

From The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power

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Oneness, Enlightenment and the Mystical Experience

Many people, through various routes, have experienced what have become known as altered states of consciousness. By "altered" what is meant is that the way experience is both taken in and framed is different from one's ordinary day-to-day experience. The two main routes of alteration (perhaps each as old as humanity) are through substances (chemicals in plants or synthetics) and practices that loosen up the way the mind structures experience. Altered states can also occur through near-death experiences, great stress, or spontaneously without any known cause.

The Mystical Experience

One of the most life-changing of these altered states is what is called the mystical experience, the essence of which is the actual experiencing of an underlying unity within all existence. We call this the Oneness experience. While this experience is occurring, it feels beyond words and concepts, beyond time, beyond all polarities (including life and death), and beyond even the feeling of there being an experiencer who is having the experience. The infusion of more easily accessed mysticism into Western culture began in the sixties. For still unknown reasons, powerful psychedelic drugs bypass the ordinary ways the human brain integrates, making available experiences that previously could only be read about in esoteric books. Many leaders in the then-budding human potential movement and young aspirants in the arts, humanities, and sciences had their worldviews chemically jolted. Eastern spiritual structures offered routes of explaining and integrating these experiences in a way Western ones simply could not. Some experimenters loudly and publicly extolled their newfound insights, while many others more quietly incorporated them into their viewpoints. Eastern spiritual teachers either came on their own or were brought to the West to plow this fertile ground. The actual mystical experience along with the interpretations of Eastern cosmologies became dual influences on psychology, music, art, and fashion. This even shifted the perspectives of many who were not directly involved in the psychedelic culture. Mysticism was in the air.

Once a person has had a Oneness experience, it is not difficult to make being in that special state more of the time, or all of the time, the meaning and goal of life. This can also be true for those who have not had the experience, but have heard of it and give it credence. Doing this is reinforced by presumed spiritual masters who not only claim to live in this exalted state, but also insinuate that this place of unity is more real and superior to ordinary reality where separation is experienced.

Although all who have had mystical experiences acknowledge they cannot be captured within the frameworks of thought, different traditions do attempt to frame them in their different ways. People having such experiences have been previously conditioned by their culture and time, which affects how the experience is viewed and integrated afterwards. Mystical experiences do not create a tabula rasa, a clean slate; but rather, whatever insights occur get interpreted through different lenses. This is why Hindus have Hindu mystical experiences, Christians have Christian ones, etc. Thus Christian mystics can experience God in everything and still keep the transcendent God necessary for dualistic Christianity. The Eastern mystic can experience everything as God, and so not only have an immanent God, but build a framework where ostensible non-duality (Oneness for the Hindu, the Void for the Buddhist) is the ultimate reality. So the way the mystical experience is experienced is not "pure" (nothing is) but is historically and culturally embedded.

The concept of Oneness is an abstraction created by thought as a way of framing and attempting to describe the mystical experience. Insofar as Oneness is placed in a higher realm or plane than the world of separation and multiplicity (the Many), this is done by abstracting out and reifying a presumed quality or essence from life, and making that more important than the individual expressions of life itself. In so doing, the plurality (the many forms) of existence is trivialized. This is representative of the historic pattern followed by all accumulation cultures in which the spiritual was abstracted out from the secular and exalted above it.

In the East, the abstractions derived from mystical experiences of unity have created not only the concept of Oneness, but a religious ideology, ethics, and hierarchy that flow from it. (We define ideology as a worldview containing a program or ideal of how to live

– i.e., a morality.) The mystical experience is important, both as a historical factor influencing the perceptions of humanity, and also because of its relevance for individuals. But traditions that made an ideology out of the concept of Oneness created a morality that denigrated or made unreal the individual self with its individual interests. Any worldview that denies either the reality or importance of the individuated self ends up defining virtue as selflessness, which is achieved through self-sacrifice. When renouncing self-interest is the spiritual path, we define the morality as renunciate. Renunciate moralities have neither eliminated nor diminished self-interest, but have often made its expression more hidden and thus corruptible. This chapter will show how the concept of Oneness is used by spiritual authorities to make their pronouncements unchallengeable, and therefore authoritarian. Those who attempt to communicate the experience of unity usually begin with a caveat on the limitations of words to capture it, and then proceed to describe it in these ways:

1. One experiences being in the eternal, a place that always was and always will be.
2. There can be a great energy that breaks through boundaries to the extent of experiencing one's awareness expanding until it seems to (or could) include everything.
3. The ordinary separations between what's me and not-me either momentarily disappear or become really ambiguous.
4. There are often (though not always) deep feelings of identification – one might even call it love – with the cosmos.
5. One "knows" this place is always there to be tapped into.
6. The place feels foreign and yet familiar at the same time.
7. There is both awe and a feeling of personal insignificance, where the mundane concerns and emotions around self-enhancement and self-protection seem trivial and beside the point.
8. There is no fear, because death feels quite unreal. Or in a slightly different vein, when you cease identifying with yourself and merge with the cosmos, it feels like you've already died, so there's nothing

left to fear. This cessation of fear is one of the most marvelously unusual feelings, bringing deep relaxation on levels one didn't even know existed.

