

Radiant Mind
Peter Fenner

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An Interview with Peter Fenner

What is “radiant mind” and how can we access it?

Radiant mind is the experience of being fully at home and comfortable with the totality of our conditioned experience—our minds, feelings, body and environment at the same time that we are infused with the liberating experience of unconditioned awareness. Radiant mind arises when the luminosity of pure awareness or buddha-mind radiates throughout our embodied existence bringing harmony, peace and coherence to everything we do. Everything we do and say reflexively invites others into the state of primordial completion.

Why is the experience of “radiant mind” important?

The experience of radiant mind is important because it gives us everything we want. When we abide in radiant mind, we are totally fulfilled with things exactly as they are, nothing needs to be added to or taken away from our experience. We’re able to integrate everything that happens, including our own death, without any upset or disturbance.

What are “nondual” teachings?

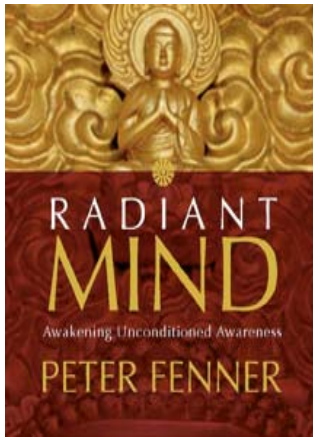
“Nondual teachings” are spiritual teachings that directly reveal that we are totally complete, right now, without anything needing to change. Nondual liberation doesn’t exist in another place or at another time. Nondual freedom isn’t freedom in the dualistic sense. We’re free because we don’t need to be free. We free because we don’t need anything. Things can change on the inside or outside it doesn’t make any difference. This is unconditioned liberation. A nondual teaching is anything that reveals this state. Nondual teachings often take the form of questions, koans, or poetic metaphors that invite us to directly experience that liberation and bondage are just constructions, and that ultimately there is no one, no self or person who can be free or limited in any way. Dualistic paths, on the other hand, lead to conditioned forms of freedom, because freedom depends on the presence or absence of particular conditions, such as feeling satisfied or being free of suffering. In the nondual state there is no suffering, but it’s so unconditioned we can’t even say that we are free of suffering. We can’t say anything. Dualistic forms of freedom can come and go. Nondual freedom neither comes nor goes because it isn’t an experience.

How can nondual teachings—such as those you offer in *Radiant Mind*—and psychotherapeutic methods inform each other?

Nondual teachings and psychotherapy complement each other. The nondual approach is very radical, too radical some of the time because it’s just too simple. It’s inconceivable, unbelievable that we can be free while still carrying with us the psychological and somatic memories of past traumas or when we’re severely challenged by the circumstances of our present life. If people are troubled – heavily identified with their suffering, experiencing difficult emotions or struggling with their external circumstances, their health, material needs, etc. they need something that makes sense to them, something they can connect to. A

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strictly nondual approach as this point is irrelevant, even absurd or ridiculous because it's too far out. This is where psychotherapy, spiritual practices, life-skills coaching, etc. come into the picture. They offer methods that are relevant and which can bring people to the nondual by helping them to change things at the conditioned level so they are more comfortable and peaceful in their lives. When people begin to relax and feel okay with themselves, it's possible to ask such questions as: Who is suffering? Who wants to be free? And so on.

For a nondual perspective, psychotherapy can be helpful so long as we realize that it's a bridge, that it's a provisional path. From the nondual point of view a lot of psychotherapy is limited because it's essentially focused on making us feel better about ourselves. In contrast, the nondual state is not about feeling good. When people begin to integrate the nondual experience in their lives, they invariably feel more serene, more open and more accepting, but these are by-products.

What holds us back from the experience of radiant mind and what is a simple exercise that can be done to help awaken this awareness?

In an ultimate sense, nothing can hold us back from the experience of radiant mind. Nothing can obstruct the experience because it isn't anything. What gets in the way is thinking that radiant mind is something we can obtain and hold onto. If we relate to it like this we keep on reifying or consolidating the idea there's someone to get something. If we think that radiant mind is going to save us or shield us from the possibility of pain and suffering it becomes an objective, a goal. Radiant mind has nothing to do with the future. It never exists in the future, it never exists in the past, it doesn't even exist in the present. It exists because it doesn't exist.

