



Nondualism as a Research Paradigm for Mindfulness Research and Beyond

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Abstract

Many qualitative methods textbooks instruct researchers to begin by declaring their paradigm position from a standard typology, such as positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, critical, and poststructural paradigms, and to ensure methodological coherence with that position. This typology is often perceived to be a comprehensive framework for locating research positions. We argue that it is not. We examine what is at stake methodologically when a researcher's starting commitments are nondual, that is, when the subject-object distinction that structures every position on the standard typology is itself treated as a derived rather than fundamental feature of reality. Researchers whose work is shaped by such commitments may be more common than the explicit literature suggests, particularly in mindfulness, contemplative science, and consciousness research, where Buddhist philosophical commitments implicitly underlie much of the work without being made methodologically explicit. We situate our argument by noting parallel attempts to articulate paradigm positions from non-Western philosophical traditions, and by introducing the Kyoto School's articulation of nondualism through the work of Nishida Kitarō. We then present a recent framework called “unitlessness” that renders nondualism's methodological consequences accessible to contemporary researchers. We close by drawing out the implications of adopting nondualism as the starting commitment. First-person and third-person methods are located at the same structural level rather than ranked on a hierarchy of fundamentality. Reflexivity is deflated rather than made constitutive: positionality statements are themselves discourse-level acts, and they cannot close a researcher–researched gap that is itself a discourse-level structuring. Research methods are left unchanged; what changes is how findings are worded and what they are taken to show. Nondualism enters paradigm debate on the same terms as any other position; it requires no contemplative practice of the researcher and claims no privileged access to truth.

Keywords Research paradigms · Nondualism · Unitlessness · Positionality · Qualitative research · Quantitative research

Many, though not all, qualitative methods textbooks present a familiar opening: Research design begins with paradigm declaration (e.g. Creswell & Poth, 2024; Denzin et al., 2023). Before formulating research questions, before selecting methods, before collecting data, the researcher is advised to declare their ontological and epistemological commitments, that is, what they take reality to be like and how they think it can be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The available options are typically given as a list: positivist, postpositivist,

constructivist, critical, and poststructural paradigms, sometimes with pragmatism or participatory paradigms added. We acknowledge at the outset that textbooks and training traditions differ a great deal in how much weight they place on declaring a paradigm. Our argument concerns the influential strand of the methods literature in which such declaration is treated as foundational, and not qualitative methods teaching in its entirety. In this paper, we accept the methodological seriousness of paradigm declaration as a starting point, but we ask a different question. Some researchers' underlying commitments are *nondual*. They hold, on philosophical grounds or contemplative grounds or both, that the subject/object distinction structuring the standard typology is itself a derived rather than fundamental feature of reality. How might these nondual commitments be articulated as a paradigm position? What methodological commitments follow from adopting such a position?

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We are not arguing that researchers should adopt nondualism. We are asking what follows methodologically for those who do. This may be more common than the explicit literature suggests: Substantial portions of contemporary mindfulness, contemplative science, and consciousness research may operate with background commitments derived from Buddhist or other nondual traditions, while the methodological framing of these studies typically defaults to a positivist or postpositivist paradigm whose assumptions are foreign to those traditions (Krägeloh, 2019; Van Gordon et al., 2015). The historical shaping of the modern mindfulness movement by Buddhist modernism is well documented (McMahan, 2008; Sharf, 2015). How common such implicit commitments are among individual researchers has not, as far as we know, been studied systematically. We therefore offer this premise as a plausible assumption that remains open to empirical test, rather than as an established fact. Making the underlying commitments explicit and asking what methodology follows from them is overdue.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first revisit the paradigm question itself, drawing on recent work showing that the standard typology is one paradigm conception among several. We note that attempts to articulate paradigm positions from non-Western philosophical traditions have been made, and that Buddhist ideas warrant particular attention given their role in the mindfulness literature. We then turn to nondualism, distinguishing it from related positions, considering how it has been articulated in several philosophical traditions, and presenting a structural formulation suitable for methodological discussion. We close by drawing out the methodological consequences of taking nondualism as a paradigm starting point.

