

This document contains first the reflexions of the known English Dharma teacher Christopher Titmuss on “The Dharma of Non-Duality”. He asserts that the “Dharma teachings are deeply concerned with Non-Duality”. My detailed answer follows. Both texts appear on Christophers “Dharma Blog” (<http://christophertitmuss.org/blog/?p=50>). If there are further replies they will appear there.

The Dharma of Non-Duality

Christopher Titmuss

The other week, Radha, who teaches the Dharma Facilitators Programme in Oz, and I were talking on the phone about Non-Duality. She has a great love of the exploration and teaching of the non-dual. It is something we both share. I know she has given many years to this inquiry.

The Buddha, himself, never used the term *Non-Duality* (advaita) in 5000 Pali suttas of his teachings.

Why?

Advaita had a specific meaning 2500 years ago – namely the union of Brahman (God) with the Atman (Soul). The Buddha treated God and soul as personal beliefs, not located in the nature of things.

Sankara became the high priest of Advaita and the non-dual reality of Brahman. Between Sankara in the 7th century and Ramana Maharshi in Tiruvannamali, south India in the 20th century, you can hardly find a single teacher or teaching in India of Advaita.

Why?

Advaita, as expressed by Sankara, had little appeal for everyday life.

Sankara proclaimed Brahman is real and the world is unreal. Ramana Maharshi said that a “toothache is only a thought.” (Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, page 427). Many householders and yogis alike cannot not relate to such a view.

The Buddha does not apply teachings of Non-Duality in such a way to deny conventional experience or reduce everything to thought. It is one of the reasons why Buddha’s teachings continued in India for another 500 years after the death of Sankara until the Moghul Empire destroyed most Buddhist monasteries and books. Incidentally, there is a common view in India that Sankara’s teachings brought about the demise of Buddhism in India. It is a story without evidence!

Are the Dharma teachings deeply concerned with Non-Duality?

Yes

1. Dharma emphasizes neither clinging to a position of self or no self
2. Nagarjuna, the foremost commentator on the Buddha, used Non-Duality in his introductory verse on the nature of things in his acclaimed Mulakarika text.
3. Non-duality is the essence of the Heart Sutra – the most illustrious of Mahayana texts. Form is Emptiness. Emptiness is Form. Form is Form. Emptiness is Emptiness
4. Buddha speaks of eight dualities in the 3rd section in the discourse on the Application of Mindfulness (Satipatthana Sutta).
5. There is the duality of the eight worldly conditions. Profit and Loss, Success and Failure, Praise and Blame, Pleasure and Pain.
6. Dharma points to going beyond form and formlessness (4 jhanas and 4 formless realms)
7. Truth or Liberation is neither here nor there (non duality) nor in between.
8. Truth is One without a second (Sutta Nipata). Ultimately, there are no two truths (a duality).
9. The Buddha teaches the Middle Way (between the two extremes that generate dualities)
10. Dependent arising is, said the Buddha, the Dharma. Suffering is not caused by oneself. It is not caused by another.

The exploration of Non-Duality applies relatively (Dependent Arising) and ultimately as liberation since liberation has no opposite (therefore is non-dual). Radha and I, and other Dharma teachers, will continue to keep inquiring into and teaching Non-Duality. We encourage others to keep exploring.

Comment by Hans Gruber from Germany

Despite the following criticism I deeply appreciate Christopher and his Dharma-work. We know each other for a long time. He knows that I consider such an approach if necessary as an integral part of the ancient as well as the preferable Western Dharma.

I will just comment here Christopher's interpretations of central Early Buddhist teaching. The discourses of the Mahayana have been purposefully written later in order to emphasize particular (old or new) teachings. From a scientific standpoint they are less authoritative than the early discourses on the question of what the Buddha has taught himself. This does not deny their general value. Some early teachings are emphasized and elucidated more in the context of the Mahayana, such as the Bodhisattva ideal. Teachings of "Non-Duality", "Unity", "Buddha Nature" or "True Self" as descriptions of the nature of the world or human beings have arisen only later.

Nagarjuna cannot be attributed to a particular Buddhist school or tradition. There are many interpretations of Nagarjuna and many attempts by representatives of the Mahayana to monopolize his truly independent teachings. His only intention was to clarify again the Buddha's universal practice teachings in view of increasing attempts at his time (appr. 2nd century A.C.) to move into "substantialist" directions of believing in a "Self".

Annotation on style: Technical terms are written here in big letters, in all their components.

1) Christopher says above: "Dharma emphasizes neither clinging to a position of self or no self."

