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### The Secret of Nonduality

It is the morning of Thanksgiving. The house is silent, everybody fast asleep. Eugene Jhong sits lazily on a couch as the first rays of sunlight beam down from the half-circle window and illuminate his living room. A framed portrait of his family rests in the corner of the room. His one-year-old puppy lies on the carpet next to his feet. Jhong's eyes are closed, gray brows completely relaxed. Not a single muscle is tense in his slender body. If you were sitting in the room at this very moment you would not notice anything particularly remarkable, but he has just had the most profound insight of his life: he has been misguided about his true identity.

A deep inner peace envelops his heart.

The realization Jhong unlocked within himself at this moment is known as nonduality. A retired Silicon Valley programmer, Jhong shifted from the mainstream "logical" philosophy of materialism to this deep spiritual truth. This transformation has reframed his worldview and filled the constant knot of worry and existential suffering that he felt. Nonduality is the recognition that you have been misidentifying yourself with a false identity from thoughts and concepts when in actuality you are the pure awareness that is the background of all experience. Often called the ego-death, understanding the nondual truth rids us of self-centered thoughts and gives us a sense of being pure, spacious and whole. Jhong defines "Materialism" as the mainstream intellectual belief that the universe is made of matter and governed by purposeless

mechanistic laws, using science and rationality as their justification. As a former materialist, Jhong wants to show current materialists who may view spirituality as fantastical that nonduality is, in fact, not inconsistent with logic and science. He pushes for open-mindedness, emphasizing that they need not trust the theory at face value but can discover for themselves whether it is viable.

Now 53 years old, Jhong “grew up in modernity,” surrounded by high-achieving materialists for all of his early life. He describes it as “an intellectual culture of elitism” (Jhong). Jhong learned to live competitively, holding a narrow ideal of success and happiness in his head. “I grew up fully entrenched in the materialist framework promoted by science” (Jhong). Having studied at Harvard and Stanford, he became one of the first Google engineers when fewer than 300 employees were working there.

Jhong was fortunate enough to retire in 2006. By all means he achieved the materialist model of success, but something was still missing. As a high-achieving computer scientist who has “gotten almost everything that [he] set out to do” in the external world, Jhong asserts that this external success did not make him happy (Jhong). Having worked primarily under the expectations of his perfectionist family, he still felt a deep existential dread, eventually realizing he needed to shift his focus from the external to the internal.

If you told Jhong two decades ago that he would search for mysteries embedded within his own consciousness, he would have looked at you like you were crazy. The thoughts of “channeling energy” and “unlocking chakras” would not have garnered his interest. Being a computer scientist, Jhong held the mainstream academic skepticism of spirituality. He now believes the materialist position is often held by its proponents without deep examination just because it is the status quo and thus perceived to be the most "rational" or "scientific" view.

Atheist Richard Dawkins showcases how the intellectual authority of materialism causes close-mindedness. Dawkins holds the belief that since his arguments are based in science, they are undeniably correct, holding an active condescension and hatred of others who have different perspectives. According to an article titled “The Closed Mind of Richard Dawkins,” Dawkins ironically idolizes Charles Darwin, who “understood science as an empirical investigation in which truth is never self-evident and theories are always provisional” (qtd. in Gray). Unlike Dawkins, Jhong believes that an open-minded rational view leaves open the possibility that reality is very far from being well understood.

The resistance to spirituality from science-minded people also stems from their tendency to trust their preconceptions of the world. For instance, a study analyzing climate change researchers reported that “symposia scholars showed a stronger preference for Judging (76%) than for Perceiving (24%), and this pattern was significantly different ( $p < 0.001$ ) from the National Representative Sample, which was 54% Judging and 46% Perceiving” (Weiler). The definitions of the Judging and Perceiving personality types suggests that the former tends to trust preconceptions over observations. Jhong believes that expending effort to examine one's own consciousness is a very rational and logical thing to do, because it hinges on observation—not preconception—and because you only have one consciousness available to you for first-person exploration.

