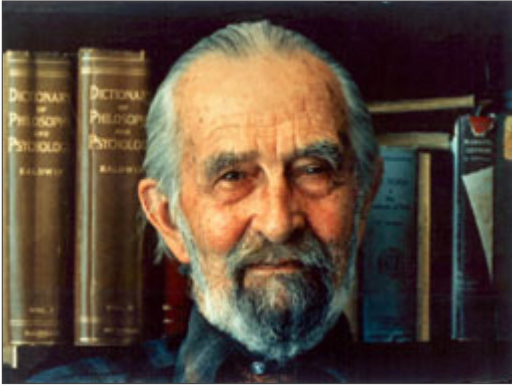


# The Nondual Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff

by Thomas McFarlane

*I recommend the most honorable kind of life that you can live: In all human relationships to cultivate the attitude that the end is the triumph of good; not my good, but good as such.*  
-Franklin Merrell-Wolff, 1983



Franklin F. Wolff was an American mystic, philosopher, and mathematician who combined an extraordinary intellect with profound mystical insight and authenticity. Born in 1887 in Pasadena, California, he was raised in San Fernando as the son of a Methodist minister. Wolff graduated from Stanford University in 1911 with a major in mathematics and minors in philosophy and psychology. He then went on to Harvard graduate school to study philosophy, where he was particularly influenced by the study of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. As a result of his philosophical studies, Wolff "became convinced of the probable existence of a transcendent mode of consciousness that could not be comprehended within the limits of our ordinary forms of knowledge." Prior to completing his degree at Harvard, he

returned to Stanford to teach mathematics. When it became clear to him that he must "reach beyond anything contained within the academic circles of the West" to Realize Transcendental Consciousness, he left his promising career in academia to engage in a spiritual quest. When he married Sarah Merrell, they joined their surnames to symbolize their partnership in a shared spiritual work.

Wolff's twenty years of seeking included deep engagements within the theosophical, Sufi, and Hindu traditions. In the later part of his quest, Wolff was drawn to the philosophical works of the Indian sage Shankara, who founded the Advaita Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy. It was while in deep contemplation of the teachings of Shankara that, in 1936, Wolff's efforts culminated in two Transcendental Realizations which provided the foundation for his philosophy. While the first Realization confirmed the perspective of Shankara's philosophy, the second Realization was unexpected and opened Wolff's philosophical view beyond his understanding of Advaita Vedanta. His books *Pathways Through To Space* and *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without An Object* provide a detailed record of Wolff's realizations and a lucid philosophical description of Transcendental Consciousness. Wolff's long life was spent writing, lecturing, teaching, and working the land. He spent his retirement years at the foothills of the eastern Sierra Nevada near Lone Pine, California and died there in 1985 at the age of 98.

## Franklin Merrell-Wolff's Realizations

Wolff grounds his philosophy in his Realizations, and not in mere rational speculation. In his written report of his mystical unfoldment, Wolff identifies three premonitory recognitions and two fundamental, or transcendental, Recognitions.

### First Premonitory Recognition: "I am Atman"

Wolff's first premonitory recognition took place in 1922, approximately 14 years prior to his transcendental breakthroughs. Wolff describes this first recognition as a noetic insight into the truth of "I am Atman". The term "Atman" is a Sanskrit term that Wolff uses to refer to the transcendental subject to consciousness. Just prior to this insight, Wolff had been engaged in the practice of discrimination of subject (Atman) and object (world). This practice of discrimination is fundamental to the teachings of Shankara, the founder of the Advaita Vedanta school of nondual philosophy. The purpose of this practice is to effect a disidentification and detachment from the objects of consciousness, and a realization of identity with pure subjectivity. Although Wolff previously had been intellectually convinced of the truth of the proposition "I am Atman", this time he suddenly realized its truth at a deeper level than the intellect. Although this was only a veiled Realization, it nevertheless brought a sense of Light and Joy, and had persistent positive effects, such as a certain change in the base of thought, bringing clarity where there had previously been obscurity.

## Second Premonitory Recognition: "I am Nirvana"

The second premonitory recognition took place in late 1935, approximately 9 months prior to the first fundamental breakthrough. Wolff describes this recognition as the realization that "I am Nirvana". Prior to this noetic insight, his thought upon the subject of Nirvana had been involved in the confusion that Nirvana is a kind of other-world separate from the relative world of subject-object consciousness. While meditating upon Nirvana, however, it suddenly dawned on him that "I am Nirvana", where "I" is understood here to mean the inner core of subjectivity. Like the Atman, Nirvana is never an object before consciousness. It is therefore identical with the subject to consciousness, or the true "I". As with the first premonitory recognition, this insight was accompanied by a sense of Joy and Illumination within the relative consciousness, and had persistent effects. In addition, there was a sense of a Current with profound depth.