9. One feels immune from being affected by the judgments of others, and also free from such petty responses as vengeance and competitiveness. After all, we are all one. Along this line, all so-called negative emotions – anger, jealousy, etc. – can seem not only unnecessary, but silly and based on illusions.

10. There is a recognition that one is (or we all are) an aspect of God.

11. Everything (oneself included), and the way the cosmos is unfolding, is seen as perfect.

Experiencing this underlying unity initially can feel better and more real than normal reality, and afterward it is difficult not to become what we call God or Oneness–intoxicated. The experience of having no boundaries, feeling eternal, and being at peace with the cosmos can be so powerful that it's hard not to project how wonderful it would be if everyone could only get beyond the ego attachments presumed to be keeping this state away. Being in this state as much as possible can become one's major life goal.

For those who have tasted the above, "ordinary reality" can easily be interpreted as containing opposite characteristics or qualities: fear and ambition, endless preferences, boundaries between self and other, awareness of one's limits, and the march toward death. In everyday life one is affected by the emotions of others and subject to all the unwanted feelings. Instead of feeling at one with the universe, feelings of disconnection and discontent are rife. Perfection is not experienced, but is at best an elusive ideal.

The aspects of ego that separate – pride, envy, selfishness, greed, ambition, competitiveness, etc. – seem not only paltry and pitiful in comparison, but easily can be viewed as entirely negative. The Oneness experience comes to represent all that is positive, true, and real. Separation becomes the bad guy with no inherent value, the enemy that keeps Oneness away, or as in Hinduism, maya – the grand illusion. The meaning of life, or the spiritual path, then becomes transcending separation and all the negativities therein.

Dualism and Renunciation

The actual experience of underlying unity is different from thought creating an abstract concept of it, and then making that concept more real than individuated existence. What should not be forgotten is that it takes an individual to experience unity. Oneness is an abstraction that presents itself as beyond dualism, but has within it a hidden duality. Dividing the cosmos into two categories or levels of reality is dualistic by nature. The ideology of Oneness (as opposed to the experience of it) creates an opposition with multiplicity, calling itself "higher" and more real. And although the mystical experience can give a person a deeper connection with the cosmos, by contrast the ideology of Oneness with its camouflaged, hierarchical dualism has separated the spiritual from the worldly and humanity from nature.

Dualism divides everything into two basic categories. In Western religions it is overt – God and God's creation. When existence is so divided, one side of the division – in this instance God – is always valued more than the other. This creates an obvious hierarchy of value between the two categories, as God is superior to its creation. It also creates a hierarchy of value within the lesser category based on the virtues or dictates of the higher one. That is, the more godlike, or at least God-fearing and hence obedient, the better. The same kind of dualistic, either/or framework of conceptualizing is operative in the ideology of Oneness, but is masked by the concept itself, which proclaims the unity of all being and thus seems all-encompassing. But if unity is valued more than diversity, the inevitable result is the attempt to get to unity by negating or in some fashion lessening the value and importance of separation. Thus the way that much of Eastern spirituality has been framed involves identifying with the principle of unity through denying, renouncing, dis-identifying with, or trivializing separation. Becoming more aware, more "spiritual," is then seen as moving one's identity from the personal (and thus the limited) to the totality. "Everything is perfect"; "I am that"; "We are all one"; "Separation is an illusion" are examples of identifying only with unity.

Renunciation requires two sharply defined hierarchical categories—a lower one to renounce in order to achieve the higher one. The

higher one is usually made sacred, which justifies sacrificing the lower to it. When unity is considered better or more real than diversity, emulating the values abstracted out of the concept of Oneness is presented as the solution to the problems within individuated life. This results in making people's concerns with their own individual lives the source of all problems. In short, this is the East's way of making self-centeredness the villain. This would include valuing cooperation over competition, altruism over egoism, and giving over getting.

In an article on "spiritual masters" (Omni, March 1990), a disciple of an Eastern guru recounted a vignette to illustrate how his master could teach a profound lesson in a few words. The guru was having a temple built in his honor. Disciples from all over the world had come to the cornerstone ceremony with treasures, many of them of considerable value, to be buried in the large hole under the foundation. The narrator had been chosen as the first to deposit his offering in the hole. He describes how in his pride at being selected to be first, he chose a large rock and enthusiastically threw it in. He then looked at his master, who said to him quietly, "Too much 'getting' is going on here." The man concluded by saying: that his humbled ego became far wiser as a result of those few words.