Paradigms Reconsidered: The Limits of Standard Typology

The standard typology presented in qualitative methods textbooks distinguishes paradigm positions along a familiar axis. *Positivism* holds that reality exists independently of observers, that systematic methods can reveal it, and that findings are generalisable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). *Postpositivism* concedes that the researcher cannot be fully separated from what is researched and that findings are contextual rather than generalisable, but retains the assumption that there is a reality to be approximated (Lincoln et al., 2018). *Constructivism* holds that reality is constructed through human experience, individually invented and socially negotiated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). *Critical* paradigms hold that reality is structured by power and that research is properly emancipatory (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2018). *Poststructural* positions hold that reality is plural and fluid, and that the categories used to describe it must themselves be

interrogated (Baker, 2022; Foucault, 1982). Some treatments add a participatory or cooperative paradigm (Lincoln et al., 2018) emphasising co-inquiry and democratised research relationships.

The differences between these positions are taken seriously in the methods literature and shape disagreements about how research should be conducted. However, all of them are organised around a shared dimension, namely the relation between subject and object. They differ on whether the subject can access an independent object (positivism), whether the subject's access is mediated and partial (postpositivism), whether the subject constructs the object (constructivism), whether the relation is structured by power (critical), or whether the categories of subject and object are themselves unstable (poststructural). The dimension on which they differ, namely how the subject/object relation is configured, is shared.

An important distinction concerns the poststructural position. Foucault's work, in particular, does not hold the subject/object relation constant. It shows that our relations to self and world are fluid, and that the subject itself, and therefore the relation between subject and object, has a history that can be told (Foucault, 1970, 1982). We accept this characterisation, and it is why the poststructural position sits at the far end of the shared dimension rather than outside it. Foucault showed that the relationship between the knower and the known has changed shape over the course of history, but his analysis still keeps that relationship at centre stage. What changes over time is how subjects, objects, and their relations are constituted. Foucault historicises these terms rather than treating them as fixed, but his analysis does not thereby make the further nondual claim that the subject-object distinction itself is experientially generated and ultimately non-fundamental. The nondual position makes a different kind of claim altogether. The very division into a knower "in here" and a known "out there" is something that experience produces, and this claim holds no matter how that division has varied across history.

However, this commitment is not neutral, and it has implications for the kinds of positions that can be expressed within the framework. Chafe (2024) has recently made this point with force, showing that what is presented in qualitative methods literature as *the* paradigm question is in fact one particular paradigm *conception* among several, namely the researcher-defined paradigm model originating with Guba and Lincoln (1994; see also Chafe, 2023). Kuhn's (1970) discipline paradigms, Burrell and Morgan's (1979) positional paradigms for sociological theory, and the Guba-Lincoln researcher-defined paradigms perform different functions, address different questions, and rest on different assumptions about inquiry. Chafe (2024) identified several features along which these conceptions differ: their rationale, definition, who or what has a paradigm, how paradigms

arise, the scope of their ontological claims, their relation to research projects, the range of available positions, the types of tenets they include, and the extent to which paradigms are expected to be explicitly articulated.

The Guba-Lincoln conception has specific features that are not shared by alternative accounts of paradigms. Paradigm positions are held by individual researchers (not by communities of inquirers, as in Kuhn, 1970). They are worldviews requiring declaration at the start of every project (not background assumptions inferable from a theorist's work, as in Burrell & Morgan, 1979). They are based on "basic beliefs" that "must be accepted simply on faith" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). Additionally, the available positions are characterised through ontology, epistemology, and methodology, that is, through assumptions about reality, the knower's relation to it, and the means by which it may be studied. Consequently, the framework remains organised around the subject/object relation.

The methodological point we take from Chafe (2024) is this: *The standard paradigm typology is not exhaustive of the options*. Researchers who find that none of the standard positions captures their commitments are not failing to be methodologically rigorous. They are recognising that the typology itself is a contingent construction, and that other paradigm conceptions are available.