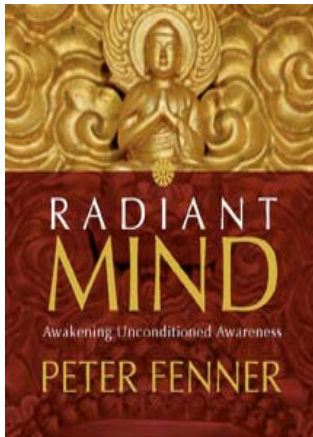
So the way through the idea that something can stop us from experiencing radiant mind is to see that there's nothing to get through, we don't have to do anything. There's no one to get through anything and nothing to obtain. The exercise, the practice as it were, is to really see that radiant mind is this, just this, the ineffable display of phenomena that's indistinguishable from contentless awareness.

When people speak about the nondual teachings, one major criticism is that the nondual view is an invitation to ignore our neuroses and conditioning. Can you explain how it is possible to rest in unconditioned awareness without escaping our psychological and emotional issues, or "spiritual bypassing"?

People do talk like this, but it's quite misleading. Contentless awareness is simply incapable of suppressing or obscuring anything. How can nothing distort something? It can't. It's impossible. Nondual awareness lets everything be *exactly* as it is. Nondual awareness doesn't let us avoid anything. If we're trying to run away from anything—unpleasant feelings, people we don't like, worldly responsibilities—if we're putting any energy whatsoever into avoiding or denying what's happening in our lives, it's impossible to presence nondual awareness. In fact nondual awareness guarantees that we experience whatever's there, in our minds, bodies and the outer world. Why? Because when we're presencing nondual awareness nothing threatens us.

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Is it necessary to engage in “formal” spiritual practice in order to experience radiant mind? Can it be experienced without prior contemplative training?

That depends on *what* we believe and how *strongly* we believe it. If we believe we have to practice then we have to do *something* because if we don't do anything we'll think that we're wasting our time. Our “not practicing” will consist of just drifting along in life because we haven't had a clear experience of “not *needing* to do anything.” Quite a lot of people cop-out by confusing the practice of *doing nothing* really purely (in other words, resting in emptiness) with giving up and drifting along aimlessly and loosely. These are completely different.

Prior contemplative practice can cut two ways. Contemplative practice helps people to be present to intense emotions, frustration, anger, elation, ecstasy, hope and fear without having to escape these feeling or act them out. That can be very useful when it comes to deepening the experience of nondual awareness.

The downside of spiritual practice is that is also very easy to condition the belief that we *need* to practice in order to achieve the particular result we're looking for. It's quite difficult to practice without having any expectations. Why would we be practicing? But even the slightest expectation—of making progress on the path, becoming more peaceful, achieving nirvana—throws us into time and stops us from being totally complete right now, in this moment, without having to do anything. Spiritual practice can become an obstacle to realizing the unconditioned. When we realize nondual awareness we realize that it doesn't have anything to do with spiritual practice, past, present or future. As some traditions say, it's acausal.

So the trick is to find a practice that efficiently shows us that there's no thing to get, that it's here, this is it, not as thing, but as a no thing, and so we don't need to be practicing anything. This of course is the intention of things like Zen koan practice. We continue practicing until we realize that we don't have to do what we thought we had to do!

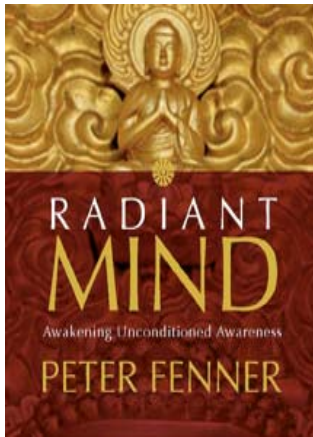
When we're resting in nondual awareness it doesn't matter if we're practicing or not. It doesn't make any difference. The experience can't be enhanced or maintained so there no reason for any practice. But there's no reason not to practice either. It's possible to keep practicing; it's just that we're not getting anything out of it. We don't need to because we're in the ultimate state. Whether we look like we're practicing or not, is just a question of how we've conditioned ourselves.

You speak of the importance of integration of unconditioned awareness into the conditioned body-mind. How can we experience this kind of integration?