For the chastised disciple, the guru's lesson was a statement that his giving was not pure enough. Another entirely different interpretation of the above scenario is possible: To have a temple built in one's honor and then to further waste valuable gifts by burying them to symbolize one's greatness is a sign of a monumental ego that has little constraint. One of the cheapest guru ploys is to make people feel inadequate by showing how their behaviors are tainted with self-centeredness—always an easy task. This guru, who was the recipient of all of this "getting, could not even share a little of it with his disciple without making him feel bad about himself. Perhaps the disciple's gift, a mere rock, was not grand enough. But since the guru is viewed by his disciples as a person beyond duality and beyond ego, they could not even entertain the possibility of our interpretation.

Consequently, the disciple entirely missed the real lesson of history: The guru's "getting" and self-enhancement are masked by images of enlightenment and selflessness and thus are made unconscious. Once his purity and hence superiority are taken for granted, it is

assumed that he deserves to be "getting" precisely because he is thought enlightened. He can thus reprimand his disciple for the very activity he was involved in on a far grander scale without it seeming hypocritical. Who gets and who gives is never questioned because "spiritual" values mask what is really going on.

The Function of Enlightenment

The major Eastern religions make reference to a state of consciousness of a different order called enlightenment. Its foundation lies in the mystical experience of unity that has been conceptualized as Hindu Oneness or the Buddhist Void. From this came the idea of the "enlightened one" who lives in this exalted place all the time, most of the time, or at least a significantly greater amount of time than ordinary folk – having at the very minimum some control over access to that place. The traditional conception of enlightenment involves two major components:

1. Being at one with the universe to the extent of having no ego or boundaries around the self.
2. A hierarchy of value wherein the more selfless one is, the better, with the highest state being total selflessness.

The way an "enlightened" person is supposed to manifest enlightenment is through being selfless and beyond any need for ego gratification. So the image of the enlightened one is of being totally giving, unconditionally compassionate and loving, and with no taint of greed, envy, lust, or competitiveness. Those who wish to be considered enlightened must present themselves as being "above it all" – beyond all the foibles of ego: beyond preference, beyond negativity, beyond fear and desire, etc. Such individuals paint a seductive picture of a state they can help others get to that is not only eternal but that can solve all the mundane problems of life.

Creating a special category called the "enlightened state" is itself a manifestation of an accumulation mentality, it becoming the ultimate goal to achieve through accumulating merit and partially enlightening experiences. One day or lifetime, one finally crosses the barrier and arrives. Then one is a perfect manifestation of the godhead – a perfect master with nowhere else to go. You work

toward the goal of enlightenment and once you get it, you have it. The way the ideal is constructed makes it static and unchanging. The experience of unity feels timeless, but the concept of enlightenment turns a timeless moment into an "all the time" fixed identity that continues over time. Ironically, the identity of being enlightened attempts to crystallize in time what is experienced as timeless.

Once one gives credence to such an identity either in oneself or in another, this creates a dualistic, either/or framework: one is either enlightened or not enlightened – this or that. This is another example of how constructing two separate categories and giving one greater value (it's better to be enlightened) creates a hierarchy of value not only between the two, but also within the less valued (non-enlightened) category. Those viewed as not enlightened are considered better to the degree they emulate the images of enlightenment. This basically amounts to measuring the extent of selflessness.

Once existence is bifurcated into two categories, a bridge is required between the two parts. In both the East and West, religions create the two realms and then become the bridge between them. They design a "spiritual path" from the lower to the higher through defining the proper actions to get one from here (this world) to there (however salvation is defined). In the East via karma/rebirth, the path progresses through levels of spirituality, taking many lifetimes until arriving at the enlightened state – also referred to as nirvana, moksha, cosmic consciousness, etc. This conception is linear and hierarchical, as are the religions that produced it. Some schools (Tibetan Buddhism) have even constructed hierarchical levels of enlightenment, so that one enlightened being is held to be more so than another. Among spiritual seekers the burning issue is how far along the path one is.

Asserting a basic unity permeating all existence does not automatically lend itself to hierarchy. Enlightenment is the way hierarchy is brought in by viewing a few individuals as special channels for, and greater manifestations of, this underlying unity. Once it is assumed that some people embody or express the true nature of reality more than others, an authoritarian hierarchy easily flows from that basic assumption. This also lays the foundation for perpetuating the hierarchy, because the one who knows best can

decide who is enlightened and thereby transfer the mantle of authority. One person deciding when another is enlightened does seem a bit strange. One would presume that if enlightened, one would know it without being told. Yet this is what occurs within many spiritual frameworks.

