



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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The Universe is NOT one

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If you've ever practiced in a non-dual tradition, you've heard the phrase, "The Universe is ONE," probably a few million times. It's a staple of how non-duality is communicated, "we're all connected," "there is no separation," "it's all one big consciousness." In the traditional versions of these teachings, they pretty much leave this helpful pointing out instruction at that. But in the modern West, we've taken it further. Much, much further, into a realm where it was never meant to be taken. To the point where, in my opinion, it becomes completely misleading.

The misstep here, and it is an epic one, is to think that what your experience in your meditation (a first-person, subjective experience) has anything at all to do with how the external universe works (a third-person, objective reality). You think you are discovering the hidden truth underlying reality, but that is not what's going on at all. Instead you're discovering the hidden truth behind all of your experience, the secret of who you really are—which is arguably much more important. This misunderstanding leads to all kinds of problems, and, worst of all, simply wastes your time and fills your brain with a lot of useless ideas.

When you have a non-dual experience (and, yes, I know that it's not strictly proper to call it an experience, but we're restricted to using human language here), there is a profound collapse of subject-object duality. In the smaller, but still significant version of this there

is a collapse of the difference between you and any other object in the world. In the larger version of this, there is a collapse of the difference between you and the world, on the one hand, and God or the Source on the other. Everything appears to be composed of one, undivided universal consciousness. That's why it's called "non-dual," because there is only ONE, not two, or three, or four things. The entirety of the world is simply one. To call this experience profound doesn't do it justice. It is a radical reshaping of your life and is utterly transformative.



What is going on here? How could it be that all things appear to be equal, composed of consciousness, and connected? There are two possible explanations:

1. That it is the literal, external, objective truth, or
2. That it is true from the *subjective experience of a mind*.

If you land on the first explanation, which is the standard one (in most non-dual philosophies), then hopefully you will just accept that and leave it alone. If not, you will be stuck forever trying to find all sorts of scientific justifications for this belief. There is a huge zoo of these so-called explanations, most of which rely on some sort of quantum mysticism. In QM, you use a fundamental misunderstanding of quantum physics to postulate an underlying "connection between all things" as well as a "substrate of pure consciousness" out of which the universe is supposedly created.

I'll leave it up to others to debunk these misunderstandings in detail, but what I'd like to say here is this: Why is it important to you to even try to make these elaborate "scientific" claims? Such claims will not deepen your non-dual awareness, nor will they somehow give you any more abilities to "create the world you want" than you have already. All they leave you with is a half-baked belief system which you'll spend the rest of your life arguing with others about. At best, you can make a fairly decent living trying to explain it to others who will then believe that you are deep. But it is my contention that you are actually misleading people.

The second explanation, on the other hand, is simple, clearly true (while not negating the first one), and actually can benefit you and other people. Let's look at it more closely. It seems as if everything is actually one thing (which is not a thing, but...). It seems like everything is infused with or made of consciousness. It seems as if a perfect, pure, endless, timeless, awareness unifies everything. As Nisargadatta puts it in one of a thousand similar quotes: *The world you perceive is made of consciousness; what you call matter is consciousness itself.*

How is that possible? Let's look at it from a secular and scientific perspective. First of all, no human being has ever experienced the actual world. Your experience of the world comes to you through the signals of a group of peripheral devices, called "senses." Those signals are then assembled in the brain into some kind of experience. It's important to remember that this experience is a brain-generated hallucination or fantasy, not the actual outside world. It's just like a really, really high-resolution virtual reality (VR).

Secondly, no human being has ever experienced their own body for exactly the same reasons listed above. The nerve impulses from your body are assembled in the brain into an experience, but this is just a virtual representation of the body. Thirdly, the same is true for even your thoughts and emotions.

Greetings

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[Rick Hanson, PhD](#), edits the *Bulletin*. [Michelle Keane](#) is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by the design team at [Content Strategies Online](#).

