

## **Radical acceptance: A nondual psychology approach to grief and loss**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the application of nondual psychology in transforming grief and loss into the experience of nondual consciousness. Nondual consciousness is the collapse of the dualistic notions of self and other through the direct realization of the stateless state of no-self. The experience of grief and loss serves as a catalyst to this radical experience because it invites the experience of death and non-being shattering one's conventional notions of self and open one up to the realm of transpersonal and nondual consciousness. The barrier to this experience is the fear of no-self. Nondual psychology is the facilitation towards the radical acceptance of no-self, whereby the contraction around grief dissolves revealing the open spaciousness of one's being. The author also includes a segment of his own transformational journey through grief and a client case study.

There was a man of Wei, Tung-men Wu,  
who did not grieve when his son died.

His wife said to him:

“No one in the world loves his son as much  
as you did, why do you not grieve now he is  
dead?”

He answered:

“I had no son, and when I had no son I did  
not grieve. Now that he is dead it is the same  
as it was before, when I had no son. Why  
should I grieve over him?”

(Osho, 1977, p. 52)

This is not a tale of an emotionally disconnected father but of a man who is living an awakened life; a man whom through a spontaneous act of grace has made the shift in perception from that of a separate bound identity to a vastness beyond description. It is a parable pointing towards an effable *presence* existing within our being; an eternal

presence felt in any moment and within any circumstance (Osho, 1977). It is a stateless state which includes and goes beyond the dualities of being and non-being, of illness and health, and of happiness and grief, in fact, it is the immediate presence existing right here and now, prior to identification with the body and mind (Adyashanti, 2000; Maharaj, 1999; Maharshi, 1985). This is the condition of a life lived in harmony and wholeness with all of existence, from the most blissful to the most terrible and grief stricken states of existence. This radical experience has been described by mystics and shared in various contemplative wisdom traditions as awakening, the void, enlightenment, Christ consciousness, the Self, the Tao, our true nature and no-self (Adyashanti, 2000; Harvey, 1996; Hixon, 1989; Maharshi, 1985; Osho, 2000; Smith, 1991; Suzuki, 2003).

As a nondual therapist I have personally experienced and witnessed the awesome power of grief and despair and how it can serve as a transformational opportunity of realizing our true nature. I will begin this article by describing my own transformational journey through grief and how it changed my life and the way in which I counselled clients experiencing grief and loss.

### **The Uninvited Guest: My Own Transformational Journey through Grief**

It was Valentine's Day and my wife and I we were sitting in the doctor's office awaiting the results of an MRI scan performed several months earlier. For a few years my wife had been experiencing tingling sensations down her arm and in her face. We were not worried because we were told that if the results were of a serious nature we would have been contacted immediately and received the next most available appointment. Imagine our surprise when the doctor finally walked in and shared the shocking news that

my wife has brain cancer (later to be diagnosed as malignant and inoperable). We were stunned. Tears rolled down our eyes as we digested the news. Apparently, my wife's medical file had been "misplaced and forgotten" and so the doctor had only learned of the results that afternoon. After what felt like an eternity, my wife quipped, "Quite the uninvited guest this evening!"

For months, grief and pain filled my being. Our world was turned upside down. I found some relative reprieve by including healthier foods, a chemical free environment, and letting go of toxic friendships, but the pain continued. It felt like a deep ache at the centre of my chest. Having been on a psycho-spiritual journey for several years I found myself practicing alternative healing strategies including various forms of energy healing work, attending weekend Holotropic Breathwork sessions and various forms of meditation. Despite experiencing some healing in these practices, it was temporary, and the pain would re-appear.