Pragmatic and Sociological Dissolutions of the Positional Problem

The positional problem we have described has not gone untouched within the Western tradition, and it would misrepresent the landscape to present it as open until nondualism intervenes. Ian Hacking addressed much of it in a practical way, in several strands of his work. First, he shifted attention from how science represents the world to what researchers actually do in the laboratory, so that the long argument about whether theories picture reality correctly matters less than whether an experimental practice can reliably produce a stable effect (Hacking, 1983). Second, he described styles of reasoning: distinct historical ways of posing questions and settling them. A style helps constitute both what can count as an object of inquiry and the standards by which claims about it can count as objective, so that judgements of good and bad work remain binding inside a style without anyone needing to occupy a view from nowhere (Hacking, 2002). Third, he analysed what he called interactive kinds and looping effects. When people are sorted into categories, they respond to being categorised, and the categories then have to be revised. A psychiatric diagnosis is a familiar example: The label changes how people understand and describe themselves, which changes the very pattern the label was meant to capture. This gives a naturalistic account of how classifications and the people classified shape one another,

and it complicates a simple subject-object dualism without collapsing into idealism or relativism (Hacking, 1999). Gieryn's (1983, 1999) studies of boundary-work supply the empirical sociology of the same terrain. He showed that the authority of "science", the placement of the objective-subjective divide, and the fortunes of competing research approaches are contingent social accomplishments, negotiated in discourse and in institutional practice.

We therefore do not claim that nondualism is needed to dissolve the positional problem as a whole. Much of it has already been dissolved from within. What is left over, and what a nondual paradigm position specifically addresses, is a remainder that these accounts deliberately leave alone. Hacking sets questions about the ultimate nature of reality aside rather than answering them; indeed, his earlier entity realism remains a form of realism (Hacking, 1983), and his styles of reasoning are ways of talking and working. Boundary-work by Gieryn (1999) operates entirely at the level of discourse and social practice. Neither author asks about experience as it is, before it is put into words, and neither makes a claim about whether the split between subject and object is a basic feature of reality or a derived one. That remainder, at once metaphysical and first-personal, is exactly where the framework we present below operates.

Non-Western Paradigm Proposals

If the standard paradigm typology reflects one particular way of organising inquiry rather than a neutral and universal framework, what might alternatives look like? Several scholars have articulated paradigm positions drawn from non-Western philosophical traditions, and these positions have generated actual research programmes rather than remaining at the level of philosophical critique.

The Indian psychology movement, which traces its institutional origins to scholars such as Sinha (1986), and has been developed further since (Kumar, 2011) represents one such programme. Across this literature, a distinction is drawn between *Indigenisation* (adapting Western frameworks to local contexts), *Indigenous psychology* (developing context-specific theories), and *Indian psychology* as a distinct tradition with implications beyond India's borders. The third of these positions, which Rao (2005) has articulated as a classical Hindu psychology model, treats consciousness as ontologically distinct from mind and brain.

Within the broader programme of Indian psychology, Bhawuk (2010) argued from Upaniṣadic and Vedāntic traditions that epistemology and ontology ultimately converge rather than remain sharply separable. According to this view, knowledge consists not in apprehending independent entities as separate objects, but in realising that Brahman permeates both self and world. Although Bhawuk (2010) argued

strongly from a Vedāntic conception of reality grounded in Brahman and Ātman, he simultaneously maintained that Indian psychology should remain pluralistic and capable of accommodating multiple ontologies rather than subordinating inquiry to a single logical-positivist framework. Consistent with this position, Bhawuk argued that empirical inquiry should not be reduced to the assumptions of logical positivism or restricted to conventional Western experimental methodology but should remain open to more than one account of what exists. We note, however, that paradigm proposals grounded in Upaniṣadic thought rest on religious commitments, namely the reality of Brahman and Ātman, which are accepted on the authority of scripture rather than on empirical grounds. These proposals are important early examples of research being opened to more than one worldview, but they are not the route taken in this paper. The paradigm proposed here for scientific research does not require researchers to accept, as its starting point, the claims of a particular religion about what exists.