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Let's look at the situation then. All sensory experiences of the external world, your own body, and your own thoughts are just brain-generated representations. (There probably really IS a physical reality out there, and a physical self that houses your physical brain, but you've never experienced any of that directly.) Instead, what you are experiencing as yourself and the world is a very compelling, convincing VR generated by your brain. This is not me speculating here, this is just standard neuroscience of perception — that's how brains and bodies work.

Under those conditions, noticing that all thoughts, feelings, sensations, and sensory experiences are “one” is utterly clarifying. They are in fact all generated by one brain — yours. They are in fact pervaded by one consciousness — yours. Life and the world is in fact a dream — your dream. This fact is utterly liberating when experienced from within. It is in fact total, seamless, stainless, pure non-dual reality. One Taste. It.



When understood intellectually, in the way I just outlined it, you will probably not have a strong non-dual awakening. The real thing is a first-person, non-intellectual direct “knowing.” A collapse of the VR into pure wakefulness. But it has two advantages over the usual intellectual understanding of non-duality. The first is that you won't get lost in endless speculation about “creating your own reality.” Yes, your brain generates your experience of the world, and that is a highly-slanted version of the world, filtered and mediated through a lot of unconscious biases. But, no, that doesn't equal the actual, external world. Those are two different things.

I hasten to add here that, Yes, there almost certainly is real physical world out there with real physical humans in it, with you living among them. And, yes, your senses are probably



reporting a fairly accurate version of that world. It's crucial for survival that they do so. So, yes, the world is probably real—it's just that you've never experienced that world.

Secondly — and I think this point is extremely ironic — you can quit being so sure you know how the Universe works. It may in fact be all one, and composed of pure consciousness. I'm not saying it isn't—except in the title of this article, which is intended to be provocative. All I'm saying is that *you don't know*. And you definitely don't know because it looks that way when

you close your eyes. Landing on one fixed interpretation of How Everything Works is the epitome of what non-dual experience teaches you to avoid, isn't it? The *whole damn point* is that you don't know in concepts and that you can never know in concepts how the universe actually works. The underlying construction of the universe, what is called “deep reality,” is forever beyond the ken of science, and certainly beyond the ken of your meditation experience.

Thirdly, and this is the most important point, you can stop wasting your time attempting to slap together kludges of pseudo-science and poetry into some kind of Theory of Everything. Such theories are just embarrassing to you and everyone else and almost certainly wrong. They won't help you to build a better airplane, or cure cancer. They will only cause you to squander your one precious life on this planet.

Of course, in practice letting go of all of these concepts is crucial. This is true of all ideas about how the brain works, how the world works, and how the universe works, too. For me, the understanding that even the external world is a kind of unconscious creation of the brain makes it much easier to let go of, and come back continuously to, the consciousness that supports it.

For those of you who feel like enlightened non-dual masters, *try this experiment*. Just for a few days, let go of all your theories about the scientific validity of non-dualism. Let go of being convinced that the world is composed of consciousness. Recognize that even if these are both true, they only exist in your mind as concepts. Don't just drop them provisionally, drop them utterly and entirely. Allow yourself to be truly concept-free during this time, fully immersed in not-knowing. My guess is that you will discover a level of freedom that you have never experienced before.

Related Resources:

Article: [Nonduality and Mindfulness: Two Great Traditions that Go Great Together](#)

Book: [Nondualism](#)

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He regularly teaches at Google and worked on curriculum development for [SIYLI](#). Michael is also an official advisor to the [Therapeutic Neuroscience Lab](#). He was previously editor-in-chief of [Being Human](#), a site for exploring what evolution, neuroscience, biology, psychology, archeology, and technology can tell us about the human condition, and was editorial director of [Sounds True](#).

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Moving On

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When we know our brains are wired for trouble and stop trusting all passing feelings as facts, we can prevent unnecessary suffering. Sometimes it seems *our minds have minds of their own*. Actually, brains have multiple parts. Once we notice the primitive amygdala has taken over, we have the option to stop, breathe, center, and focus on the present moment. While it may take time for the “critical voice” and the negative chemicals released in our bodies to fade, we can focus on being safe and dwell on something near that is beautiful.

