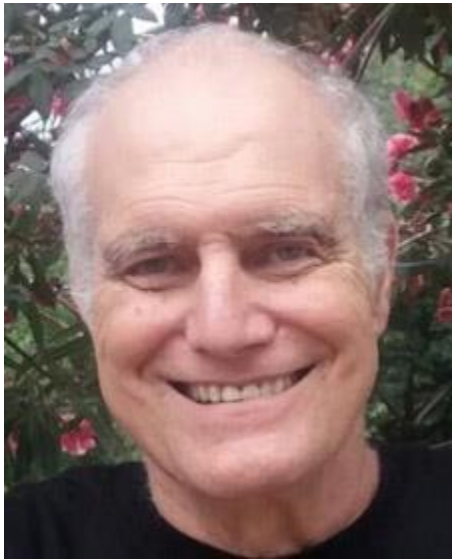


# Duality: The Problem and the Solution

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By Glen Kezwer



Two polar opposites: duality and oneness. The first is the problem confronting humanity; the second is the solution.

Duality is the vision which accepts two different realities, taking both to be equally real. These realities can be described as consciousness and matter, the inner Self and the world, the seer and the seen, the knower and the known, I and you. In other words, duality is the sense of otherness.

In one sentence, duality means that as soon as you wake up, there are two separate things: one is the body, and the other is your "I"—your inner consciousness, your Self. In terms of everyday perception, duality is the mechanism with which we normally view the world. This mechanism involves two elements: the seer who sees, and the world the seer experiences. Duality is the understanding that these two elements are separate. When we look at the world in this way, we do not perceive the underlying oneness. Yet this oneness is the essential truth—unperceivable to the senses—which underlies the physical universe in which we live. The Theosophical Society brands oneness as "the Unity of all life."

Duality can be called difference. In fact, difference and duality are synonymous, and they come from the mind of a human being.

Differences begin when the waking state of consciousness begins . . . You too have never found any differences while in the state of deep sleep. Even if you choose to differ with what I am saying, in order to make that choice you must resort to your waking state of consciousness, because this is where your mind arises. This shows that the waking state and the mind are one and the same reality. (Swami Shyam, 52)

This quote contains two important elements. The first is that we don't experience duality while we are asleep. Most people tend to dismiss sleep as irrelevant, a state of unconsciousness or nothingness, which gives our physical and mental systems their needed rest but otherwise has no practical value. But let's look a little deeper. No matter what we may be suffering from—a painful

disease, mental anxiety or worry, grief at the passing of a loved one—that suffering completely vanishes as long as we are asleep. This is not a trivial point. It shows that we have the power within ourselves to be free from all suffering during those hours. The question is, can we create a state of freedom that is free of problems as deep sleep is, yet also embodies awareness? I will return to this question later on.

In the first paragraph of this article, I called duality the problem of humanity. By this I mean that when we are under the influence of duality, we experience all of the pain and suffering, but also the joy and happiness, of the world. We undergo duality from the moment we wake up in the morning until the moment we fall asleep at night. The world is entirely composed of differences. We see a multitude of objects that are separate from one another and especially from ourselves: human beings, cars, trees, mountains, milk cartons, and so on are all distinct and separate entities. Time and space separate all things and events. And this is the only way it could be; otherwise, there would not be a universe in which we live.

Why is this a problem? Simply put, duality creates pain and suffering, and human beings want to remove pain and suffering. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali call the suffering we want to avoid *heya*, which is echoed in the first of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. The essence of the world is suffering, and human beings wish to avoid it.

The opposite of duality is oneness. (Actually, there is no opposite of oneness, since it is absolute, but for the purposes of our discussion here, this definition is useful.) Oneness is the ultimate goal of the path of spiritual pursuit, which unites everything into one seamless, undivided reality. This reality is the essence of all human beings, all living creatures, and all of creation. It is beyond space and time, birth and death, and all other pairs of opposites. It cannot be perceived by the senses or the mind, yet is the source of all. Oneness is poetically described by the Sanskrit mantra

*Om poornamadah poornamidam poornaat poornamudachyate  
Poornasya poornamaadaaya poornamevaavashishyate*

The inner world is oneness. The outer world is oneness.

If you take from oneness, oneness remains, and that which you take is oneness.  
(my interpretation)

Since there is nothing in ordinary human experience to compare to oneness, to understand it, we can make use of the metaphor of the waves on the surface of an ocean. From the surface, all the waves appear different. They move at different speeds and come in different sizes and shapes, and some are breaking and some are not. Yet if we go down to the deeper water beneath the waves, all is still and calm. The waves represent the infinite forms which comprise the universe. They all look different, but just as the essential nature of each wave is water, which is one and the same everywhere, the essential nature of all the forms is universal oneness. If we plunge beneath the mind's surface of thoughts, we find stillness and peace.

The dictum of Adi Shankaracharya, the chief formulator of the Advaita Vedanta, sums up oneness: *brahm satyam jagat mithya*. *Brahm*, the highest consciousness, which is the unchanging source of the universe, is real, and the world is an illusion. Essentially *Brahm* is one without a second, and the world exists only as long as one has not realized this truth.

