



Chapter 4

Non-Duality as an Experiential Possibility

4.1 Introduction: not a “higher state” but a configuration

Non-duality is often presented as a kind of metaphysical end point, a condition in which reality reveals itself as it “truly” is. In spiritual and popular literature it takes on the contours of a truth: something that must be found, reached, or realised.

In everyday human experience, however, non-duality does not appear as a revealed truth, but as a change in how phenomenal appearing is organised.

The starting point of this chapter is simple: what if non-duality is not an unmasking of reality, but a changed relation between experience and interpretation?

Within that framework, non-duality can be approached as a possible mode of phenomenal appearing, comparable to other configurations such as the conventional dualistic experience, psychotic experiential worlds, religious frameworks, or certain meditative states. These configurations do not differ in “degree of truth” but in their structural and phenomenological characteristics.

In that sense, non-duality is not a way out of the human condition, but a phenomenon within that same condition.

4.2 The standard configuration: distinction, location, direction

I showed that experience is always the result of construction processes that lie largely outside conscious access. Within that system there is one configuration that almost all humans share: the dualistic experiential structure.

This structure contains three characteristic features:

- **Distinction:** Phenomena appear as separate entities: me here, the world there.
- **Location:** There seems to be a “centre” from which experiences are lived.
- **Direction:** Experience is automatically read in terms of cause and effect, past and future, choice and intention.

This structure is functional. It supports action, orientation, anticipation and social interaction.

But it also gives rise to a range of phenomena people often experience as problematic: tension, the anxious search for certainty, existential pressure, and a persistent tendency to interpret experience as pointing to something behind or beneath appearing itself.

4.3 What changes in non-dual experience?

When people speak about non-duality in the strict sense — not as doctrine or belief, but as an event within experience — they usually refer to three shifts:

- The falling away of the centre.
- There is still seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, but it no longer seems to occur “from someone”.

- Functionality continues, but the sense of an inner controller weakens or disappears.
- The falling away of boundaries.
- The distinctions between “this” and “that” remain conceptually usable, but they feel less absolute.
- Experience becomes flatter, more open, less centred around a “self”.
- The falling away of interpretative tension.
- There is less urge to explain, frame or anchor experience.
- The whole feels lighter, simpler, less loaded.

It is important to notice that these shifts are not necessarily spiritual, elevated or mystical.

They are *phenomenological*, not metaphysical. It is not an unveiling of a deeper reality, but a change in how experience organises itself.

| “*Nothing arrives. Nothing departs. Experience is the whole event.*”

Miranda Warren

4.4 Non-duality does not provide better access to reality

Even this immediacy is not outside experience's way of organizing itself; it is not the absence of structure, but a configuration in which certain distinctions temporarily lose their force. The tendency to regard non-duality as “truer”, “purer”, or “more real” arises from the same dynamic discussed in Chapter 1: experience often claims more than it can justify.

In duality, appearing behaves as if it grants direct access to a stable external world. In non-duality, appearing sometimes behaves as if it grants access to a foundation beneath it. Both claims are untenable.

The only honest statement is that experience – dualistic or non-dualistic – appears as it appears.

Non-duality does not reveal any supposed “true nature” of reality; it reveals only something about the variability of human experiential structure.

“Awareness does not illuminate a deeper truth; it only shows that there is no place outside experience to stand.”

Shiv Sengupta

4.5 The pitfall of spiritual mythology

Because non-duality is often presented within spiritual traditions, a cycle of claims arises very quickly:

- that something must be achieved,
- that some people are “awakened”,
- that non-dual experience is superior,
- that the dualistic experience is an illusion from which one must escape.

These claims are psychologically functional: they provide a narrative of progress, purpose and validation, but they have no epistemic foundation.

In reality, the same can be said of non-duality as of any other experiential state:

- it occurs,
- it does not always occur,
- it cannot be forced,
- it has no status above or below other experiences,
- it tells nothing about what “reality really is”.

The only thing that distinguishes non-duality is that the usual structure of a localised subject temporarily disappears.

That can be relieving, but also confusing.

4.6 Experiences of non-duality are not uniform

There are different ways in which experience can feel “non-dual”, and not all of them resemble one another:

- a flat, open presence without a self-centre;

- a sense of transparency of experience;
- periods without internal commentary;
- deep meditative silence;
- spontaneous shifts during crises or exhaustion.

These variants are not uniform, and it is pointless to rank them on a scale from “truer” to “less true” non-duality.

They are configurations with overlapping characteristics, nothing more.

“*This seamlessness is always what’s here, even when thought divides it up.*”

Joan Tollifson

4.7 Headlessness as an experiential configuration

What is known as “headlessness” – originally formulated by **Douglas Harding** and later described with great clarity by **David Lang** – is one of the simplest empirical demonstrations of how experience can shift without anything mystical happening.

It is not a method, not a path, and not a belief system. It is a pointer to a shift in attention: not about what the world is, but how it appears when the habitual self-localisation is briefly not followed.

In the ordinary configuration, the centre of experience is automatically localised “behind the eyes”: an implicit position from which the world is seen. This location is not questioned – it is experienced as self-evident.