Rick Hanson has shared that our cave man roots encouraged our brains to be Velcro for trouble and Teflon for good. Survival was essential. Pleasure was not. As a result, we need to spend time with our good moments to embed them in our minds. Gratitude and meditation are the paths.

I wrote *Marriage and Other Leaps of Faith* to share my vulnerabilities so others can smile at them, visit their own, and hopefully *move on* to positive responses.

In the poem below, I mention living in the present moment, but don’t explore the details above. We all want to *move on*—drop self-defeating reactivity and embrace the reflective awareness that hurt is passing through. Mindfulness is the path.

Moving On

I'm a geyser. I hold anger in, then
pressure-spray my husband away
and steam for the day; he sulks
and waits for my remorse.

On this bright morning I'm singing,
and since I know he's not fond
of my songs, I shut his office door.
He makes a fatal mistake: he turns
around from his desk and says, Good.

I swing into the room and erupt,
Do you have to die before I can sing?
Do I have to kill you before I can sing?

I slam the door and head for breakfast
as my brain presses replay on old hurts.

Then my mind ratchets, pivots
to living in the present moment—
I turn from angst to food.



I'm determined to enjoy my omelet
when he emerges ready for
the next step in our dance.
Morose, he approaches and says,
I'm too upset to go for my massage.

I want to say Good
and get his geyser going,
but the new me says,
We had a fight. It's over.
No apologies. No grief. Move on.

He wants to talk.
I hug him, tell him
my eggs are getting cold,
and if he tries, I bet
he can have a great massage.

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Jeanie Greensfelder is a poet and a retired psychologist. A volunteer at Hospice of San Luis Obispo, CA, she does bereavement counseling. Her two books are *Biting the Apple* and *Marriage and Other Leaps of Faith*. Her poem, "First Love," was featured on Garrison Keillor's Writers' Almanac. Other poems are at *American Life in Poetry*, in anthologies, and in journals. She seeks to understand herself and others on this shared journey, filled, as Joseph Campbell wrote, with sorrowful joys and joyful sorrows. View more poems at jeaniegreensfelder.com.

Making Friends with Emptiness

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Why make friends with emptiness? Normally we think of this as a negative state that is linked to depression and grief (Downs 2004; Sanders 2008) so who would want to cultivate this feeling? For example, borderline personality disorder, a very difficult mental health disorder to both have and treat, is defined in-part in DSM V (American Psychiatric Association 2013), the diagnostic manual used in the USA for mental illness, as an experience of “chronic feelings of emptiness.” However, in Buddhism, the foundation of mindfulness practice, emptiness is seen as a positive state (Gyatso 1995). Why would this be?

Emptiness is a complex concept in Buddhism based on the idea that reality is an illusion in so much that each part of our reality is dependent on everything else; when you take away any part, the content disappears and becomes empty. This idea is termed Dependent Origination and an example of this used in Buddhism is the concept of non-self, which is in essence the opposite of having a soul. This is reasoned by saying that if you take away the senses, mental faculties, emotions, etc. you are left with nothing that would create a sense of self (Gowans 2003). Again, on initial reflection this seems like a very frightening and



depressing thought, however, in Buddhism this is seen as positive because an individual who can understand this can become detached from ‘reality.’ They, therefore, do not experience the suffering that derives from being attached to an impermanent reality where everything will eventually come to an end (Goode and Sander 2013). Emptiness is a key part of the Buddhist understanding of mindfulness but is something that is rarely, if ever, touched on in the secular practice of it.

This concept is one of the most challenging aspects of Buddhism to understand and to practice however learning to become friends with the inner emptiness that we all experience may help with this. Emptiness is something we experience when we encounter a significant loss, for example the death of a loved one (Sanders 2008), when we are lonely, and, to a lesser extent, when we are bored (Klonsky 2008). It could be argued therefore that this is an underlying feeling that we only become aware of when we do not have sensory, mental, or emotional stimulation. If this is this case, being afraid of this feeling could cause us to engage in compulsive, stimulus-seeking behaviour as a form of avoidance, for example through drug addiction, gambling, always needing to be with others or to be busy, or having a relentless need to achieve, and so on.