Late one evening though, as another round of grief and fear filled my being, I, for some unknown reason, decided not to fight it. I sat down and let it be there in its entirety. I came to a complete stop. I remember saying to myself, "No matter what happens I'm not going to fight you". Gangaji (1996) describes this as an important realization:

We have gone everywhere to get rid of suffering. We have bought everything to get rid of it. We have ingested everything to get rid of it. Finally, when one has tried enough, there arises the possibility of spiritual maturity with the willingness to stop the futile attempt to get rid of, and, instead, to actually experience suffering. In that momentous instant, there is the realization of that which is

beyond suffering, of that which is untouched by suffering. There is the realization of who one truly is (p. 41).

And so suddenly, in that instance of full stop, I felt a swelling of energy emerge and expand in the centre of my chest. I felt like I was being opened up from the inside out. This was not a traumatizing experience in the least; rather it was like deep currents of energy were passing throughout my body and it felt incredibly refreshing. I was clear and alertly aware. As I accepted the entirety of my experience in the moment without any desire for escape I experienced a thinning away of my usual sense of self and replaced by a vast spaciousness that I had never experienced before. I was truly stunned. I realized that the essence of my pain was fed through my desire to be rid of it. Strangely, my search for healing was an underhanded way of perpetuating its existence.

I was shocked at my discovery. When I dropped all my strategies of healing, understanding, escaping or even of trying to transcend the experience, the immediate clarity of who and what I was revealed itself more and more. It felt like the tension of grief and pain was burned up in the transparency of the moment. I stopped judging my experience and my wife's condition as something that should not be happening. A downpour of tears and feelings of heartfelt sadness filled my being and it became abundantly clear to me that *this* is it, just *this* moment. I could see that any movement to reject the moment, no matter how subtle, would only plunge me right back into the hell realm of personal suffering. My suffering was in defending against death and non-being through self-improvement strategies and personal judgments. I recognized there was nowhere to go and the present moment was all there was. My wife's condition mirrored

back my own impermanence and shattered my conventional notion of self. A huge question mark was etched into my being. I will now explore how typical forms of grieving can be used as a defense against death and experience of no-self.

### **The Problem with Ritualized Sorrow**

The pain of losing a loved one or the grief of suddenly being diagnosed with a terminal illness can bring one down to the deepest depths of sorrow where it can feel like it will go on forever. The death of a loved can bring about the realization of one's own impermanence and threat of non-being (Adi Da, 1983; Chodron, 2001; Greenspan, 2003; Levine & Levine, 1982; Pillay, 1996; Thich Nhat Hanh, 2002; Wilber, 1993).

Interestingly, Adi Da (1983) made the poignant observation that the grief and sorrow we commonly feel at such times, although entirely appropriate, does not necessarily fully address the underlying hugeness and terror of non-being. Death is merely reacted to and so grief and sorrow become nothing more than a form of ritualized ego activity which has very little to do with the recently deceased loved one and much more to do with one's own fear of death and non-existence. The death of the separate self is essential when dealing with this difficulty because it is the self that is afraid of giving up control and facing its own extinction, not the truth of who you are. He shares:

To deal with that Ultimate reality you must be free of your ego-based ritualization of existence, not divorce yourself from It through ritual. All this social face, these bodily attitudes, the tendencies toward emotional reaction, dependence and independence, all the character games we play all day long, all the ways we deal with primary events in life, are all a ritual, a defense, an expression of Narcissus,

the self-contracted personality that is fundamentally devoted to defending itself against the realities of the Living Process and, in the process of that defense, divorcing itself further from the ultimate Condition which these changes are occurring (p. 316).

Specifically, Pillay (1996) noticed such dramatic rehearsals emerging in the attachment to theoretical formulations of reincarnation and pursuit of spiritual contact with recently deceased loved one. This is not to deny the very real possibility of such contact as has been reported in many near-death studies (Moody, 1976; Ring, 1982) but illuminates how this behaviour can be used as a buffer around the threat of non-being. Arjuna (2005) also observed such defensive strategies existing in the form of cultivated compassion where one appears humble and sad, makes the appropriate gestures towards grieving loved ones, goes through the motions of extending heartfeltness, but at the heart of it is the fear of their own non-existence. Such spiritual pursuits rarely question *who* it is that is afraid of non-existence and so are considered dressed up forms of spiritual materialism (Trungpa, 1987).