The ideal of enlightenment at first blush seems completely innocent of human corruption because it is defined as being totally selfless. Yet it is this sacrosanct concept of perfection that allows authoritarianism to manifest, and indeed flourish. Two mental constructions work in tandem: Enlightenment provides authorities, and karma as a cosmic moral law provides the metaphysical justification for why some rather than others come to be enlightened authorities. These two concepts intertwine and validate each other, creating an impenetrable closed system that perpetuates itself. Superior past lives are used to legitimize special status, while those with special status present the karma/rebirth ideology as an unchallengeable truth.

Monotheism with one God on top is obviously authoritarian. The authoritarianism embedded within the Eastern ideology of Oneness is less obvious. Believing that God is everywhere and in everything makes a centralized hierarchy more difficult. The concept of enlightenment, however, does bring decentralized hierarchies, each with a master on top. This is what one sees in Eastern religion and in its Western transplants. Whereas monotheism makes the revealed Word of God sacred, Eastern religions make presumed enlightened beings sacred. Thus the concept of enlightenment brings authoritarianism at the personal, charismatic level (gurus, masters, avatars, and buddhas). Here the authority comes from living people, not an institution – although they almost always create an institution around themselves or are already part of one. Not coincidentally, surrendering to and obeying the master is presented as a (usually necessary) step on the path to enlightenment.

The very nature of any structure that makes one person different and superior to others not only breeds authoritarianism, but is authoritarian in its essence. Just as there is no way for humans to question a remote God, there is really no way for a non-enlightened being to question the words or actions of a presumed enlightened one. This is why gurus can get away with anything – they are judged by different standards that make whatever they do perfect by

definition. The idea that someone is no longer susceptible to the corruptions of power ensures corruption will occur, promulgating self-delusion in all involved. So the concept of enlightenment, precisely because it is so exalted, almost inevitably lends itself to abuse and corruption. It can be used to justify any behavior, privileges, or excesses, creating an insidious double standard for the superior ones.

There are even warnings about the traps of enlightenment within esoteric literature, where it is said that no one who has had truly enlightening experiences ever claims to be enlightened. Perhaps this is because anyone with real wisdom would know that building an identity around enlightenment creates a static, unchanging image of how to be, which is just another cage. Let us leave aside the question of whether there is or ever has been a person of ultimate cosmic wisdom, totally devoid of self-centeredness. The only person who could say "Yes, there is" with certainty would have to be one. And that person would have to be absolutely certain of being free of all self-delusion—not an easy task.

The very idea of enlightenment has hidden assumptions within it that are part of our authoritarian heritage. An example is the presumption that a modern manifestation of enlightenment would say essentially the same things as were said thousands of years ago. This is an odd image of finality within an otherwise evolving cosmos. People do have enlightening experiences and insights, but are they always a repetition of old insights that others had thousands of years ago? Is awareness a path others have trod that leads to a predictable end? The concept of enlightenment needs to be a-historical, unchanging, and infallible to support authoritarian religious hierarchies. This is the East's way of endowing someone with the last word and ultimate authority on cosmic truth.

Buddha initially excluded women from his monasteries. When pressed, he made their entry conditional upon perpetual subservience to the lowliest (newest) male monks. Was this an example of unchanging wisdom? Or were some of his ideas not so enlightened, but rather a function of his place in history? His agenda to end suffering has had millennia to test itself and has failed. Are people just not good enough or smart enough? Is there something wrong with people or is something wrong with the agenda? His methodology for ending suffering was tied to the

concept of enlightenment, which involves renouncing both the self and self-centeredness. So as an essentially renunciate religion, Buddhism is also essentially authoritarian, with Buddha being the absolute authority on what to renounce and how to go about it. Some modern Buddhists would bristle at calling Buddhism renunciate. They would say that through dis-identifying or detaching from the illusion that there is a self, self-centeredness effortlessly leaves. We view this as their illusion.

Some people may at times see more deeply into the nature of things than others. However, the idea of enlightenment as a state of finality that one reaches once and for all is a viewpoint of wisdom and spirituality that is supposedly true for all people and all times. This static view of enlightenment derives from the a-historic Oneness ideology wherein one transcends the illusion of separateness. Only separate entities can change in relation to each other. Ironically, Buddhists who assert there is nothing but change in the material world hold that spiritual realizations do not change. Denying change in the spiritual realm is basically a fundamentalist stance used to protect the sacred and tradition. But perceiving deeply is a process that is necessarily historically embedded, for each epoch has its particular illusions that must be pierced. Significantly, a less common meaning of an enlightening experience is penetrating the veils of illusion. We see the dis-illusionment necessary for this age as going beyond the polarizations of either/or moral frameworks, which are the source of most distortions and illusions. Any ideology that presents static ideals of perfection and attainment necessarily creates its own illusions. This anti-evolutionary view of awareness and wisdom not only blocks further inquiry, but it limits the possibility of constructing new frameworks that can free people to be truly more aware.