Yes, it's important to integrate nondual awareness into the conditioned body-mind, because this is where we live! There not much point in having occasional glimpses of emptiness only to return to a body that we've let go the rack and ruin, or a relationship that become so toxic that we can't stand being in our own home.

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The way to integrate the nondual into our lives is to simply rest in this state when it's possible. It's as simple as that. When opportunities present themselves—at home, at work, on retreat, sharing with friends, meditating, in the bath—we begin to find ourselves slowing down, stopping for a few moments, half an hour, half a day. Perhaps we pick up a book that can bring us to the unconditioned. Or we do our own reflecting: “What’s all this about? What’s the best thing I can be doing right now? Is it different from this, or the same as this? If it’s different, I’ve got a problem. It means I have to do something. Who thinks they have to do something? I do. Who’s that? I don’t know.” We gently work our way back into unconditioned awareness. In the Radiant Mind course we have created many opportunities each week for people to explore the nondual in the midst of their daily activities.

We don't need to think about how to integrate the nondual. It happens automatically. The simple fact that we spend time resting in unconditioned awareness predisposes our mind to return to this experience again and again. It's like a gravitational pull, or a homing instinct. At a deep level, beyond beliefs and even priorities, we recognize the value of this experience. Having tasted it we know that it gives us everything we want. Deep down we know what's good for us, what works, what lets us stop and rest and be complete with what it.

Without thinking about it we begin to restructure our lives in order to open up opportunities to be in our effortless, natural, uncontrived state. At a certain point radiant mind develops its own impulsion and we simply can't stop the process of evolution and awakening. Our desires and preferences no longer get in the way.

In the Mahayana Buddhist perspective the importance of cultivating loving-kindness and compassion for all beings is stressed. However, in the nondual perspective suffering is seen to be an illusion. How can we reconcile these two views and offer compassion with the understanding that what we see is not real?

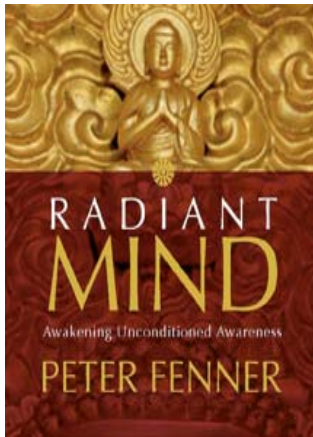
From the Mahayana perspective, suffering is neither real nor unreal. The famous Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna says the same thing. To think that suffering is an illusion is only half the picture. This is a very important point. The Mahayana saint knew exactly what they were saying. They were being very careful and precise with their words because they wanted to be true to the nondual experience and they also wanted to make sure that people didn't misinterpret the state of nondual emptiness.

So yes, from within the state of nondual awareness there's no suffering. That's clear. We just need to look at it. But that's not to say that suffering is an illusion—there's just no suffering. Because, as we see, the Mahayana goes onto say that there is absence of suffering. It would be an illusion if there was suffering and it was unreal. But in samsara there is suffering.

So nondual awareness doesn't tell us that suffering is an illusion. We can't extract that from the experience. If nonduality meant that there was no suffering it would be a conditioned experience. Nondual awareness could only be presented if suffering was unreal. Nondual wisdom says that it's neither real nor unreal. People get confused with this and think that Mahayana says that suffering is

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People get confused with this and think that Mahayana says that suffering is unreal. But, as I said, this is only half of the picture.

The nondual state—the bodhi-mind—contains and transcends samsara and nirvana.

Within the nondual state we don't experience that there's no suffering, because freedom from suffering is a conditioned experience. In nondual awareness, we're not suffering, and we're not not suffering.

So there is nothing in the bodhimind that stops the perception of suffering. Question: The bodhisattva activity is to so that the suffering that they see is unreal. But how does that help the crystallized identity who is suffering? Bodhisattvas don't help in a dualistic fashion. The bodhisattva doesn't see her or himself as helping someone. When people enter into a bodhisattvas field of awareness and influence and begin to interact with the being that we call a bodhisattva their suffering can't be sustained. It dissolves into a space where there is neither suffering nor its absence or at least the suffering is ameliorated. Most people don't get the full nondual realization but the bodhisattvas awareness creates a transformational field or vortex that gently or abruptly irrevocably moves people towards radiant awareness.