This need for excessive stimuli could be seen as relating to the Buddhist concept of non-self because for something to exist it can only exist *in relation to something else*, as is stated in Dependent Origination. This concept suggests that, without stimuli to relate to, there can

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be no sense of self. Unless a person has learned to accept and become friends with inner emptiness this could be very frightening (it would be like being scared of your own shadow and always needing to run away from it). If emptiness could be seen as a friend though, it could be perceived as a haven and a safe place from which to escape excessive stimuli. In fact, it could be seen as our only permanent

reality, as all phenomenal reality is transitory and constantly changing. This includes our inner world, as our self-identity, beliefs, and desires change throughout our lives, from 10 years of age, to 20, 40, 60, etc. It could even be argued that when we experience a loss we retreat into emptiness so that we can be reborn anew once the loss has been assimilated. Interestingly, in a parallel idea the physicist, Lawrence Krauss, proposes that the universe is created from nothing (so emptiness) in his book *A Universe from Nothing* (Krauss 2012).

There are other philosophies and theories that refer to emptiness as a positive state. The Tao Te Ching, the most important work in the Chinese religion of Taoism (which Tai Chi is derived from), constantly describes emptiness as being aligned with the Tao or The Way (Tzu 2015). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, a mindfulness based cognitive therapy, refers to the “observing self” (Harris 2008). This is defined as a transcendent sense of self that is continuous, unchanging, and impervious to harm, which can be accessed to reduce distress and is equatable to emptiness. Eckhart Tolle refers to inner stillness and space as being the “true self” in his book, *Stillness Speaks* (Tolle 2003), which is a simplified and distilled version of his philosophy. Again this concept of stillness equates with emptiness.



There are several ways in which an individual can ‘make friends’ with emptiness. The classic example would be meditative practice, where the aim would be to quieten the mind to point where there is an experience of inner stillness or emptiness. This is very much

the aim of zazen, Zen meditation (Suzuki 2011), as well as many other meditative traditions. There are also other practical, day-to-day methods – for example, when we experience a lack of stimuli and possibly even boredom we have the opportunity to recognise this inner emptiness without instinctively pushing it away; to try and rest in it for a period. The resting period doesn't have to be long - just long enough that the need to impulsively 'fill' the emptiness is reduced.

Another example could involve avoiding the tendency to impulsively push away the emptiness that may result from an experience of loss, and instead choosing to try and rest in the experience of it. The aim of this would be to experience a profounder reality that is not transitory, unlike the phenomenal world of loss and gain. This very much relates to the Tibetan Buddhist concept of Bardos, which refers to periods of change that give opportunities of liberation from suffering, in the Buddhist tradition (Rinpoche 1995). Initially practising this on small day-to-day losses, for example, small failures, where we don't achieve what we want, or when something breaks or we lose a small amount of money, would be the easiest. We can then use this learned practice to help with more significant losses.

From my own personal experience, this practice can help us cope with small losses much more effectively. With very great losses we still experience intense distress but we can process these losses more readily and possibly understand life in a different way. I personally would not advocate being completely detached, as our emotions show the meaning we attach to events, people, etc. and I think a meaningful life is just as important as anything else. (Not that I don't also have respect for the story of the Buddhist monk, who when told by a conquering general that he could run him through without blinking replied that he could *be run through* without blinking.)

Ultimately the point of this article would be to say that unless we are able to make friends with our inner emptiness we are a divided self, one half being afraid of the other. This is not to say that we should not seek stimuli and fulfilment in the phenomenal world, rather that by making friends with our inner emptiness, we do not feel trapped by 'Maya,' the

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this *Bulletin*), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

illusionary experience that Buddhist and Hindus believe life is (King 1999). In a transitory world our inner emptiness may be the only thing that we will never lose, which could be a depressing thought unless you can make friends with it, after which point it becomes a liberating one.