True, but what does this have to do with the teaching of "Non-Duality" as a supposed highest reality? The ability of not clinging any more to or letting go of any position of Self or No-Self comes from growing insight into Universal Emptiness. But Universal Emptiness means something else than Non-Duality (cp. the next comment to point 2).

"Not-Self" Anatta is always a predicate, qualifying things as Anatta. The Buddha never taught in abstract terms "there is no Self" but always in concrete terms, i. e. the conditioned or all phenomena and even "all things" (sabbe dhamma, including the unconditioned) are Not-Self. In this sense Anatta is a verifiable "practice instruction" (indologist Lambert Schmithausen), not a philosophical teaching, idea or assumption.

If this relative "Not-Self" Anatta is generalized (made into an absolute) it appears as that incorrect "No-Self/there is no Self". And if the conclusion is drawn from that relative "Not-Self" Anatta that apart from the phenomena or things qualified as Anatta there must be some Self it means again faking an absolute which doesn't apply. If "all" is Anatta there is nothing apart from all which is not Anatta or a Self. By seeing Emptiness such absolutes aren't imagined or "put forward" any more.

2) Christopher: "Nagarjuna, the foremost commentator on the Buddha, used Non-Duality in his introductory verse on the nature of things in his acclaimed Mulakarika text."

Nagarjuna does not use "Non-Duality" in his introductory verse. He merely talks there about the Emptiness of the elements of different pairs of opposites, i. e. "the non-ceasing and the non-arising, the non-destruction and the non-eternity, the non-unity and the non-multiplicity, the non-coming and the non-going". After this enumeration Nagarjuna then gives the reason for this Universal Emptiness, namely "Dependent Arising".

The elements of different pairs of opposites being empty of “Self” or “Own Being” Svabhava does not mean that in truth there is no difference between them – what “Non-Duality” would mean. For Emptiness only denies the independent “Self” of a thing but not its dependently arisen state or being. As such, every one thing exists and is different from every other thing.

The reason that Nagarjuna illustrates Universal Emptiness in the introductory verse with those elements of particular basic pairs of opposites is that “belief”-entanglement in these basic pairs (by believing in their true or “Self”-existence) causes the “normal” torn inner state, namely wanting the one element, but not the other of those pairs.

By realising their Emptiness the ceasing of “Mental Proliferation” Prapanca (which is fed by that torn inner state or its expression) and Final Liberation is realised, as said at the end of the verse.

If two things exist in a state of Non-Duality they exist in a state of Unity. Unity and Non-Duality are synonyms. The assertion of Non-Duality is only the disguised assertion of Unity because the latter position is too obvious a position of a higher “Inherent Nature”, “Entity” or “Self”. Universal Emptiness or Dependent Arising denies every “Self”, including the “Self” of a supposed “Unity” or “Non-Duality”.

3) Christopher: “Buddha speaks of eight dualities in the 3rd section in the discourse on the Application of Mindfulness (Satipatthana Sutta).”

This does not imply a teaching of Non-Duality. In the context of the Satipatthana-practice in the 3rd section on mind/mind-states the task is to become aware whether one’s mind is e. g. with or without hate, lust or delusion, concentrated or not and liberated or not. So the advise given here is to see whether one’s inner state is wholesome or unwholesome, in order to become increasingly able to move towards the wholesome and liberated.

But this increasing movement towards the wholesome and liberated doesn’t mean or imply the realisation of Non-Duality. Hate, lust, delusion or unconcentration and unliberated states become ever less on the path of mindfulness only as a result of insight into the Three Marks (Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness and Not-Self). The instruction on this very insight appears regularly in the Satipatthana-Sutta as the aim of the practice.

The same as just said applies to Christopher’s next point (above-number five) where the basic “worldly” desires for gain, success, praise and pleasure and the basic “worldly” fears of loss, failure, blame and pain are mentioned. The more we become aware of these basic desires and fears and the sufferings bound up with them we can leave them behind. Then we are not caught up in these desires and fears any more. That is all what is taught here.

4) Christopher: “Dharma points to going beyond form and formlessness (4 jhanas and 4 formless realms).”

This “going beyond” which the Dharma points to only means proceeding from the path of mere Concentration (the 4 Jhanas and the 4 Formless Realms) to the path of Liberating Insight by understanding even all forms of mere Concentration as well as all happy or lightful states connected with them as Impermanent, Unsatisfactory and Not-Self or Empty. Again, that “going beyond” does not mean a realisation of a supposed Non-Duality.

5) Christopher: “Truth or Liberation is neither here nor there (Non-Duality) nor in between.”

The non-locatedness, non-fixedness or conceptual undefinability of Highest Truth or Liberation does not show the supposed Non-Duality of things. It is just a statement of the ungraspability of Highest Truth with conventional means or concepts. And the realisation of this Highest Truth does not come about with seeing Non-Duality but with seeing Universal Emptiness.