Some people resort to a two levels resolution of the Mahayana discovery that suffering is neither real nor unreal. They say that suffering is possible at the conditioned level, and impossible at the unconditioned level. It's real at the relative level and unreal at the ultimate level. This is a dualistic way of understanding the Mahayana. It's an easy way out of the dilemma but it isn't what the Mahayana is saying. The Mahayana is saying that suffering is unreal (if can't be found) and that the absence of suffering is unreal, because it can't be found either. There are no two levels. This is how it is. This is the end of the story. We look using the "clear seeing" of vipashyana and this is what we see.

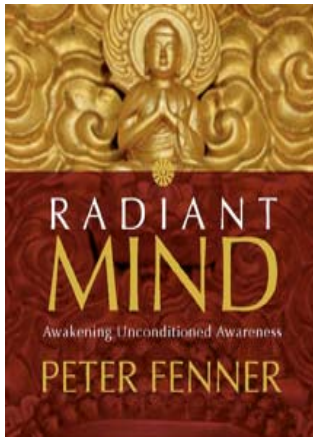
So what does this mean in relationship to how bodhisattvas relate to the suffering of sentient beings?

The bodhisattva (the being who's functioning from bodhimind) totally gets that someone is suffering—they get it in a completely unfiltered and undistorted form, because they see straight through the illusion that there's a state or way of being that's free of suffering. They know that it's impossible to find a state that's free of suffering. *And* at the same time, *and* in the same way, *and* at the same level, they see that there are no samsaras (no states of suffering). They know that nothing can be found—samsara (suffering) and nirvana (its absence) are always unfindable. This is what they bring to the world. The inseparable union of compassion (the absolute knowledge that freedom from suffering doesn't ultimately exist) and wisdom (the knowledge that ultimately there is no suffering). Within the bodhisattvas wisdom eye there is neither suffering nor freedom from suffering.

So how do we get inside this? How do we get inside the mind of the bodhisattva? Actually, we don't have to get inside the mind of the bodhisattva.

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All we have to do is enter radiant mind, and see what's happening. Radiant mind is the mind of the bodhisattva.

Suffering is like a perturbation in the field or expanse of awareness. This perturbation is known and experienced as suffering by a crystallized identity (a person) who has particular needs and preferences. In a sense the bodhisattva bring to this perturbation (someone's suffering) the reflexive awareness that suffering is unfindable, and that freedom from suffering equally cannot be found.

Is the presence of such a perturbation a problem? No. The bodhimind is not free of suffering. No one ever said it was. So there's no problem here. There's no suffering in the bodhimind and no freedom from suffering. So it's completely consistent for the expanse of awareness to crystallize in this way and for people to suffer in the myriad of ways that they do—through illness, fear, madness, death, etc. And at the same time the bodhisattva know that none of this is happening. There's no illness, no fear, no such thing as madness, and no death!

There's no invalidation of suffering. The bodhisattva doesn't think, "Oh! Those poor suffering beings. They are suffering. They don't realize that suffering is an illusion. I have to show them that it all an illusion." That's not how it works.

There's no difference in the bodhi-mind between self and other. There's no inside and outside...

Suffering is real. There's no question about it. When we're hurting and in pain, it's real. We can't say it's not happening. Actually, it isn't happening, but we can't say it's not happening. It is happening. We relate to it as though it is unquestionably happening, and at the same time we know there's no suffering. And it's this knowledge that let's us bring people through to the same awareness. This can sound a little weird but this capacity is the heart-essence of the bodhisattva path.

Compassion validates the reality of suffering. Nondual wisdom sees right through it. The truth is that it is neither real nor unreal. This is why Mahayana emphasizes the importance of realizing the nonduality of wisdom and compassion. One without the other produces a bias in our relationship to suffering—our own and others. If there's too much compassion at the expense of the wisdom of emptiness we get caught up in our own and others' suffering. If there's no compassion, if we think that suffering is an illusion, we disconnect from the predicament that thousands and perhaps innumerable beings find themselves in.

But the truth is that we don't have to worry about integration, or getting the right balance of wisdom and compassion, because in radiant mind nondual wisdom includes the realization and actualization of compassion—the knowledge that there is no real or immutable freedom from suffering.

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