## Third Premonitory Recognition: "Substantiality is inversely proportional to ponderability"

The third premonitory recognition took place in late July, 1936, about two weeks prior to the fundamental breakthrough. Prior to this insight, Wolff experienced certain logical difficulties reconciling Transcendent Being with the physical universe. These difficulties arise from the habit of regarding objects of consciousness, i.e., any appearance in consciousness that we can ponder or experience, as in some sense substantial. Although Wolff had a prior intellectual conviction that the Transcendent Being was more substantial, the intellectual idea alone had failed to have a powerful transformative effect on his consciousness. This third premonitory recognition, however, had a profound effect on his consciousness that served to clear the way for the fundamental breakthrough that would follow in a matter of days. Wolff expressed the insight with the following proposition: "Substantiality is inversely proportional to ponderability", or "Reality is inversely proportional to appearance". In other words, the degree of true substance or reality is the inverse or opposite of the degree of ponderability. Thus, concrete objects of experience, which have a high degree of ponderability, are the least substantial. Subtle or abstract objects of experience, on the other hand, which are less ponderable, partake of a higher degree of substantiality and reality. The effect of this insight upon Wolff was an acceptance of substantial reality where the senses reported emptiness, and a greater capacity to realize unreality, or merely dependent or derivative reality, in the material given through the senses. This insight brought about a more profound shift of identification with the transcendent supersensible reality, and a correspondingly profound detachment from the objects of consciousness. This shift was decisive in clearing the way for the fundamental realizations that were to follow.

## First Fundamental Recognition: Realization of Self, Liberation

The first of Wolff's two fundamental Realizations took place on August 6, 1936. In contrast with the prior insights, which retained objective elements in his own consciousness and thus fell short of genuine identification, the fundamental Realizations unequivocally transcended the subject-object or relative consciousness. Just prior to the first Realization, Wolff had been meditating upon the teachings of Shankara, particularly the discussion of Liberation. Upon meditative reflection, he realized that his efforts to attain Liberation involved a seeking after a subtle object of experience. But any new object of experience, no matter how subtle, was something other than the objectless transcendent consciousness. Thus, Liberation does not necessarily involve any new object of experience or change in the content of consciousness. To seek such a new object or experience, therefore, is a mistake. Genuine Realization, therefore, is a recognition of Nothing — but a Nothing that is absolutely Substantial and identical with the SELF. The result of this profound realization was the complete and instant cessation of expectation of having any new experience or relative form of knowledge arise. The light of consciousness then turned back upon itself, toward its source, and the pure Atman was realized as absolute fullness and as identical with himself. This Recognition was not an experience of any new content in consciousness, but a Re-Cognition of a Truth that is, was, and always will be. It is a nondual knowledge of identity that transcends space and time. Nevertheless, there were various effects experienced within the relative consciousness, that may be considered expressions of the Recognition. Because the Recognition is not the recognition of any particular effects or phenomena, they should not be confused with the Recognition itself. Some of the effects Wolff experienced were: (1) A shift in the base of reference in consciousness, transplanting the roots of identity from the relative to the transcendent, (2) a transformation of the meaning of self from a point-like principle opposed to objects of experience to a space-like identity with the entire field of consciousness and all its contents, (3) a sense of penetrating knowledge into the depths of reality, (4) a transcendence of space, time, and causality, (5) complete freedom and liberation from all bondage. Also experienced were qualities of joy, felicity, serenity, peace, and benevolence.

## Second Fundamental Recognition: High Indifference, Equilibrium

Although Wolff's first fundamental Realization was an unequivocal transcendence of the subject-object consciousness, for a period of approximately 33 days there remained certain unresolved tensions preventing it from being a full state of equilibrium. This tension consisted in the contrast in valuation between the superlative Joy, Peace, Rest, Freedom and Knowledge of the Transcendent and the emptiness of the relative world. There was a distinction between being bound to embodied consciousness and not being so bound, with a subtle attachment to being not bound. Counter-acting this subtle attachment, however, was Wolff's prior acceptance of the bodhisattva vow, a commitment to the value of relative manifestation and embodiment, motivated by compassion for all sentient beings. With this motivation, Wolff resisted his strong inclination to retreat into the transcendent bliss of nirvanic consciousness. Instead, he sacrificed his strictly personal enjoyment of those transcendent values in order to maintain a relative embodiment and help liberate all sentient beings. This act of compassion and ultimate renunciation led to an unexpected second fundamental Recognition that resolved the residual tensions between the universe and nirvana. This Realization represented a complete Equilibrium, not only a relative equilibrium between objects, but also an ultimate Equilibrium between relative and absolute levels of consciousness. Because this realization does not give any more valuation to nirvana than to the universe, and recognizes no ultimate difference between the two, Wolff called it the High Indifference. It is the complete resolution of tension between all opposites, the complete transcendence of all distinctions, including the distinction between the transcendent and the relative. At this profoundly deep level of Recognition, all self-identity, both in the highest sense of the transcendental Self and the lower sense of the ego self, was no more. In Wolff's words, "I was no more and God was no more, but only the ETERNAL which sustains all Gods and Selves."