A parallel argument has been made from East Asian philosophical traditions. Hwang (2023) explicitly invoked Kuhn's (1970) account of scientific revolutions to argue that mainstream psychology operates as a "WEIRD" paradigm (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010), and that the importation of this paradigm into non-Western research settings produces what he called an "episteme of self-colonization": Researchers adopt frameworks whose underlying assumptions about persons, relationships, and morality do not apply outside the cultures in which they originated. Hwang's diagnosis is at paradigm-level rather than methods-level. The problem is not that questionnaires or experiments are inappropriate techniques; it is that constructs such as individualism, principled moral reasoning, or autonomous selfhood presuppose an ontological picture of the person that is foreign to the Confucian relational ontology in which Chinese participants have been socialised. In response, Hwang articulated an "epistemological strategy" for constructing culture-inclusive theories grounded in philosophical commitments that the WEIRD paradigm cannot generate; in his case, those commitments come from classical Confucian sources.

Buddhism, Mindfulness Research, and the Question of Implicit Commitments

Mindfulness research has expanded rapidly over the past four decades, from the development of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in the early 1980s (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) through the proliferation of second-generation interventions (Van Gordon et al., 2015) and a vast empirical literature on contemplative practices and their effects (Goldberg

et al., 2022; Krägeloh et al., 2019). Much of this literature operates with techniques, terminology, and underlying constructs drawn directly from Buddhist contemplative traditions, particularly Mahāyāna and Theravāda lineages.

The relationship between present-day mindfulness constructs and their Buddhist sources is itself disputed (Sharf, 2015), and Buddhist meditative traditions differ in how they understand mindfulness. Dunne (2011) drew a distinction between two kinds of account. "Classical" accounts, rooted in Abhidharma scholasticism, treat mindfulness as working inside a dualistic and constructivist model of the mind, in which a subject observes objects and builds up a picture of them. Nondual accounts, such as those of the Mahāmudrā tradition, treat awareness as coming before the split between subject and object. This variety within Buddhism matters for our argument. It means that the paradigm question facing mindfulness research cannot be settled by appealing to "Buddhist philosophy" in the abstract, and it is why we specify a particular lineage below.

The paradigm question is, however, rarely engaged in this body of work. Quantitative mindfulness research, including questionnaires, randomised controlled trials, neuroimaging, and statistical inference, typically proceeds without explicit paradigm declaration of any kind. Some of the qualitative work in the field does engage paradigm questions, and interpretivist, constructivist, and phenomenological positions are commonly declared in qualitative studies of mindfulness-based programmes (e.g. Frank & Marken, 2022; Malpass et al., 2012). Even there, however, no readily identifiable paradigm position is currently available for researchers to reflect any Buddhist philosophical commitments such as those that might be implicit in the practices being studied. The result is that the paradigm question has either been left unaddressed or been answered using a typology that does not contain an option suited to the underlying commitments of the field.

This matters because Buddhist philosophical traditions, particularly the Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra schools (Nagao, 1991) and their later development through Chan/Zen and into the modern Kyoto School (Heisig, 2001), contain sophisticated positions on the nature of subject and object, the limits of language, and the structure of experience. These are philosophical resources, not merely spiritual ones, and they bear directly on what kind of paradigm position is available to researchers whose work is shaped by them. The question of what paradigm position is implied by this inheritance is therefore not abstract. It bears on how researchers articulate what their research is doing, what they take their findings to show, and how they locate themselves in relation to the practices and constructs they study. This raises the question of nondualism, to which we now turn.

Nondualism: Definition and Distinction

Nondualism is the position that the subject-object distinction is not a fundamental feature of reality but a derived, pragmatic structuring within experience (Krägeloh & Berryman, 2026). We can clarify this by distinguishing it from several positions with which it is easily confused.

A qualification is needed straight away. There is no generic nondualism to appeal to, and no single “Buddhist nondualism” either. Loy (1983) outlined several distinct senses in which traditions have spoken of nonduality, and the Buddhist traditions themselves disagree about the sense in which the duality of subject and object is overcome. The accounts given in the Pāli discourses, in Madhyamaka and Yogācāra scholasticism, and in Chan/Zen are not interchangeable. Much of the history of Buddhist philosophy consists of arguments about exactly these differences (Dunne, 2011; Kopf, 2004; Sharf, 2015). Using “nondualism” as an umbrella term, with no further marking, would therefore risk importing the Westernised and secularised nondualism that is common in popular discourse today. That version matches no particular tradition.