The One-Sidedness of Oneness

It is through constructing images that idealize unity and selflessness to the detriment of separateness that spirituality and morality have gone awry. By a sleight of mind which easily passes unnoticed, the experience of an underlying unity is turned into the ideology of Oneness, which contains both unwarranted assumptions about reality and prescriptions on how to be. The commonest ones are:

1. Such experiences are more real than ordinary reality, and so unity is superior to diversity.
2. It is possible to be in the mystical state all the time and, of course, the more you're there the better.
3. The path to unity is through negating individuation Here descriptions of unity turn into prescriptions for individuals to no longer act like individuals.
4. Following a presumed "arrived" master is the best way to get there.

The experience of being a part of something larger (even the whole cosmos) is very different from declaring the whole more real than its parts. Just as it takes an individual to have this experience, it takes an individual mind to construct the ideology of Oneness – an ideology which quixotically denies the individuated reality of the person constructing it. If, as we see it, diversity (the Many) is just as real as the underlying unity (the One), then attempting to solve the problems of day-to-day life by inappropriately superimposing the values abstracted out of the concept of Oneness will not work. If unity and diversity, the One and the Many, are embedded in each other, then values of moral purity that deny separation and villainize self-centeredness spawn an underbelly of corruption.

We wish to show how elevating one side of a dialectical relationship (unity) over the other (separation) generates an unlivable renunciate morality. If, from the point of view of the One, everything is perfect, then how can one judge this to be better than that, or in fact have any preferences at all? So from this, an ideal of spirituality is built that involves making no judgments and having no preferences. Here the ideal is to love everyone and everything equally, because one is supposed to be free of attachments to any particular expression of this unity–i.e., to any person or object. So problems within individuated life around such issues as power, competition, envy, jealousy, manipulation, sexuality, and self-centeredness in general are wrongly thought to be solvable by adopting the values that come from looking at existence as a seamless web of unity.

But if existence has seams (boundaries), and if individuation is an irreducible aspect of it, then trying to solve the problems within

individuated life by superimposing values derived from a different level of abstraction (unity) can only lead to confusion and paradox. An element in opening and closing boundaries involves judgments on the part of an organism as to what to let in or keep out. This serves to protect and to maintain some degree of individual integrity. Judgments are only possible because there are individuals with differences that can be judged. If making judgments and distinctions is necessary when dealing with each other and life, the problems of judgmentalism cannot be unraveled by reactively positing an ideal of being nonjudgmental. The fact is, people make judgments about everything all the time. Comparison and judgment are part of the way thought works to sort things out – survival depends on this. The preference for Oneness is itself highly ironic, as is the judgment that it's better not to judge.

Such ironies abound in mystical writings, where so many of the seeming paradoxes involve a levels shift of identification from the small "I" of individuated life to the big "I" of the totality of being. The mystical experience of unity has an eternal quality. How easy it is to project that quality onto oneself and say, "I, the individual, am eternal." This can then be used to validate any afterlife conception such as karma/rebirth.

Experiencing an underlying unity can alter one's relationship to daily life and also profoundly change the way one approaches death and dying. It can increase compassion and empathy, and bring the capacity to see oneself as a player in an eternal drama. It can also add a poignant dimension to the seeming paradox whereby each of us is less than a speck of awareness in the scheme of existence, and yet each of us is also a center in the universe. To say we are all God is well and good, but not at the cost of denying our humanity with all its seeming foibles.

In spiritual realms, because what is considered proof by science or logic is at times not applicable, the ideology of Oneness has historically remained aloof from serious critique. Challenges coming from overtly dualistic frameworks (monotheism) can be easily dealt with because Oneness is a higher level of abstraction. Similarly, monotheism can incorporate all the wanted attributes of polytheistic gods into one God. A monotheistic God is more remote with more abstract qualities than polytheistic gods. To distinguish polytheistic gods from each other, they must each be given traits

and identities, as well as their own realms of power and importance. Monotheism created a new concept of power by subsuming all power traits into one abstract quality—omnipotence. It also did this with knowledge (omniscience) and virtue (perfection). As a higher level of abstraction, monotheism could explain away polytheism, while polytheism could not explain away monotheism. Similarly, as a lower level of abstraction, monotheism has a problem with explaining Oneness.