## The Three Fundamentals of the Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff

Based on his fundamental Realizations, Wolff developed a transcendental philosophy which he distilled into three fundamental propositions. Wolff emphasizes that these propositions, like his philosophy as a whole, are conceptual symbols of an ineffable Reality. Moreover, Wolff acknowledges that the Realizations upon which his philosophy is based are not necessarily ultimate, and are authoritative only for Wolff and anyone who has had similar Realizations. Nevertheless, the philosophy has value for others who aspire to such Realization. The three fundamentals of his philosophy are as follows.

### 1. Consciousness is original, self-existent, and constitutive of all things.

Wolff's term "Consciousness" here does not mean consciousness as opposed to unconsciousness. Nor does Wolff use the word "Consciousness" here as a consciousness involving any particular structure or mode of experience, such as the structure of intentionality, or the mode of our typical experience based on the distinction between subject and object. Rather, the meaning of the term "Consciousness" here is THAT which is the primordial ground and essential nature of all modes and forms of experience, both subjective and objective. In Wolff's words,

*The One, nonderivative Reality, is THAT which I have symbolized by 'Consciousness-without-an-object.' This is Root Consciousness, per se, to be distinguished from consciousness as content or as state, on the one hand, and from consciousness as an attribute of a Self or Atman, in any sense whatsoever. It is Consciousness of which nothing can be predicated in the privative sense save abstract Being. Upon It all else depends, while It remains self-existent.*

Thus, Consciousness is primary, i.e., it is first, prior to everything. Not before or first in the sense of time or temporal sequence, but prior in the sense of not being secondary to or derivative from anything else. Hence, Consciousness is self-existent, i.e., it does not depend upon anything else for its being and is entirely self-sufficient and complete. In particular, Consciousness does not depend upon, and is not derivative from, matter, energy, or any other substance. On the contrary, all experience and all objects are derivative from Consciousness. Thus Consciousness is constitutive of all things, i.e., all things are, in their ultimate nature, nothing but this Primordial Consciousness itself.

## 2. The Subject to Consciousness transcends the object of Consciousness.

To understand this philosophical proposition, we need to first clarify Wolff's use of the terms subject and object. Our experience is normally conditioned or structured by the distinction between a subject to consciousness and objects of consciousness. The subject to consciousness is that which is aware of objects or appearances in consciousness. Objects of consciousness are distinct states or appearances in consciousness, ranging from the most concrete to the most subtle. A concrete object in consciousness might be a visual perception of a chair or a sensation of pain in our foot. More subtle objects are appearances in consciousness such as a thought or memory, an intuition about something, or a state of consciousness such as an experience of the world that is permeated by a subtle sense of bliss. It is important to note that the term "object" as used here by Wolff includes our thoughts, feelings, and other inner experiences. Such inner phenomena are still objects in consciousness just as much as outer phenomena are.

In contrast to objects in consciousness, the subject to consciousness is the principle or aspect of consciousness by which there is awareness of objects. Because an object cannot be reasonably said to be in consciousness if it is not an object of awareness, the existence of any object in consciousness necessarily implies a subject to consciousness. At the basis of our relative experience, therefore, is a distinction between subject and object. The second fundamental of the philosophy states that the subject transcends the object, i.e., that the subjective principle or aspect of consciousness is more fundamental to consciousness than the objective appearances in consciousness. This philosophical proposition derives from the insight that, on the one hand, the objective appearances of consciousness vanish in the transcendent nirvanic state of consciousness, while, on the other hand, the subjective principle of consciousness, i.e., the capacity of awareness, is common to both relative and transcendent levels of consciousness. The subjective principle is therefore transcendental, while the objective principle is not.