For this reason, we state our genealogy openly. The position developed in this paper comes from one specific lineage. It begins with Madhyamaka analysis, in which Nāgārjuna argued that all phenomena, including subject and object, lack intrinsic, self-standing existence (Garfield, 1995; Westerhoff, 2009). It continues through Yogācāra and Chan/Zen (Nagao, 1991). It is then set out systematically in modern philosophy by the Kyoto School, above all in the work of Nishida (Heisig, 2001; Kopf, 2004). The unitlessness framework introduced below is what makes that work usable for methodology (Krägeloh, 2025). Wherever “nondualism” appears below without further qualification, this lineage-specific sense is what we mean. We make no claim about nondual traditions in general.

What we take from this lineage is deliberately minimal: The structural claim that the subject-object distinction is derived rather than fundamental. This criterion does not say that Nāgārjuna, Kūkai, Dōgen, and Nishida all “say the same thing” about the division between subject and object. They clearly do not. Instead, it highlights the one feature of the lineage that matters for the paradigm question, and it leaves the substantive differences between traditions to the specialist literature. The criterion should therefore be judged by how useful it is for research, not by how it represents the complete teaching of any one tradition.

One potential confusion is with monism. Monism is the claim that reality is fundamentally one: one substance, one stuff, one underlying thing. But monism and dualism (the claim that reality is fundamentally two: mind and matter) are answering the same question: How many fundamental

kinds of things are there? Nondualism does not answer this question with a different number. It rejects the framing of the question. The question presupposes that reality is composed of kinds of things whose number can be counted, and it is this presupposition that nondualism declines.

A related confusion is with idealism, the view that reality is fundamentally mental and that the apparent material world is a manifestation or projection of mind, or with eliminative materialism, which holds that what we call mental phenomena are really physical processes and that the mental vocabulary will ultimately be replaced. Both of these positions still operate within the mind-matter framing; they simply collapse one pole into the other. A nondual position does not collapse the poles. It treats the two-pole structure as a derived feature of how experience is organised, not as a basic feature of reality.

Finally, nondualism, as we use the term, is distinct from mysticism in the sense often associated with reports of unitive or transcendent experience. Mysticism in this sense typically asserts that the subject-object distinction dissolves in a special state of awareness that is taken to reveal a deeper unity behind ordinary experience. The position we are articulating makes no such claim. It does not require special states, does not assert a hidden unity, and does not treat ordinary experience as illusory. What it claims is structural: The organisation of experience into a subject confronting an object is one way experience is structured, not the way reality fundamentally is.

Several philosophical traditions have argued for nondual positions on independent grounds. Madhyamaka Buddhism, beginning with Nāgārjuna, argued that no phenomenon has intrinsic, self-standing existence; all phenomena arise interdependently, and the apparent independence of subject and object is a conceptual imposition rather than a feature of what is (Garfield, 1995; Nagao, 1991; Westerhoff, 2009). The Daoist tradition developed nondual themes through different conceptual resources (Loy, 1983). Advaita Vedānta developed a nondual position substantively different from the Buddhist ones (Vaishnav, 2025), and the differences between these positions are philosophically important. We deliberately do not draw on Advaita Vedānta here. Its nonduality rests on the positive claim that Brahman is real. That commitment is both metaphysical and theological, and it is held on the authority of a particular scriptural tradition. The research paradigm proposed here is meant for a scientific context where the researcher does take a commitment of that kind for granted. Madhyamaka-derived analysis works the other way round. It proceeds by negation and asserts nothing of its own. It is a method of analysis that withholds positive claims about what ultimately exists (Westerhoff, 2009), and it is “an-ontological” in Krummel’s (2018) sense. That is why it fits with empirical science, which likewise asks for no article of faith.