However, McKenna (2002) could appreciate this fear because the experience of no-self is intolerable. “Fear of the hollow core. Fear of the black hole within. Fear of non-being. Fear of no-self. The fear of no-self is the mother of all fears, the one upon which all others are based” (p. 7). Although a delicate process, the only real remedy is to surrender our judgments towards the experience of non-being. As Nixon (2001) states, there is no comfortable way around this experience but to have a full on encounter with it, to trust and take the leap into the roaring silence of the abyss and perhaps rather than

seeing the experience as being something terrible one can merge with the intense energy of it and embrace it as an energetic aspect of one's own being. Because as Adyashanti (2008, p. 215) puts it, "We must die in order to truly live. We must experience absolute non-existence in order to truly exist, in a conscious way".

When our harsh commentary towards the experience settles the posture of separateness and fear of non-being collapses. Krishnamurti (2000) described this as a process of "choiceless awareness" where the absence of preferences towards human experiencing reveals the possibility of experiencing our true condition. The death of our separate self is replaced by a vast emptiness. Almaas (1988) describes this experience:

One experiences oneself as a vast, dark, silent emptiness. It is a sheer emptiness, boundless, infinite and absolutely silent. One experiences oneself as an emptiness that has no characteristic except that of being a totally silent Impersonal Witness. There is a stupendous vastness, an absolute silence, a complete impersonality, and a singularly clear but absolutely uninvolved awareness of everything.... The silence is so complete that it is eerie. One feels one is absolutely this ultimate, but singularly aware, void (pp. 426-427).

The more we accept non-existence into our own lives the more the contraction around death ceases and the potential of life revealing its inherent mysteries is made. A more authentic response to grief and loss is one of awakeness, spontaneity and total freedom from the confines of the separate self where death is not seen to be a problem (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2002; Tolle, 1997). No more are we reacting to life, instead, we are responding from the true stateless state of who and what we are. The problem of grief

was really only a problem to the separate self, which, upon investigation, really never existed (Gangaji, 1996; Osho, 2000). We will now turn our attention to the school of transpersonal psychology who account for such extraordinary experiences and identify grief as a catalyst to these experiences.

### **Grief as a Gateway to the Transpersonal**

Many psychologists and therapists alike are recognizing grief and loss as an extraordinary opportunity of experiencing new realms of human consciousness which extends beyond normal ego identity awareness (Halifax, 2009; Greenspan, 2003; Grof, 1985; Levine, 2005; Singh, 1998; Wilber, 1993). Greenspan (2003, p. 95) describes grief as a stormy “emotion that asks us to depart from the “normal”--- to be still, like a pool of frozen water in the winter” and in that stillness act as a potential doorway into transpersonal levels of consciousness.

Transpersonal psychology describes human consciousness as evolutionary in nature and stretches beyond the exclusive identification with the body and mind to include the levels of the transpersonal; the level of Spirit, from which all forms and formless aspects of existence rise and fall (Almaas, 1996; Assagioli, 1971; Boorstein, 1996; Bucke, 1973; Cortright, 1997; Grof, 1985; Maslow, 1968; Rowan, 2005; Welwood, 2002; Wilber, 1986; 1996). Wilber (1986; 1996) developed a full-spectrum model of human growth and development through the integration of Western schools of psychology and contemplative wisdom traditions. The model outlines ten central levels of self-development through three distinct stages: pre-personal, personal and the transpersonal. Each stage consists of three levels of consciousness with the tenth not

being a level at all but nondual consciousness *as such* or the ground of being from which all other levels emerge and fall.

Wilber (1986; 1996) noted that Western psychology focused exclusively on the pre-personal and personal levels of human development concluding that self-actualization is the furthestmost tip of human consciousness development. This is not the case. He describes three distinct levels of consciousness development that transcend the mature ego including what he called the psychic, subtle, and causal levels. Below is a brief description of these levels.