## 3. There are three, not two, organs of knowledge: perception, conception, and introception.

The third fundamental of Wolff's philosophy is an affirmation of a third way of knowing, or a third organ of knowledge. Secular philosophy in the west admits only two modes of knowledge: perception and conception. Perception includes all sensory knowledge we derive from seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting. Conception includes all knowledge we derive from thought, memory, imagination, and the like. If we admit only these two forms of knowledge, then our knowledge of reality is forever limited to our hypothetical, conceptual speculations about what reality might be "behind" our perceptual appearances. If we are limited to conception and perception alone, any certain, categorical knowledge of reality and truth is not possible, and there is no rational way to understand the possibility of mystical realization or transcendental consciousness. The third fundamental, however, affirms the existence of a third way of knowing, which Wolff calls "introception". The introceptive capacity is normally latent or partially latent, but can be activated partially or fully, through intentional effort, spontaneously or both. When activated, introception provides immediate, categorical knowledge that transcends the subject-object distinction, i.e., it is not a relational knowledge of something by something else, but a knowledge through identity in which there is only knowledge itself that includes and transcends both knower and known. The third fundamental, in short, affirms that, in addition to the capacity of perception and conception, there is also a capacity for transcendental knowledge.

## Franklin Merrell-Wolff's Aphorisms

In addition to using more traditional forms of philosophic expression, Wolff also expressed his Realization in the form of poetry and aphorisms. Regarding his Aphorisms, Wolff writes:

*There are two lines of approach to, and employment of, the aphorisms. They may be regarded as seeds to be taken into the meditative state, in which case they will tend to arouse the essentially inexpressible Meaning and Realization which they symbolize. This we may call their mystical value. On the other hand, they may be regarded as primary indefinables upon which a systematic philosophy of the universe and its negation, Nirvana, may be developed. In this case, they may be viewed as a base of reference from which all thought and experience may be evaluated.*

In the following aphorisms, Wolff uses the terms "Consciousness-without-an-object" to refer to "the Sole Reality upon which all objects and all selves depend and derive their existence" (aphorism 54).

## APHORISMS ON CONSCIOUSNESS-WITHOUT-AN-OBJECT

(Excerpted from *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without An Object* by Franklin Merrell-Wolff, and reproduced here with the permission of Doroethy Leonard.)

- Consciousness-without-an-object is.
- Before objects were,  
Consciousness-without-an-object is.
- Though objects seem to exist,  
Consciousness-without-an-object is.
- When objects vanish,  
yet remaining through all unaffected,  
Consciousness-without-an-object is.
- Outside of Consciousness-without-an-object  
nothing is.
- Within the bosom of Consciousness-without-an-object  
lies the power of awareness  
that projects objects.
- When objects are projected,  
the power of awareness as subject is presupposed,  
yet Consciousness-without-an-object remains unchanged.
- When consciousness of objects is born,  
then, likewise, consciousness of absence of objects arises.
- Consciousness of objects  
is the Universe.
- Consciousness of absence of objects  
is Nirvana.
- Within Consciousness-without-an-object  
lie both the Universe and Nirvana,  
yet to Consciousness-without-an-object  
these two are the same.
- Within Consciousness-without-an-object  
lies the seed of Time.
- When awareness cognizes Time  
then knowledge of Timelessness is born.
- To be aware of Time  
is to be aware of the Universe,  
and to be aware of the Universe  
is to be aware of Time.

- To realize Timelessness  
is to attain Nirvana.
- But for Consciousness-without-an-object  
there is no difference  
between Time and Timelessness.
- Within Consciousness-without-an-object  
lies the seed of the world-containing Space.
- When awareness cognizes the world-containing Space  
then knowledge of the Spatial Void is born.
- To be aware of the world-containing Space  
is to be aware of the Universe of Objects.
- To realize the Spatial Void  
is to awaken to Nirvanic Consciousness.
- But for Consciousness-without-an-object  
there is no difference  
between the world-containing Space and the Spatial Void.
- Within Consciousness-without-an-object  
lies the Seed of Law.
- When consciousness of objects is born  
the Law is invoked  
as a Force tending ever toward Equilibrium.
- All objects exist as tensions  
within Consciousness-without-an-object  
that tend ever to flow  
into their own complements or others.
- The ultimate effect of the flow  
of all objects into their complements  
is mutual cancellation  
in complete Equilibrium.
- Consciousness of the field of tensions  
is the Universe.
- Consciousness of Equilibrium  
is Nirvana.
- But for Consciousness-without-an-object  
there is neither tension nor Equilibrium.
- The state of tensions  
is the state of ever-becoming.
- Ever-becoming is endless-dying.