The most rigorously argued modern articulation of non-dualism in the philosophical literature came through Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), founder of what is now called the Kyoto School. Nishida's *Inquiry into the Good* (1911/1990) developed the concept of “pure experience” (*junsui keiken*), a pre-reflective mode of awareness in which subject and object have not yet been distinguished. His later work, particularly the logic of *basho* (place or topos) and the concept of *absolute nothingness* (*zettai mu*), provides a sustained philosophical articulation of nondualism continuing his engagement with the work of Kant, Hegel, James, and Husserl rather than in opposition to them (Kopf, 2004). For Nishida, the subject-object distinction is a derived structuring within a more fundamental field; “absolute nothingness” is not an absence or void but the groundless ground from which both being and non-being arise (Krummel, 2015).

Nishida's philosophy gives nondualism a philosophical articulation that does not depend on scriptural authority and does not require theological commitment. It is, however, demanding. The full system requires substantial engagement with both Western and Japanese philosophical traditions, and despite its influence in continental philosophy, has not penetrated psychology widely. For our purposes, which are to articulate a paradigm position for research methodology, a structural articulation is required that is more accessible to contemporary research audiences.

Unitlessness: A Structural Articulation

Krägeloh (2025) recently introduced a framework called *unitlessness* as a way of communicating nondualism to contemporary psychology researchers without requiring full engagement with the Kyoto School corpus or other relevant material. The framework distinguishes three structurally related levels, which are useful for the methodological argument we develop below. We emphasise that unitlessness is a very recent proposal, put forward within one specific research programme (Krägeloh, 2025; Krägeloh & Berryman, 2026). The present paper builds on that proposal and extends it, rather than reporting an established framework. The comparisons with neighbouring philosophical and sociological work in the preceding sections are meant to widen the base on which it stands.

The first level is *units*. This is the level of language, categorisation, and description. When experience is articulated, it is parsed into discrete elements: words, concepts, distinctions, and categories. Standard research methods operate at this level: Quantitative measurement produces numerical units; qualitative coding produces thematic units; theoretical models specify conceptual units and their relations. Nothing in the unitlessness framework rejects this level. It is the level at which all conversation and thus also research takes place.

The second level is *unity*. This is the level of pre-discursive experience, what Nishida (1911/1990) called pure experience. When descriptive units exhaust themselves, what remains is experience that cannot be further analysed into constituent parts. It is not subjective in the sense that contrasts with objective, because the subject-object distinction has not yet been drawn (as this would be a description and thus in terms of “units”). It is “unity” not in the sense of a unified substance, but in the sense of being not-yet-divided. First-person methods, phenomenological inquiry, and contemplative practices point toward this level. Cognate Buddhist articulations of this pre-discursive immediacy include the Tibetan notion of *rigpa*, or pristine, non-conceptual awareness, which Choden (2025) described as recognising awareness directly rather than through the mediation of thought.

The third level is *unitlessness*. This is the enveloping ground from which both units and unity arise. It is not describable (because description requires units) and not experienceable as a thing (because experience-of-a-thing requires the subject-object structure that has not yet arisen). It is, in the phrase Krummel (2018) applied to Kyoto School thought, “an-ontological”, which is not a denial of ontology but a refusal to make positive metaphysical claims about ultimate reality. It corresponds structurally to Nishida's absolute nothingness: not absence, not void, but the groundless ground from which both the units level and the unity level are derivative (Krummel, 2015, 2018).

The three levels are connected by bidirectional movement. From the units level, one can move toward unity by exhausting descriptive resources. When no further unit of description can be added, what remains is the immediacy of experience. From unity, one can recognise that unified experience is itself a structuring, and that its ground (unitlessness) cannot itself be experienced as a thing. In the other direction, unitlessness gives rise to unity, which gives rise to units, though this movement cannot be observed and reported on, because any observation or report about it occurs only at the units level.

The framework is trans-discursive rather than non-discursive (Krägeloh, 2025). It does not reject language; it locates language at one level among others. This is methodologically important. A nondual paradigm does not require the abandonment of standard research methods, only the recognition that those methods operate at a particular level with particular scope.