The psychic level is the seventh level of consciousness and is characterized as the opening up of the “third eye” where a person’s cognitive and perceptual capacities become more fluid and expansive that they begin to reach beyond and transcend the narrowly constructed notion of self. This can be done through enquiry where awareness begins to “turn in on itself” and question the questioner. Here, the citadel of the mind begins to crumble giving way to formless aspects of consciousness. Once can begin *seeing through* the crystallized sense of individuality. For example, while plummeting the depths of a broken heart after the loss of his beloved wife, Shamala, from autoimmune disease lupus, it became clear to Kriben Pillay (1996) that instead of participating with the mind that so desperately wanted to re-establish its familiar world he shifted his focus to the dilemma of death itself and began enquiring into the reality of the separate self. He asked himself,

Certainly there was the death of the person known as Shamala, but was there really such a permanent person? ... The blatant truth is that we construct the

person in our minds from the raw material of the impressions given by the person's body-mind, which are always changing; when the body-mind is no longer we are really mourning the loss of our own self-creation (para. 8).

Here, consciousness is beginning to dis-identify from the usual content of the mind and make contact with open spaciousness of being prior to emergence of thoughts. The emergence with the experience of no-self is beginning to take place.

The subtle level, and the eighth in the overall spectrum, is the home of actual archetypal forms and symbols, subtle sounds and audible illuminations, of transcendent insight and absorption (Wilber, 1986). The subtle level is similar to *sambhogakaya* in Buddhist meditation practices which describes intense dancing light and colors understood through deep intuition and experience (Evan-Wentz, 1971). It is the origin of personal apprehension of deity-energy form, a witnessing of something far beyond the rational and limited mind. Fox (1988, p. 64) illustrates this in the image of the "cosmic Christ" sharing, "It is the outward birth of the image of God from within". For example, an archetypal form of prayer emerged in Greenspan's (2003) gut wrenching experience of the death of her infant son. She shares:

Dead, he was nakedly mine and altogether gone all in the same instant. Time stood still and the world fell silent. I was drawn into a vortex, and the self I knew was irreversibly shattered. What happened next: an energy larger than my body could contain broke through in a rush of strange, unfathomable syllables..... What came through me, as I stood and wrapped my arms around my dead baby, was a

form of speech emanating from a source deeper than personality. Though utterly indecipherable, these strange sounds were a kind of prayer (pp. 90-91).

The subtle level gives way to the causal which is the transcendence of archetypal forms of experience and identification with the transcendental ground of all the lesser levels and structures of development. It houses the pure subjective Witness, a vast expanse of pure formless consciousness; a state which is prior to all arising phenomena no matter how mundane or transcendent the experience. It is prior to time, space and all objects of awareness. It is that which is eternally awake and aware during deep sleep, dreaming and waking states of consciousness (Wilber, 1986; 1996).

We can see this illustrated in Bedard's (1999) experience after being told by his doctors that he was dying from Leukemia and had only a few hours to live. He shares:

That day, I entered a state between life and death, as my mind was drawn further and further away from my body. I gradually became aware of a boundless expanse of light, an endless moonlight, soothing and comforting. There was no sense of self or having a body. I had disappeared into limitless, birthless space. For what seemed to be an eternity, I had rested in a place I had never really left (pp. 112-113).

Through a full dis-identification with all of forms of existence one can reside in this extraordinary state. Grief and loss invites us to enquire into our own fear and

terror of non-being and open up to uncharted realms of our own consciousness. A transpersonal orientation to human development assists therapists in processing and guiding clients through such extraordinary experiences. Let us now take a look at the pinnacle of human consciousness, nondual consciousness, and the living condition with the experience of grief and loss.