Related Resources:

Article: [Impermanence: A Model of Mental Illness Based on Loss](#)

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Skillful Means

[Your Skillful Means](#), sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Letting Go

Purpose/Effects

By relinquishing our grip on things, we allow ourselves to see the world with new eyes. Letting go allows us to be more objective, to relax, to reflect, and to heal. There are many things to let go of, and many ways in which to do so. These skills and techniques all lead to a healthier and happier emotional life and a renewed sense of our real place in the world.

Method

Summary

These many skills help you to let go. Try them all and find what works for you.

Long Version

The Body:

1. Practice [Breath Awareness Meditation](#), which encourages physical and mental relaxation.
2. Practice [Diaphragmatic Breathing](#), also encouraging physical and mental relaxation. You might also try [Bellows Breathing / Breath of Fire](#).
3. Now try the opposite. Try breathing with no control from the command center. Combined with relaxed, body aware meditation that just lets your body “do its thing,” this can have powerful results.
4. Release tension from the body with [Progressive Relaxation](#).
5. Do “heartmath.” Inhale and exhale for equally long periods with centered on the

heart with positive emotion.

6. Practice [Basic Relaxation Meditation](#).
7. If you can, consider therapeutic massage or even [Postural Integration](#).

Thoughts and Emotions:

1. Identify from where wrong thoughts come. These facets of the personality may be the result of past trauma. Listen to them, comprehend what they say, and then quiet them. Try your best to [realize intention](#).
2. Argue with your wrong thoughts. If something comes up in your mind that you know is wrong, instead of ignoring it so that it can fester, confront it mentally. Sometimes the best way to let go of something is to engage with it.
3. Be realistic. Accept what you can and can't change. Get some perspective. Often the bad seems worse and the good seems smaller when we worry too much.
4. Say goodbye to things. Let the past be the past. Perhaps make a formal farewell to mental patterns, banishing them gently but firmly.
5. Use relaxing, centering imagery. Imagine yourself in a beautiful, safe place.
6. Be compassionate and forgiving of everyone...including yourself. [Transforming Ill Will](#) can take you from negative to positive emotions.
7. Decide that your thoughts and feelings are, at least in part, the result of choice. Accept that you have a part in emotions, and that you can often choose to have them or not.
8. When dealing with a frustrating emotion, imagine it flowing away with each gentle exhalation, naturally waning until it goes.
9. Identify the root causes of tension and frustration. You might want to try [Emotional Journaling](#) if the past overwhelms you.
10. You might use your emotional journal to vent. Sometimes venting is even physical. Yell into a pillow, or even hit it. Just let go of the anger.

The Self and Wants:

1. Recognize that your self is not the center of the world. Try to avoid personalizing everything.
2. Each day, realize how connected you are to others. Remind yourself that we are, in the end, all in this together.
3. If a want or a personality trait seems to dominate you, ask yourself if this is indeed who you really are.
4. Assess your wants. Find the unambiguously positive ones and the ones that are actually needs. Keep them separate from those that spring from greed, anger, or delusion.

5. Analyze desire. Consider the positive and negative ramifications of each (for example, it's nice to have a big house, but having a big mortgage can be more trouble than the house is worth).
6. Recognize that letting go of wants and negative emotions brings your self into a better place. Align yourself with the good.
7. Be positive. Try [Taking In the Good](#).

History

Much of Buddhist thought deals with the benefits of letting go; the Third Noble Truth reminds us that relinquishing our grip on the world is the only way to end suffering.

Notes

Many Christians speak of “letting go and letting God.” Relinquishing the illusion of control doesn't require a higher power, however, just the recognition that our selves are not as important nor as powerful as we might sometimes think.

See Also

[The Twelve Steps](#)

External Links

[A Christian affirmation for letting go](#)



Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.