Pantheism, which simply says everything is God, is an even higher level of abstraction, as it does away with dualism altogether. A straightforward pantheism may be intellectually appealing because of its simplicity and internal consistency, but it has grave moral difficulties. If everything is God, how can the actions of any one part of God be better or worse than any other? How can any trait (love) be better than any other (greed)? The ideology of Oneness contains a hidden dualism precisely to make certain expressions of unity better and higher than others. Still, Oneness is a higher level of abstraction than monotheism because the way it separates spirit from matter is less absolute. It can incorporate monotheism into its framework, while monotheism, by definition, cannot deal with the unity of all being except by denying it. A practical example: Hinduism can call Christ another avatar (pure manifestation of God) and in one fell swoop include Christianity under its banner.

There were Eastern thinkers aware of the hidden dualism in most conceptions of unity. The way they attempted to reconcile this involved using paradoxes that mysteriously evoked the idea that the separate parts are both separate and not separate at the same time: "The One is the Many" (in Hindu terms) and "Nirvana is samsara" (in Buddhist terms, meaning "The Void is the world of form") are examples of this. We have no problem with constructions that point to different things happening at different levels (the different levels here being unity and diversity). Paradox is useful as an indication that a levels shift is occurring – but not if it is used to cut off inquiry, as is usual. Our problem with such conceptions is that they are embedded in a worldview that acts as if unity were somehow more real. The view of enlightenment that is a part of such constructions still involves shedding ego and identifying with only one side. What these thinkers neglect to mention is that, as with pantheism, if unity is not more real than diversity, the renunciate ethics that are based on giving unity priority come into question.

The ideology of Oneness constructs its hidden dualism by making the whole more sacred or more real than its parts. Sacralizing unity places it in another realm, "the spiritual." Once anything is made sacred, sacrificing to and for it is inevitable. When selflessness is the highest virtue, the spiritual path becomes practices that seemingly promote it. The difficulty of testing this ideology is compounded by making the promised payoffs occur after death. A totally secular ideology that values the parts sacrificing for the whole, like Marxism, does not have that luxury. If within a few generations it does not begin to improve the quality of life, it loses credence and crumbles. Yet not to look at the long-term results of any worldview, no matter how otherworldly, is truly remiss.

One of the longest experiments in history, the approximately 3000-year-old Eastern ideology of Oneness, was first developed in the Upanishads. It does have one component whose results can be examined in this world – the efficacy of its moral system to do what it set out to do: eliminate or even moderate divisiveness and self-centeredness. The failure of its renunciate morality to diminish self-centeredness is a powerful statement that something is amiss. The usual reasons given for this are either that humanity has not tried hard enough or isn't good enough. ("We as a species have more karma to work out.") It is our contention that this morality has failed not because there is something wrong with people, but because the framework constructs ideals that are impossible to achieve, thus setting people up for failure and self-mistrust. That it has been around so long and has not even tempered human divisiveness should not be taken lightly.

The incongruity that the most highly structured and internally divided culture (India) originated and nurtured the Oneness framework is no accident. Caste, with its privileges through the hierarchy it sets up, has proven to be one of the most powerful and lasting ways of dividing people. The moral structure is simple: people do their prescribed duties and strive to eliminate self-centeredness; along the way "good karma" is generated that pays off in increasingly better next lifetimes. The caste one is born in is a function of one's karma. Making separation an illusion is useful to both the "haves" and the "have-nots": the privileged use it to self-protect by removing themselves from the surrounding misery; the miserable use it to cope with a hopeless situation. The message of

the privileged to the underprivileged is, "If you accept your lot, which you deserve, next time around you'll be better off." This is the source of the deep resignation one finds there. The category of illusion functions like a cosmic refuse collector into which one can dump whatever one doesn't like or wants to get rid of, by claiming it isn't real.

Holism and Interconnectedness

Concepts of unity are very appealing, since it is increasingly obvious that divisiveness and uncaring self-interest are paramount causes of why the planet is becoming unfit for life. Many who are ecologically-minded and peace-oriented are attracted to the Oneness model because on the surface it seems to fit the planet's need for people to realize that everything is interconnected. The danger in holistic thinking lies in not giving separation an equal place in the scheme of things.

There is a strain within holistic thinking that posits the total interconnectedness of everything (the cosmos) such that every change anywhere affects everything else. In this framework, existence is looked upon as a gigantic mobile wherein a tug anywhere moves everything. This is an example of horizontal thinking (which tends to be holistic). Believing that somehow the shifting grains of sand on a beach either affect or are affected by say, a fire in the Bronx, let alone a distant star going nova, is necessary if one is to take the above theory seriously. Giving priority to unity over diversity leads to these kinds of assumptions.

