As indicated by its subtitle, *The Empathic Ground* brings together intersubjectivity theory and the experience of nondual consciousness in the context of psychotherapy, reflecting on the inherent relationships between lived experience, spirituality, and therapeutic effectiveness. In so doing, this book makes an important and original contribution to contemporary psychotherapy theory. Considering the strengths and limitations of both contemporary psychoanalytic intersubjectivity theory and Asian approaches to nondual consciousness, Blackstone elucidates how they can complement each other to increase the healing power of psychotherapeutic process. Specifically, she focuses on how an integrated approach can both enhance the interpersonal dimension of psychotherapy and ground it in a deeply embodied experience of self.

The intersubjective approach to psychotherapy provides a deeply mutual relational context in which experience is held as subjectively constructed. Rather than assuming an expert position, the therapist relates as a partner in a dyad to empathically explore the client’s experience. Within this context, it is possible for clients to become aware of rigidly organized internal structures of self and other and relinquish entrenched, self-limiting ways of relating. However, in its assumption that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, is socially constructed, the possibility of an ontologically independent self is denied. If there is no self that is not a representation, then the experience of self is always an abstraction and there is no possibility of a direct apprehension of self, per se. From Blackstone’s perspective, this unnecessarily and inaccurately limits clients’ potential development.

Asian nondual philosophies, on the other hand, hold that human beings have the innate potential to access an unconstructed domain of pure consciousness. At this level, self is experienced as beyond all representation. According to Blackstone, “nondual consciousness is an extremely subtle perception that perceives itself as luminous, pervasive space at the same time as it perceives objects” (p. 51). This state involves a direct and immediate experience of self, without the interposition of mental constructs between oneself and one’s experience, within and without. Therefore, without losing the experience of one’s own subjectivity, self and other are experiences as a unity. In fact, it is through one’s subjectivity that one enters into the nondual state. From Blackstone’s perspective, this is at variance with some interpretations of Asian nondual philosophy that negate or suppress the personal self. She suggests that “this view disregards a central and crucial paradox of nondual realization: we realize our own individual self as we transcend our individual self” (p. 54).
Blackstone proposes that by maintaining the nondual state in the therapeutic relationship, the relational factors that precipitate psychological healing and development are enhanced. The therapist’s awareness, perception, and capacity for empathy, are heightened. Further, in this state there is the potential for both parties to experience nondual field and are “meeting in the same unified dimension of consciousness” (p. 39).

It is this very experience of nondual consciousness that enables clients to relinquish rigidified organizations of self that intersubjectivity theory describes. To the extent that these patterns are the result of traumatic memories, nondual realization enables the client to move to a level of being from which they can be released. However, this requires, not a superficial transcendence that dismisses personal experience, but rather a deep encounter with one’s embodied subjective self. Blackstone states, “My main argument with...both intersubjectivity theory and Asian nondual philosophies is with the failure of both these disciplines to recognize the somatic component of invariant organizations of experience” (p. 69).

By synthesizing the clinical insights of intersubjectivity theory with the transcendent wisdom of nondual philosophy, Blackstone has offered a model of clinical practice that can significantly increase therapeutic effectiveness. In the final chapter, she offers ten exercises that can be practiced and incorporated into the psychotherapeutic process, that enable clients to embody nondual realization, release patterns of constriction, and enter into deep energetic attunement with others.

The Author

Judith Blackstone, Ph.D., developed Realization Process, a method of realizing and embodying nondual consciousness. She combines Realization Process with psychotherapy in private practice in New York City and Woodstock, NY. She teaches workshops and teacher trainings throughout the United States and Europe. She is author of The Empathic Ground; The Enlightenment Process; The Subtle Self; and Living Intimately. For more information, visit www.judithblackstone.com.

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