rearticulates concepts associated with yogic-oriented *advaita* traditions, such as mental annihilation (*manonāśa*) and the destruction of impressions (*vāsanākṣaya*). Following in the wake of figures like Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, Baba heralded what he called “a new world culture,” and the diverse influences in his work evidence a variety of Hindu traditions as well as Sufism, a tradition Baba is understood as continuing through his order Sufism Reoriented. Historically, some Sufi positions have been understood as resonating with forms of non-dualism, such as in the case of the ecstatic utterances of the Persian Sufi Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī (e.g., “I am He”) or various articulations of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (“unity of being”), which were prominent in South Asia. Baba’s globally constituted philosophy incorporates diverse approaches and models, and he considered certain sages from a range of religious traditions as Perfect Masters or “Man-Gods”, including the Sufis Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, and Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfīz, as well as the Catholic saint Francis of Assisi and the *sant* Kabīr.

Whether within premodern traditions or those constituted by the multidirectional flow of ideas during roughly the last two centuries, non-duality has consistently served as a salient model within diverse philosophical systems, albeit with varied meanings attached to it. As an area of inquiry, it is not simply of historical importance, or a matter of textual exegesis, but is increasingly relevant within currents of psychology, consciousness studies, and philosophy of mind, as well as therapeutic paradigms. Collectively, the articles in this themed issue push beyond the literal sense of non-duality as indicating only a negation, or as operating only within the sphere of metaphysics. Approaching non-duality from a wide range of traditional and scholarly vantage points and applying it to a similarly wide array of topics, it

is our hope, as the editors of this issue, that the articles collected here will contribute to the further advancement of the cross-cultural study of non-duality in all its varieties.

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