How do we proceed from duality to oneness? To answer this question, I would like to introduce the four premises on which this article is written: (1) Duality causes pain and suffering, and at the same time happiness and joy. Happiness and unhappiness are just opposite sides of the same coin; both result from the experience of duality. (2) The mind is the creator of duality. (3) The mind is equivalent to the waking state. (4) The waking mind and the differences it creates can be transcended or overcome by observing them in meditation from the perspective of our essential inner being, the Self or Knower.

Our examination of duality and oneness should not merely be abstract philosophy. It should be relevant to our daily lives. As an example of how this works, let's look at Patanjali's three broad categories of pain.

1. *Parinaam*: pain due to our interactions with the constantly changing world in which we live. I recently had an interaction with an old friend who spoke rudely to me. It was definitely unpleasant and took some time to recover from. This is an example of pain caused by a change in my environment, from a state of being easy with my friend to uneasiness.

2. *Taap*: pain caused by worry or fear concerning possible future events. Many people are fearful of losing their home, job, or family or of becoming ill.

3. *Sanskaar*: pain resulting from the memory of a past unpleasant event. A friend of mine once sold his house, and shortly afterwards the housing market skyrocketed. Had he waited just a little while, he would have sold it for a much higher price. He lamented over this for years.

These simple examples represent the myriad types of pain a human being can experience.

Considering the second premise, that the mind creates difference, my starting point is the state of dreamless sleep. As I stated above, while we sleep, we experience no differences whatsoever—no worries, no happiness, no unhappiness, no disease, and in fact no world at all. In the state of deep sleep, nothing we experience while we are awake or dreaming appears. Of course, the entire gamut of the world returns to our consciousness when we wake up, which means that our minds return. With the appearance of the waking state, everything is created simultaneously. In an instant, you are a human being lying in a bed. Everything around you is familiar or unfamiliar, as the case may be. All that you perceive is different from you—your bed, your surroundings, the clock on the night table, the window looking out onto your backyard, and even your thoughts. The mind and the waking state are the same thing. Upon awakening, we are embedded in a world of duality, residing in time and space, which we call the waking state.

Is there a problem here? Well, yes, because in the waking state we suffer, both physically and mentally. I remember my father referring to the world as a "vale of tears." I think his attitude is quite common. Of course, we also experience happiness, joy, love, and beauty in our lives, and we don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Furthermore, we do need duality in order to survive. I'm going to the dentist this morning. I have to know that I have a tooth problem, that the dentist is the person who can take care of it, where the dentist's office is, how to pay him (often the hardest part), and so on.

The problem arises when we believe duality to be real. The mind says it is located in your head, and everything you perceive outside of you is not you. This is the essence of difference. It is the source of problems, the creator of friction, of rubbing: I like something; I don't like something else. This leads to suffering and joy or conversely happiness and unhappiness.

It is important to dispel any notion that the mind is bad or somehow should be destroyed or eliminated. The eyes see, the ears hear, and the tongue tastes. In the same way, the mind generates thoughts on the basis of the sensory input it receives. That is what it is supposed to do. You need your mind to order from a menu, use your credit card, drive your car, or talk to your friends. It is simply doing its job, which is essential to our existence as human beings. The problem comes when we interpret the thoughts of the mind in either a positive or a negative way.

Happiness is decided upon by the human mind. The World Series is on now. When a game is over, the fans of the winning team celebrate and those of the loser are dejected, but there is only one game. So the problem must ultimately be handled on the level of the mind, which can be transformed, and not on the level of the events of the world. This is not to say that we don't make every effort to improve our situation in life, but ultimately the mind must be transformed.

How do we get away from this problem, since the mind created it in the first place? Here I will return to the question I posed above: is there a state that is problem-free, as in sleep, yet also contains awareness?

This state is meditation, which creates a new perspective on the mind. In meditation your awareness turns into a sense that nothing is separate from you. In a scientific experiment, we need an observer and something observed. In meditation I will call the observer the Knower, which observes the thoughts that come and go in our minds. The Knower can also be called the witness or watcher. It provides an entirely new outlook on the mind. It perceives the mind and everything it creates, yet at the same time is free and untouched by all of its perceptions. As a free being, the Knower can choose to accept or not accept what the mind says. In other words, the Knower is free of the pain-producing thoughts of the mind.

Meditation in no way means that you have to stop your thoughts from coming. No matter how hard you try, you cannot do so anyway. Unfortunately, the popular misconception that they have to stop their thoughts in meditation leads many to abandon its practice. The key is to put your attention on the Knower-Self. If thoughts come, your meditation is not disturbed. The Knower is freedom. The Knower is oneness. Let your thoughts come and go, but keep your attention on the Knower. Your attention may stray from the Knower. When you realize this, understand that nothing wrong has happened, and gently return your attention to the Knower.

You will find that with practice, when you open your eyes after meditation, the awareness of oneness that was there does not disappear. You reenter the waking state, bringing the freedom of the meditative state into the waking state and realizing that all is you.

In other words, you will realize, as the Theosophical Society puts it, that “every existent being—from atom to galaxy—is rooted in the same universal, life-creating Reality. This Reality is all-pervasive, but it can never be summed up in its parts, since it transcends all its expressions.”

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### Source Material

Swami Shyam. *Shyam's Philosophy*. Kullu, India: International Meditation Institute, 2003.

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