Often favoring such holistic horizontal thinking has within it an anti-hierarchical political agenda, sometimes hidden. Hierarchical conceptualizations do involve thinking vertically and creating boundaries of separation. It is also true that the prevalent type of vertical thinking and the justifications therein are at the base of the world's inequities. ("I'm better than you.") So in the quest for justice, it's tempting to try to discard vertical thinking and hierarchies. To us, this is but another example of either/or framing that negates the reality of separation and boundaries. Not to acknowledge boundaries are real and that without them there would be no life (or anything else for that matter) also makes relationships unreal. For without boundaries what is relating to what?

The way systems interrelate is both horizontal and vertical. A human being could be viewed as a hierarchy of interrelating systems, from the sub-atomic through the social. Each system has boundaries that can be crossed by other systems parallel to it (two human beings are parallel systems), as well as those above and below it. A cell is a system with a boundary containing molecules which, because they are part of its composition, are systems on a level below it. The cell itself can be part of an organ, which is a system above it. Systems in proximity usually have an easier time crossing boundaries and affecting each other.

Within this framework, it is not by any means a given that all occurrences within a system break out of the boundaries of that system to affect anything outside it, let alone everything else. A pebble is dropped in the middle of the lake; ripples expand outward but dissipate before reaching the boundaries of lake and shore. The pebble not only did not affect the shore, but might not have had an effect on any or most fish in the lake.

This is not to say that the movement of a pebble or a grain of sand could not have far-reaching effects; it simply says it doesn't have to. What it does mean is that boundaries are real, and effects can truly be localized and limited. In fact, protecting what's inside from undue or casual outside interference is one of the primary functions of boundaries. Saying that everything is interconnected does not distinguish how it is all interconnected, or whether some things and occurrences have more effect than others, and some perhaps none at all. If the Earth were destroyed by a large meteor, the sun would probably survive. The converse is not true.

If everything were interconnected in the way a mobile exemplifies, it would be difficult to have room for human freedom (or any other kind) since freedom needs some degree of separation to operate. Our perspective views the vertical and horizontal as dialectically embedded (vertical only has meaning in relation to horizontal and vice versa). And although these papers are challenging authoritarian hierarchies (the vertical) and value the concept of human equality (the horizontal), we do not do so by trying to abolish or deny the vertical, or making the horizontal superior. Reframing equality and hierarchy dialectically, instead of treating them as if they were mutually exclusive in an either/or way, is another way of making hierarchy a tool instead of an authoritarian master.

Some modern Buddhist theorists use the concept of interconnectedness with its seamless web of existence to show that boundaries are really an illusion. It is no accident that seamless web proponents often use a static noun, interconnectedness, which is constructed from a passive verb (interconnected) that has no subject. This allows them to claim that interconnectedness does not imply two things, that it contains no separate elements or components. Whereas interconnecting and the active verb, connect, raise the question of what elements are actually connecting. This is an unwelcome reminder that individuation and separation are required for things to connect, so that at some level boundaries must be real.

Connecting needs subjects that connect with each other. In order for connecting to occur, there must be distinguishable things or systems with boundaries (however permeable and fluid) that are doing the connecting. Without boundaries and some degree of separation, it is meaningless to speak of connecting. That the universe may consist of hierarchies of interconnecting and overlapping systems whose boundaries are not fixed does not take away from the fact that each system has recognizable boundaries that define it and allow it to connect with other systems. Without this the universe would be one big blob of sameness, perhaps similar to the Buddhist concept of the Void.

The Buddhist Void posits ultimate reality as devoid of differentiation and is structurally identical to the concept of Oneness. Buddhism replaces Hindu maya ("All is illusion") with "All is change," making continuity (and thus identity) the illusion. Both change and illusion serve the same function – to deny the reality of normal reality (the world of individuated form). The primary Buddhist agenda of doing away with suffering is geared at doing away with the individual self that suffers through creating "unreal" boundaries. Making interconnectedness the ultimate reality in the world of ever-changing forms is an attempt to do away with subjects that connect (and suffer) as well as with the less emotionally appealing traditional Void. This is none other than the age-old hidden dualism between reality and illusion, however defined.

If the universe is actively involved in joining (coming together) and separating (breaking apart), then separation is just as real as

interconnectedness. What this means is that the web of existence has seams, and the way to solve the problems brought about by self-centeredness cannot come through villainizing or declaring unreal the fact of it. One still is faced with these basic realities: that eating, be it carrots or cows, destroys one thing for the good of the other; that people use resources, and too many people will destroy the overall support system for everyone; and that like creation and love, destruction and violence are a part of the web of existence, too.