Before he discovered nonduality, Jhong believed that external success was all that mattered in life, an idea instilled in him by his mother and the society around him. His recent midlife crisis was the inciting event for his shift from materialism to spirituality. Jhong approached the non-dual philosophy with genuine curiosity, and in a questioning yet open fashion he explored its exercises. After having multiple glimpses of this truth that kept him

searching, Jhong finally found the non-dual understanding appropriately enough on the Thanksgiving Day of 2019.

Compared to the way he used to live, Jhong is free. Gone are the days of pulling all-nighters working on code; he now enjoys going to bed and waking up early because it makes him feel more alive. He has committed to practicing Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, now able to dispel his mental resistance to the thought of attending grueling sessions. He has stopped drinking with his friends and opted to spend quiet time with his dog working on his other side projects and practicing his golf swing. “All I do is I just flow and do what my body tells me to do. And you know what it does? It does things that are much better than what it used to do before. Before it was full of worry and anxiety and fear. And now it's just like, you know what? I just do whatever I feel like” (Jhong).

Having understood the truth, Jhong lends a helping hand to those who seek it. He does not preach this understanding, but certain friends have approached him during the quarantine for advice out of curiosity. Jhong is always happy to answer questions and recommend his favorite books and resources on nonduality over Zoom calls. He first tells seekers that nonduality “is a flip of the default state of your mind so that most of the time you're in the zone and then sometimes you get into self-absorbed thoughts, but you can stop them very easily.” Although it can be referred to as a state of awareness or ego-death, Jhong always compares the non-dual state to a flow state or being in the zone in athletics: “people pass in and out of this state all the time, and they just don't realize it's something special.” Mario Beauregard, one of the few post-materialist neuroscientists, explains how this state occurs during normal life: “That state of awareness can arise during an experience of beauty, eroticism or silence. Often the experience comes in nature; while contemplating a leaf or the stars. Such states can also emerge during the

artistic process, while writing, probing dreams, painting or enjoying music” (qtd. in Todd). Jhong also presents the nondual state as the opposite of depression in some sense. Although one might think the opposite would be positive self-thinking, Jhong believes it is actually the absence of any self-absorbed thoughts.

Whether they are his high school friends or former coworkers, seekers often have trouble understanding nonduality. This is because the non-dual truth is something impossible to communicate solely through language, since words are themselves limited. The truth cannot be simply intellectualized. Akilesh Ayyar, one of Jhong’s favorite authors, says “There's no real use trying to understand the enlightened state beforehand, except to know that it is pure truth and bliss. It is beyond words and concepts, actually, and best not to weigh yourself down with expectations” (Ayyar 15). Jhong always tells these seekers that although these words cannot convey the truth itself, they can serve as pointers and make one aware of the means to find it.

Jhong strongly recommends two practices to these seekers: Hindu Sage Ramana Maharshi’s self-inquiry and surrender. These practices are not the typical sitting meditative practices, but are meant to be done in the back of one’s mind while going through an average day. Self-inquiry is a practice where you constantly try to find who you are referring to when you think “I” in order to discover the unreality of that “I” thought. Unlike self-inquiry, which is about constant effort, surrender is an exercise in which one ignores all their thoughts to see if they can still function. Both exercises “sound so simple, and they really are, but you just have to try it and you start feeling this peace, a deep peace in your heart. And that's how you know, Wow. Maybe there is something there. They call these glimpses, and if you do them enough, then you may find your brain's default state may flip” (Jhong).

Jhong's wholehearted belief in nonduality has fulfilled his life, and now he seeks to spread awareness. He is workshopping the plans for a documentary to help others realize that this spiritual journey is worth their time and effort. Jhong recommends *Awareness* by Anthony de Mello, Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now, A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, and Akilesh Ayyar's *How to Find What Isn't Lost: A Short, Pro-Intellectual, Pro-Desire Guide to Enlightenment* and *Spiritual Dialogues with Akilesh* to any materialist thinkers looking to seek for this secret. "And so if people could just understand that there is this great secret out there that could make you all view life in a completely, profoundly different way, I think more people would be aware of this" (Jhong).

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