### **Radical Acceptance as Embracing Nondual Being**

Although the causal level is said to be the embracement of all the other levels of consciousness it is still inherently dualistic. There still exists the subtle division between the Witness and that which is witnessed. The Witness itself has not merged with the underlying emptiness or ground of being. The dualistic notions of the knower and the known have not fully dissolved. This is an act of profound grace. Once the Witness is dropped nondual consciousness is revealed. Nondual consciousness is not a separate level in the overall spectrum but an embracement of all the lesser levels where all expressions and manifestations of consciousness are seen to be a perfect reflection of a clear and awakened consciousness (Wilber, 1986; 1996).

Passing fully through the state of cessation or unmanifest causal absorption, consciousness is said finally to reawaken to its prior and eternal abode as nondual Spirit, radiant and all pervading, one and many, only and all---the complete integration and identity of manifest form with the unmanifest Formless... Strictly speaking, the ultimate is not one level among others, but the reality, condition, or suchness of all levels (p. 74).

It is a spontaneous *seeing* that all aspects of existence are a reflection of one's true

nature of unity consciousness. The notions of “you” and “I” and death arise and fall together in the ground of being. This is what the Buddha realized while meditating and observing the last star disappearing as morning broke. In that moment, he came to the realization that form is none-other than emptiness and emptiness is none-other than form (Osho, 1978). This is the realization of the nondual interconnectedness of all of existence. Emptiness carries within it the seed of manifest potential. The subject and object, the seer and the seen have merged and disappeared to reveal the nondual reality of life; the suchness and totality of every moment (Balsekar, 1992). The veil of separation is seen through and thus a person is able to participate in all aspects and all levels of existence while abiding in nondual being.

Ram Dass & Gorman (1985) give a beautiful example of abiding in this stateless state of no-self in the heartfelt transformational story of the Tibetan Buddhist Master, Marpa. While alone with his grief and despair having lost his eldest son, he was approached by one of his disciples. The disciple was totally confused because the teachings state that everything is an illusion based on desire and rejection and here was his Master doubled over in grief. He asked Marpa, “Here you are weeping. If all this is illusion, why do you grieve so deeply?” Marpa replied, “Yes, everything here is an illusion. And the death of a child is the greatest of these illusions” (p. 85). This is the diamond-like insight contained at the heart of nondual wisdom. There is suffering but there is no independent self who is experiencing it. Foster (2009) echoes this paradoxical realization:

Even suffering is pointing to the absence of the separate solid person. And that can be very difficult to hear. Bear with me. There is pain, but there's nobody there who is in pain. That's the dream, that's the suffering: that there is a *person* here. No, there is only pain happening, only sensation happening, but nobody there to whom it's all happening (p. 34).

Through a radical embracement of this paradox the mind becomes exposed and loses its grip as absolute authority. This is the death of the separate self. Here, life is lived in a very ordinary and natural way free from the position of separateness. When we meet our experience through separateness or through identification with the mind we lose contact with the presence of nondual consciousness and suffer miserably. Grief loses its charge when it is radically accepted in the moment. When we allow ourselves to *be* with experience, to *be* with our grief, as it is, nondual consciousness is revealed (Pillay, 1996). The next section describes a turn towards nondual psychology when facilitating such an experience.

### **A Turn towards Nondual Psychotherapy**

The Buddhist story of a grieving mother turning to Buddha for help points to the origins of nondual psychotherapy. The story goes that Kisa Gotami, whom, having just lost her son, and could not bare the sorrow, frantically searched her community for medicine to revive him. She was told by her community to seek Buddha as he will have the answer she is looking for. Brimming with hope, Gotami met with the Buddha where he reassured her and instructed that she find a home where no one has ever died and from that house collect a few grains of mustard seed. With a feverish intensity never felt

before, she scoured the neighborhood collecting mustard seeds but could not find a home where death had not visited. Suddenly, in that moment, her frustration gave way to an explosive insight that revealed the impermanent nature of self-existence. That which we think we are is temporary. The truth of our being is eternal. The shift from an encapsulated self to that of nondual awareness was made. She was awestruck. She plunged into the depths of her being and tasted the formless nature of her being for the first time (Kramer, 1988).