The old symbol of the serpent eating its tail, Ouroboros, is an image of how unity is a process that assimilates and uses itself. The real question is how this is done – that is, how far the extensions of care go, and where the lines of use are drawn. The idea that an enlightened, or realized, or self-expanded being need no longer draw these lines is absurd, since the questions will always remain: "What will I eat?" and "What will I use for my own survival, benefit, convenience, pleasure, and amusement?" For between cherishing and using (two basic poles of differentiated existence), where are the boundaries of one's consideration to be? How these questions are answered is crucial, at the collective as well as individual level.

Connecting with interconnection can be a powerful and valuable experience that helps alleviate fear and despair. But making it the magical key to the necessary consciousness transformation is but another formula that hopes purity of intention will solve everything. There are those who even state that unconditional love or compassion is the ultimate requisite for survival—the evolutionary leap needed. Here the more unconditional (selfless) the better. This is really a prescription about how people ought to be, which then becomes the measure of one's true humanity. Such standards create a concept of purity and are merely a disguised form of the old renunciate morality that debases self-centeredness. The absolute standards it sets are authoritarian, creating a hierarchy of value – the more loving, forgiving, or compassionate the better. Such one-sided formulas cannot take into account that openness to connect may not always be appropriate; that sometimes boundaries and self-protection are needed and serve a creative function.

Once unity or interconnectedness is made sacred, a category is created that is not sacred – individuals and their individual concerns. Once the sacred was separated off into a special realm,

religions became renunciate, with the religions defining both what to renounce and the perceived higher good that doing so brings. The idea of the intrinsic value of sacrifice and self-denial is still a part of many modern moral conceptions, no matter how secularized their veneer has become.

Every morality must deal with self-centeredness. This includes issues of personal and group survival, and the asymmetries of power and privilege which are both genetically and socially constructed. The spirituality embedded in the Oneness worldview creates lofty ideals of selfless moral purity that have worked well with authoritarian hierarchies. Hindu ashrams, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, and Zen centers are all authoritarian hierarchies. Duty, obedience, and sacrifice are the key authoritarian virtues making such hierarchies work. When unity is valued over diversity, whether it be the One over the Many or the state over the individual, there are always those higher on the hierarchy to define for the lower just what that unity is and what must be sacrificed for it.

Renunciation as Accumulation

That all the major world religions have a renunciate morality seems at first blush a bit odd since these religions all operate within cultures where accumulating wealth, power, and prestige positions people higher on the hierarchy. Accumulating seems to be quite the opposite of renouncing. This seeming enigma is understandable if it is seen as the result of separating the divine from the earthly: Accumulating was the activity that got one ahead in the secular domain; renouncing was the path that got one ahead in the spiritual. Once people's general mode of thought and behavior became based on the accumulation model, this insidiously got applied to everything, including renunciation, whereby one could accumulate spiritual merit through sacrifice.

Renunciation is the mirror image of accumulation, with inverted (opposite) values, but with the same structure (hierarchical) and process (striving), and the same measuring, ambitious mentality. The contents (sacrificing versus acquiring) may seem opposite, but this is only on the surface because the form and underlying structure of each is the same. Accumulation moralities set up standards of purity which serve to measure the quantity of impurity (self-centeredness). They measure how much sin or how much

karma has been accumulated (demerits), and then give ways of accumulating merits through sacrifice. So ironically, renunciate religions are all based on accruing and stockpiling spiritual merit and are accumulative to the core. This is but another example of how either/or frameworks create reactive oppositions that, in an unconscious way, bring about the very thing they are trying to do away with. The hierarchical split between the sacred and secular breeds authoritarianism. Actually, authoritarian hierarchies thrive on renunciation, for this can always justify sacrificing the lower to the higher.

The spiritual path embedded in the Oneness worldview involves progress upward toward an enlightened state through becoming more selfless. This state is presented as the same for all people who reach it, no matter where they are historically situated. A path is a place where others have been and is a repetition of the known. Seeing spirituality as a-historical removes it from an evolving universe. Whereas if unity is embedded in its parts, which are changing and evolving, so too would human spirituality change, along with everything else.

The One and the Many, unity and diversity, are opposites only when so framed by either/or thinking. A dialectical framework that is more inclusive sees them as interweaving poles within the process of existence (See "The Power of Abstraction" for more on Oneness and on the authors' dialectical framework.). A view of both spirituality and morality is needed that does not prioritize one pole over the other. Judging as superior the values abstracted out of the mystical experience of Oneness is not only reactive, but itself is just more either/or, dualistic conceptualizing ironically the very thing the ideology of Oneness claims it has transcended. The mystical experience does not end with unity; it begins there, and then must be integrated into the equal reality of individuated daily life.