- So the state of consciousness of objects is a state of ever-renewing promises that pass into death at the moment of fulfillment.
- Thus when consciousness is attached to objects the agony of birth and death never ceases.
- In the state of Equilibrium where birth cancels death the deathless Bliss of Nirvana is realized.
- But Consciousness-without-an-object is neither agony nor bliss.
- Out of the Great Void, which is Consciousness-without-an-object, the Universe is creatively projected.
- The Universe as experienced is the created negation that ever resists.
- The creative act is bliss, the resistance, unending pain.
- Endless resistance is the Universe of experience, the agony of crucifixion.
- Ceaseless creativeness is Nirvana, the Bliss beyond human conceiving.
- But for Consciousness-without-an-object there is neither creativeness nor resistance.
- Ever-becoming and ever-ceasing-to-be are endless action.
- When ever-becoming cancels the ever-ceasing-to-be then Rest is realized.
- Ceaseless action is the Universe.
- Unending Rest is Nirvana.
- But Consciousness-without-an-object is neither Action nor Rest.
- When consciousness is attached to objects it is restricted through the forms imposed by the world-containing Space, by Time, and by Law.

- When consciousness is disengaged from objects,  
Liberation from the forms  
of the world-containing Space, of Time, and of Law  
is attained.
- Attachment to objects  
is consciousness bound within the Universe.
- Liberation from such attachment  
is the State of unlimited Nirvanic Freedom.
- But Consciousness-without-an-object  
is neither bondage nor freedom.
- Consciousness-without-an-object  
may be symbolized by a SPACE  
that is unaffected by the presence or absence of objects,  
for which there is neither Time nor Timelessness,  
neither a world-containing Space nor a Spatial Void,  
neither Tension nor Equilibrium,  
neither Resistance nor Creativeness,  
neither Agony nor Bliss,  
neither Action nor Rest,  
and neither Restriction nor Freedom.
- As the GREAT SPACE is not to be identified with the Universe,  
so neither is It to be identified with any Self.
- The GREAT SPACE is not God,  
but the comprehender of all Gods,  
as well as of all lesser creatures.
- The GREAT SPACE,  
or Consciousness-without-an-object,  
is the Sole Reality  
upon which all objects and all selves  
depend and derive their existence.
- The GREAT SPACE comprehends  
both the Path of the Universe  
and the Path of Nirvana.
- Beside the GREAT SPACE  
there is none other.

•OM TAT SAT•



# Poetry by Franklin Merrell-Wolff

Although Wolff gave expression to his Realization primarily in philosophical form, he also wrote some beautiful poetry. Two of his shorter poems, *Compassion* and *The Nameless*, give a taste of this side of Wolff. These are both excerpted from *Pathways Through to Space* by Franklin Merrell-Wolff, and reproduced here with the permission of Doroethy Leonard.

## Compassion

O Compassion! More than the other loves of men, less than the High Indifference;  
Calmly standing by and waiting; years, centuries, millennia;  
Taking to Thyself the suffering of all; transforming toward Joy;  
With Light restraining Darkness; with good, evil;  
Refusing release while others are bound; melting differences;  
Accepting impurity, giving purity;  
Bound by no law, yet acquiescing in bondage;  
Available for all as the light of the sun, yet forced on no man against his will;  
Needing nought for Thyself, though giving to all in need;  
The Base of all hope for this humanity so low;  
Pure Radiance Divine.  
Sweet art Thou, unutterably sweet; melting within me all hardness;  
Stirring inclusion of the low as the high; the evil as the good; the weak as the strong;  
the unclean as the pure; the violent as the considerate; none left out;  
Awaking new understanding and patience beyond Time;  
Arousing forgetfulness of the petty in the grand sweep of the noble;  
Equalizing regard, yet exalting true worth;  
Reaching beyond all contradiction.  
To Thee I sing, glorious Spirit; grandest God mankind can know.

## The Nameless

Above, below, to right, to left, all-encompassing,  
Before and after and all between,  
Within and without, at once everywhere,  
Transforming and stable, ceaselessly;  
Uncaused, while fathering all causes,  
The Reason behind all reasoning,  
Needing nought, yet ever supplying,  
The One and Only, sustaining all variety,  
The Source of all qualities, possessing no attributes,  
Ever continuous, appearing discrete,  
Inexpressible, the base of all expression,  
Without number, making possible all number,  
Containing the lover and the beloved as one,  
Doing nought, remaining the Field of all action—  
The actor and the action not different—  
Indifferent in utter completion;  
Diffused through all space, yet in the Point concentrated,  
Beyond time, containing all time,  
Without bounds, making bounds possible,  
Knowing no change;  
Inconceivable, yet through It all conceiving becoming;  
Nameless ever and unmastered;  
THAT am I, and so art Thou.