Today, there is a large community of psychotherapists who are beginning to integrate nondual contemplative wisdom traditions into their psychotherapeutic practice. Nondual psychology points out that at the core of all sentient beings, whether one is aware of it or not, is the drive to realize and awaken to our true primordial nature of nondual consciousness (Almaas, 1996; Blackstone, 2006; Epstein, 1995; Nixon, 2010; Prendergast et al., 2003; Prendergast & Bradford, 2007a; Theriault, 2010; Wolinsky, 1993). Where this pinnacle of realization was originally thought to be accessed by only those on a developmental hierarchical spiritual quest, as it is seen in some forms of transpersonal psychology, nondual psychology recognizes that awakening can occur in any moment independent of one's psychological development or personality make-up. Self-realization is not strictly achieved through a linear developmental enfoldment but rather in the immediacy of the moment (Nixon, 2010; Prendergast, & Bradford, 2007b). This is readily seen in the many reports of people having a spontaneous awakening in the course of living an ordinary life (Carse, 2006; Foster, 2009; Renz, 2005; Segal, 1996).

The fundamental difference between conventional schools of psychotherapy and nondual psychology rests on the existence of a separate self. Conventional schools have assumed the reality of an independent solid separate self, where as nondual psychology has questioned this assumption altogether and resurrected the age old question of, “Who and what am I?” (Almaas, 1988). Traditional forms of psychotherapy take on the perspective that clients need to be diagnosed and fixed in order to achieve healthy fulfilling lives; whereas nondual psychotherapy points to the already healed and awakened condition of nondual consciousness in the here and now moment (Fenner, 2003).

When we rest in the unconditioned mind it is impossible to worry about a fear. We don't need to find a miracle cure for an illness, and we are satisfied wherever we are ... we are free of the need to be ill or healthy. We might still have a diseased body or experience confusing emotions in our lives, but we are no longer battling our condition (p. 31).

The central task in nondual therapy is to facilitate “awakening an experience of the unconditioned mind for the therapist and client, and the ongoing cultivation of this experience” (p. 28). Although a person may present in therapy with very real emotional pain and inner conflict, when one's thoughts, feelings, sensations and inner conflicts are seen from the stateless state of no-self one is multi-dimensionally aware and liberated from the fixation that life in the moment should or should not be the way it is (Wolinsky, 1993). One is blown open on all levels of existence. This is depicted in what the mystics have called “the one-thousand-petalled lotus”, a full blooming of

awakeness in both personal and impersonal aspects of consciousness. Here, the therapist is abiding within paradox; the realization that there is no crystallized separate self, and yet, in the same breath, there does *appear* to be one. The shift is in surrendering exclusive fixation this appearance in resting in nondual consciousness. It is the client's fixation and belief in the reality of the *apparent* separate self that causes misery and endless suffering (Osho, 1983).

This is mirrored and facilitated when the therapist himself is anchored in nondual consciousness. The role of therapist and client are seen through, allowing for the possibility of a nondual resonance to take place within the therapeutic process. The boundary between client and therapist collapses bringing about a stillness and silence out of which a spontaneous encounter can emerge (Blackstone, 2006). Within this possibility of inter-subjective resonance, therapeutic techniques may be used and developmental theories considered but they are regarded as mere pointers towards nondual realization. Any fixation on a technique, role or particular therapy (even nondual therapy) limits access to the already free flowing nature of nondual consciousness (Prendergast, 2003).