6) Christopher: “Truth is One without a second (Sutta Nipata). Ultimately, there are no two truths (a duality).”

“Truth is one without a second” refers to the Highest Truth as defined by the Buddha as being one without a second. That Highest Truth is only Universal Emptiness or all things as Not-Self, as opposed to teachings of a Highest Self such as a Personal or Impersonal God, an Eternal Soul, “True Self” Atman or the Non-Duality of Atman and a “World-Soul” Brahman.

Advaita and others may teach that “ultimately there are no Two Truths”. But Nagarjuna does not teach it.

In contrast, he teaches (MMK 24, verses 8 and 10):

“The Dharma of the Buddhas is based upon Two Truths – Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth.”

“Without being based on the Conventional, Ultimate Truth is not taught. And without understanding Ultimate Truth, the Unconditioned (Nibbana) is not realised.”

So according to Nagarjuna the duality of Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth is indispensable for understanding Universal Emptiness.

The starting point for understanding Ultimate Truth is Conventional Truth. In this sense there is both an integral place for clear distinctions or critical analysis on the level of the Conventional and for the Direct Seeing of the Unconditioned on the level of the Ultimate.

Overemphasizing Highest Truth over Conventional Truth denies the indispensability of the latter. It is correct that fully seeing Ultimate Truth means realising Nibbana. But understanding Ultimate Truth can only happen through fully investigating or differentiating the conventional facts.

This can happen in a “formal” scientific or an “everyday” unscientific way, by fully applying the rational, clearly distinguishing and, if necessary, critical mind. Stigmatizing this mind is just a modern phenomena in some spiritual circles. If it happens in Buddhist circles then with people who don’t really know or haven’t carefully or unselectively read the sources. According to the old teachings the Buddha exemplifies what a rational, clearly distinguishing and, if necessary, critical mind with regard to the Conventional means. In this sense also thorough atheistic critiques of religion or the monotheistic manifestations of religion, such as the bestsellers by Richard Dawkins (*The God Illusion*) or Sam Harris (who sympathizes with Buddhism: *Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*) are sensible and necessary. According to the early collections of the Buddha’s teachings (in the Pali Canon) he has deeply criticized all major religious views of his time.

7) Christopher: “The Buddha teaches the Middle Way (between the two extremes that generate dualities).”

The teaching of the Middle Way does not mean or imply the teaching of Non-Duality. Rather, the Middle Way in its deepest sense is a synonym for Dependent Arising or Universal Emptiness.

Nagarjuna (MMK 24, verse 18):

"We say - whatever is Dependent Arising that is also Emptiness. It is (not a philosophical concept but) a pragmatism expression in order to describe the world. In this sense it is the Middle Way."

8) Christopher: “Dependent Arising is, said the Buddha, the Dharma. Suffering is not caused by oneself. It is not caused by another.”

“Whoever sees Dependent Arising sees the Dharma, whoever sees the Dharma sees Dependent Arising”, is the quotation. By seeing Dependent Arising or Universal Emptiness the source of all delusions or compulsions is dissolved, namely Ignorance or Not-Seeing – the belief in “I” (conceit), “mine” (craving) or “my Self” (all teachings of a higher Self).

But when in a state of ignorance suffering is indeed caused by oneself and not by another, namely by one’s own actions resulting from ignorance. Then karmic formations are active.

Conclusion:

“Non-Duality” is not a teaching of the Buddha or Nagarjuna on Highest Reality. But it is a very attractive idea to a great number of syncretistic and esoteric spiritual teachers today, especially if they weave together ideas of Eternal Soul, Personal or Impersonal God, True Self and Buddhist Emptiness. There would be famous examples for this approach.

One reason for the attractiveness of the concept of Non-Duality to Buddhist teachers on the other hand may be that if Non-Duality was a teaching of the historical Buddha it would be the tool for bringing religious teachings together which in truth are clearly different, especially Advaita with Buddhism or Judaism and Christianity with Buddhism.

So there is a tendency to declare Non-Duality as a teaching of the Buddha on Highest Reality. The actual reason for this declaration is either the conscious belief in Advaita and/or Judaism and Christianity or the subconscious conditioning by them. This belief or subconscious conditioning prevents clear seeing of “What is What”.

Another reason which may sometimes apply:

“Non-Duality” as a supposed teaching of the Buddha or Nagarjuna on Highest Reality can serve as a higher legitimation for stigmatizing the rational, clearly distinguishing and, if necessary, critical mind. It can also serve as a means for hiding one’s inabilities in this regard. Some people who don’t like clear thinking naturally like “Non-Duality”.