Paradigm or Meta-paradigm?

A question of level should be answered explicitly. Is nondualism, as we have described it, one more paradigm position alongside positivism, constructivism, and the rest? Or is it a claim about all of them, made from a level above?

The answer is that it does both jobs, and the two should not be run together. As a structural analysis, unitlessness works at the higher level. It places the standard positions, and the subject-object axis along which they differ, at the units level. In that sense, it no more competes with them than a map competes with the ground it depicts. As a practical matter of describing one's own research, however, nondualism works as a paradigm position that can be declared: an option a researcher can state, defend, and be held to in the same settings where paradigm declarations are already made. The position on the list is how the higher-level stance is expressed at the units level. Throughout this paper, we use "nondualism" for the declarable position and "unitlessness" for the structural framework behind it. When we place nondualism alongside the other paradigms, we mean that only in the practical sense.

Terminological Clarification: Nondualism, Nondual Awareness, and Awareness of Nonduality

Before drawing out the methodological consequences of nondualism and the unitlessness framework, it is worth distinguishing three terms that are easily conflated in contemporary literature. The confusion is not merely terminological. It bears directly on what is being claimed methodologically, and on what kind of evidence would or would not be relevant to evaluating the claim.

Nondual awareness refers to a specific state of consciousness characterised by the dissolution of subject-object structure during experience. Josipovic and Miskovic (2020) defined it as "a type of awareness, a basic non-conceptual, non-propositional awareness, without subject-object dualistic structure" (p. 4). Nondual awareness in this sense has been studied empirically through neuroimaging in experienced meditators, with research identifying distinctive patterns of brain activity, particularly in the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic attention networks (Josipovic, 2014). Related experiential states have also been studied in the psychedelics literature (Millière et al., 2018). Crucially, nondual awareness in this sense is a state: temporary, capable of being cultivated through specific practices or pharmacological interventions, and dependent on particular conditions to arise and to be sustained. It is a phenomenon that can be studied; it is not the framework within which the studying takes place.

Awareness of nonduality, or nondual awareness as a trait, refers to a sustained recognition that is not confined to specific meditative or altered states (Krägeloh, 2025). In Chan and related East Asian Buddhist traditions, this is described as discerning the underlying nature of mind in the background while engaging fully with the conventional flow of daily activity (Zhu, 2005). Where nondual awareness is a state that arises and passes, awareness of nonduality is a

stable orientation that informs how ordinary experience is engaged with. The Zen formulation attributed to Qingyuan Weixin, in which one first sees mountains as mountains, then not as mountains, then as mountains again (Li, 2015), captures this. The conventional and the ultimate are not alternatives but co-present, and mature contemplative practice returns the practitioner to conventional reality with the recognition of its emptiness intact rather than dissolved. This is closer to what we mean by nondualism as a paradigm position, but it is still being described at the level of practitioners and their experience.

The term *nondualism* is used here in the philosophical sense developed elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Krägeloh & Berryman, 2026), referring not to a state or trait of practitioners but to a *philosophical position* concerning the status of the subject-object distinction. It is the position that the subject-object distinction is not a fundamental feature of reality but a derived structuring within experience. One can hold this position on philosophical grounds, through engagement with Madhyamaka analysis, Kyoto School philosophy, or related arguments, without ever having entered a nondual awareness state. Conversely, one can have repeated experiences of nondual awareness without drawing the philosophical conclusion that the subject-object distinction is non-fundamental; many practitioners treat such states as remarkable experiences that occur within an otherwise dualist worldview. The state and the philosophical position are connected but distinct.

This distinction matters for our argument in three ways. First, the methodological argument we develop does not require researchers to be meditators, to have had nondual experiences, or to engage in contemplative practice. It requires them to take the philosophical position seriously as a starting commitment. The argument is structural, not experiential.

Second, the unitlessness framework operates at the level of philosophical structure, not at the level of states. The three levels of units, unity, and unitlessness are not three states one passes through in meditation. They are structural levels of analysis. Unity, the second level, corresponds conceptually to what Nishida (1911/1990) called pure experience and to what Tibetan Buddhist traditions term *rigpa* (Choden, 2025). It is structurally related to what nondual awareness research investigates as a state, but the framework is not making claims about meditation. It is making claims about how language, experience, and their ground are structurally related.