In many ways, the nondual therapist is acting out of an impersonal love. It is an impersonal love and acceptance of all things. One's responses are fresh, clear and spontaneous in nature. There isn't even the expectation or hope that a client realizes their true condition because doing so would be placing a demand on the moment and close down the aperture of awareness. It is similar to what the Taoists call "action through inaction" where one responds to the needs of the moment without losing sight of the already awakened condition of no-self (Wei Wu Wei, 2004). Almaas (1996 pp. 343-344)

describes it as “a quality of boundless and gentle love, a delicate light experienced as the presence of softness, sweetness and generosity. It is not exactly a personal kind of love. It is love for everything and everyone---universal love”. The nondual therapist makes his or her home in the clarity of no-self. The next section is a client case study describing a nondual approach to grief and loss

### **A Client Case Study**

Laura (pseudonym), a successful 40 year old yoga instructor, had recently participated in and completed several group therapy sessions with me exploring post-addiction recovery issues. Although she had saved her life from the trenches of drug addiction seven years ago and transitioned to embracing a healthier lifestyle she felt it was time to heal the wound of grief related to the death of her mother. She reported finding it difficult to be openly vulnerable with her friends and family, experienced intrusive thoughts related to her mother’s death several times a month and, subsequently felt depleted in energy. Feeling connected to the spiritual approach towards healing and recovery in the group therapy sessions she requested a one-to-one counselling session with me to explore this issue further.

It became clear to me that Laura was very close to her mother and that her death was a huge loss for her. Her mother had lost her battle with cancer while Laura was in her second year of recovery and despite the amount of stress Laura felt at this time she proudly shared being able to remain abstinent from drugs. Laura went on to describe how powerfully healing it was for her to be by her mother’s bedside during the last few

moments of her life but subsequently felt conflicted stating that, “It just wasn’t her time”. “I know we all return to the Source but she had so much left to give,” she said.

I let this statement hang in silence for a few moments sensing that her judgment, “it wasn’t her time” was a way in which she contracted upon herself and defended against death and the terror of non-being. I suspected that a large part of her being was energetically stuck in the past of “there and then” rather than centered in the “here and now”. Tolle (1999) described this condition as the pain-body where an accumulation of demands placed on experiences collects overtime and lodges within one’s being stunting their ability to feel open totally available in the moment. It was as if her mother’s death had become a frozen moment in time for her.

I wanted to point out to Laura how she was contracting upon herself through her story of how things should have turned out differently for her mother. I asked Laura to repeat the statements “it just wasn’t her time and she had so much left to give” a few times slowly to herself and to notice how her body-mind responded to it. As she did this, She stated feeling tightness and heaviness throughout her body and an inability to move. Teary eyed, she followed up with a vivid image of herself standing in a graveyard surrounded by tombstones. I asked her to stay with her imagery and to describe it. “I see myself walking through the graveyard but I can’t find the gate to get out. I feel trapped,” she said. I felt the moment held a transformational opportunity so I invited Laura to “Rather than look for a way out what would happen if you just accepted your situation as it is. That, in fact, there is no way out of this?” It is only when the mind is exhausted and

gives up trying to figure it out, trying to save itself, trying to avoid its own extinction, that the possibility of relax into nondual being takes place.

I could see her wrestling with this invitation. “I’m not sure what you mean?” she asked. “Seeing yourself in the graveyard, can you allow yourself to relax the desire to save yourself here? What happens if you allow the realization that there is no gate?” I replied. After a few minutes she was shocked to find that the imagery of the graveyard suddenly dissolved and revealed “An empty-blankness. An empty space,” as she called it. Astonished, she shared, “Everything just went empty and blank. I can still see, but not as me, if that makes any sense?” She described it as terrifying and exhilarating all at the same time. I encouraged her to cooperate with her process and to dissolve into the intense energy of the “empty-blankness” without resisting it in any way. Seeing that the energy of non-being is always with us, in every moment, I was curious to see if she could accept it, here and now, and let go of any attempt to save herself. “I feel a lot of fear in my heart, though” she worried. “Let fear have its place and just surrender to it,” I instructed. I suspected Laura perceiving the experience of emptiness as a negative experience and something to be avoided. The fear of her own non-existence was evident. As I watched her process the experience I observed a calmness overtake her as she relaxed more and more into her experience. With tears rolling down her eyes she shared noticing the absence of fear and feeling as if held by what she referred to as an “imageless eternal mother”.