Headlessness introduces a simple observation: there is no direct experience of a face or head at the place from which perception seems to originate.

A world appears, but at the “location of the face” nothing appears: no form, no boundary, no object called “me”.

This does not mean that no head exists, but that it does not appear in experience as a centre or as an object.

Experience is asymmetrical: things appear there, but the centre in which they appear remains empty.

In this configuration, the idea of a subject who perceives temporarily falls away, not conceptually, but phenomenologically.

There is only the appearing itself.

This points in the same direction as non-duality, but without metaphysical packaging.

It is not: “there is no one.”

It is: “the place where someone would have to appear, appears empty.”

Headlessness does not show a truth. It shows a possibility.

No access to a deeper reality

Harding and Lang never claimed that headlessness is a higher state. It is not a gateway to insight into being, source, awareness or essence. It shows precisely that such claims are unnecessary.

It is simply a shift in which the automatic self-localisation does not occur, allowing experience to appear open and without directionality.

It is a way in which the non-dual configuration can occur — not evidence that this configuration is more fundamental, purer or truer than others.

4.9 Finally

Non-duality is often presented as an exceptional condition, a kind of breakthrough to a more fundamental reality. In spiritual traditions it appears as insight, awakening, or “the shift”.

In contemporary discourse it sometimes acquires an almost absolute status, as if it were the true form of experiencing, the endpoint of an inner evolution.

But when viewed through the framework developed in the previous chapters, non-duality takes on a different meaning: not as access to a deeper reality, but as one of the possible configurations in which human experience can appear.

In that sense, non-duality is not exceptional but without contour.

It does not describe something “behind” experience, but a way in which experience forms itself: an appearing in which the distinction between subject and object, between “me” and “world”, briefly, or not so briefly, has no function.

Phenomenal appearing does not use the schema that normally provides orientation. What remains is not a mystical domain, but a minimal form of cognition that simply does not draw a separation.

This means that non-duality does not answer the question of what reality really is. It makes no ontological claim and points to no metaphysical truth. It shows at most that appearing can configure itself in this way: without inside and outside, without centre, without observer.

That does not make non-duality more true than other experiential states, but it does make it informative. *It shows that the sense of separation is not a necessary condition for a functioning human experience.*

Non-duality can be seen as a construction in which precisely the distinction that supports constructions temporarily does not occur.

Experience still has content – sound, light, movement, touch – but no inscribed subject relating to that content.

It is a possible stance of the system, not a destination.

When spirituality presents non-duality as the highest attainable condition or as proof of deeper insight, a narrative arises that is hard to sustain. The experience itself contains no information that justifies such a status.

It simply shows a configuration in which the distinction between “me” and “this” does not appear.

That in itself is neither elevated nor rare; it also happens spontaneously in everyday circumstances: during extreme concentration, in sport, in startle responses, in moments of wonder, sometimes even in fatigue or illness.

What spiritual contexts call “the absolute” is, in cognitive terms, better described as a shift in how the system organises itself.

This sober approach aligns with voices who demythologise non-duality – thinkers who emphasise that non-duality adds nothing to reality, makes no truth-claim, and offers no court of validity.

In these developments, non-duality shifts from mystical insight to phenomenological possibility.

Shiv Sengupta points out, for example, that non-duality says nothing about what the world is, but about how experience sometimes shapes itself. It is perspectival: it describes the limits of seeing, not the nature of what is seen.

Robert Saltzman emphasises that non-duality delivers no theory of reality, but at most a more honest way of approaching direct appearing, without metaphysical conclusions.

Joan Tollifson focuses on its everyday character: non-duality need not be different or grander than walking through a room, washing dishes, or breathing – life without the extra story.

Miranda Warren shows that non-duality is not about completion, liberation or “becoming better”, but about dismantling the very idea that experience must go somewhere.

What remains is a sharp and sometimes uncomfortable insight into the limited but workable way in which human experience shapes itself.

All these voices point to the same thing: non-duality is not a knowledge claim. It produces no explanations and gives no access to a foundation of reality. It is a possible appearance-mode of experience, nothing more and nothing less.

Its value lies not in truth but in simplicity: it shows how little is needed for experience, and how secondary the sense of a separate self actually is.

For me that matters because it supports the idea that human realities are multiple and fluid.

Non-duality is one of those realities — not ultimate, but an existing example.

It illustrates that experience does not follow one fixed structure.

The construction of a world can occur with or without a subject; both forms are human, coherent, and limited.

What non-duality ultimately reveals is how much the idea that the “I” is a central controlling principle rests on habit, not on necessity.

When the separation drops out, experience continues to function.

This makes non-duality not a goal, but an indication: human experience is less dependent on the self than is often assumed.

What that means will become the question of the following chapters.

Up to this point, non-duality has been described from a sober, phenomenological angle.

This connects directly with what the next chapter investigates: not what non-duality means within spiritual systems, but how the psychology of “awakening” works – how people interpret such moments, what arises sociologically around them, and why the experience is so easily mythologised.

Where this chapter demythologises non-duality, the next chapter will explore how myth-making keeps reappearing.