In some ways, Laura’s experience reminded me of the story of the Zen monk who, despite living a clean and morally ascetic life, upon his death, was still tossed into the hell

realm. Realizing that his fate was sealed and that there was nothing he could do he simply sat down and accepted the situation totally. Miraculously, through a deep acceptance the truth of his being was spontaneously revealed.

I was still curious about the depth of her experience and wanted to see if there were any residual demands placed on the moment of her mother's death. I invited Laura to close her eyes and recall the last few moments she spent with her dying mother, to slowly re-play the event through her mind and see if there were any demands placed on the experience. After several moments, she reported "I see it all happening and I feel a lot of energy in my body, but I feel ok. I feel some sadness, but it's ok. I feel a lot of tingling sensations in my arms and legs, as well but it feels like a release." After a few minutes she continued, "I feel like a still calm lake. It's very peaceful". We spent the remainder of our session sitting in the absolute stillness of the moment allowing the energy of life and death to pass through us in open awareness.

### **Discussion**

A few comments are important here. First, I suspected that a combination of Laura's prior work and rapport with me including her involvement with yoga contributed to her breakthrough experience. It is also important to note that a couple of weeks after our session Laura and I did meet for two more sessions as she was concerned that she had lost the stillness and peacefulness felt in our previous work. This is a common experience when having an initial breakthrough experience into no-self and what has been coined in the nondual community as the "I got it. I lost it phenomenon" (Adyashanti, 2008).

[Just] because we've awakened does not mean that consciousness has gotten past the gravitational pull of the dream state. If we haven't gone completely beyond this gravitational field, we're going to be pulled back toward the experience of "me" and the perception of separateness (p. 30).

The mind can grab the experience of awakening and claim a false sense of ownership whereby the mind seeks to re-experience it, again and again, missing the ineffable presence existing here and now. This mis-understanding gives birth to the spiritual search where one believes that awakening is in some future moment rather than in the immediacy of the now (Liquorman, 2009). I pointed out to Laura that the mind will attempt to sustain itself through such strategies and that the depth and clarity of awakening is not a one time abidance but rather a moment to moment one. How awake we are in each moment is the most important thing.

There is also the concern of fixating on the absolute position of no-self and neglecting the relative world of conventional living. In the Zen tradition this is referred to as "Zen sickness" whereby one uses the language of nonduality as a means of by-passing some very real pain (Kapleau, 1980). The truth of no-self can be used as a severe form of denial against grief. In a similar vein, pushing awakening onto a client experiencing grief is not only dualistic but sets the stage for confusion and possibly re-traumatizing a client. It should be noted that many people are not ready to awaken or even consider the possibilities of awakening to their true nature. Nondual psychology is not for everyone (Adyashanti, 2008; Lumiere, 2003).

Like most people experiencing a glimpse of awakening, I felt Laura would have to re-realize the awakened clarity of her being right here and now many times before a full awakening into nondual consciousness is made. However, with such a breakthrough experience, I believed that she could not ignore it and having tasted the depth of her being there was no turning back.

### **Conclusion**

The dawn of awakening shatters the illusion of separateness and reveals the vast empty nature of our true being. Awakening is the gift of freedom and liberation from the monkey mind. Nondual psychology facilitates this recognition and offers perspective clients to step out of the misery of separation and awaken. And the opportunity is always now. Even in the darkest of moments our true being remains radiantly clear and transparent, unobstructed by the dramas of life. Grief and loss is seen to be another transformational opportunity to recognize that which is already here and free from the straightjacket of separation. As the next moment is never guaranteed all we really have is the instance of this moment, and perhaps, in that instance, we can take the leap into the unknown and descend into the depths of the abyss of no-self and re-awaken to our primordial condition and laugh at our desperate attempts to defend and save that which never really existed.

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