Third, conflating these terms produces predictable methodological mistakes. If "nondualism" is read as "nondual awareness", then the methodological argument appears to depend on the empirical study of meditators, and disagreement about the neuroscience of meditation becomes disagreement about the framework. If "nondualism" is read as

“the experiential trait of advanced practitioners”, then the framework appears to be advocacy for contemplative training as methodological qualification, which it is not. Keeping the terms separate allows the philosophical argument to be evaluated on its own terms.

We note that nondual awareness as a state, and awareness of nonduality as a sustained orientation, are themselves legitimate objects of study within the units level of the unitlessness framework. Empirical research on meditation, on the neuroscience of self, and on contemplative training is not undermined by our argument; it is located. What our argument concerns is the paradigm position from which such research is conducted, not the validity of the research itself.

The Methodological Argument

We now draw out what changes when nondualism is the starting commitment for research. Each of the following is a methodological consequence, not a metaphysical claim.

Subjective and Objective Are Co-arising, Not Opposed Poles

In the standard typology, first-person methods are positioned as “subjective” and contrasted with “objective” third-person methods, with the latter typically treated as primary and the former as supplementary, suspect, or in need of methodological hedging. This positioning depends on treating subject and object as poles on a methodological axis. From a unitlessness starting point, they are not poles. They emerge together as aspects of how experience gets organised. First-person methods produce data about how experience may be structured from within the experiential field; third-person methods produce data about how experience may be structured from a particular methodological perspective. Neither is more fundamental. The hierarchy that treats objective methods as primary is a methodological choice with specific scope conditions, not a reflection of the underlying epistemic structure. This does not mean that first-person methods should be elevated in status, that they have been unjustly marginalised, or that they should be methodologically central rather than peripheral. Such claims invert the standard hierarchy rather than dissolve it, and the inversion still treats first-person and third-person methods as competing for ontological priority. A unitlessness framing does not adjudicate that competition; it dissolves the question that generates it.

What follows methodologically is more modest and more pragmatic. Different methods produce different kinds of units, suited to different questions. Quantitative research generally aggregates and compares numbers. Qualitative analysis produces words and themes, and these too are

compared across cases in order to find regularities and typical patterns. The difference between them is therefore not that one deals in “regularities” and the other in “experience”. Both look for patterns. The difference lies in the kind of units each one produces, and in the questions those units are best placed to answer. Neuroimaging is suited to questions about correlates in neural activity. Contemplative inquiry is suited to questions about how experience is structured from within engagement with it. None of these methods is more fundamental than the others, because the subject-object axis on which “fundamental” would be measured is itself a units-level structuring. Methods are evaluated on what they produce relative to what is asked, not on their position on a metaphysical hierarchy.

This has implications for how approaches are understood that explicitly attempt to bridge first-person and third-person inquiry. Neurophenomenology (Varela, 1996) and micro-phenomenology (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2017) aim to integrate experiential reports with neural or behavioural measurement, treating the experiential side as data that can be brought into correlation with the third-person side. From within a unitlessness framing, this project carries a specific risk. In producing reports that can be temporally indexed, categorised, and correlated, experience is necessarily parsed into units. The resulting data are not experience as such but the units-level description of experience, structured by the demands of the measurement procedure. There is nothing methodologically wrong with this, since units-level description of experience is a legitimate object of study, but the methodological honesty required by the framework is to recognise what has happened. Neurophenomenology does not access pure experience and correlate it with neural activity (Krägeloh, 2019). It correlates one units-level description (verbal report parsed into experiential categories) with another units-level description (neural activity parsed into measurement intervals). When the framework is forgotten, these methods can drift into reifying experience as a countable, locatable phenomenon, which is the move the framework explicitly warns against (Krägeloh, 2025). Proponents of these methods would rightly reply that reaching pure experience is not their stated aim. Varela (1996) framed neurophenomenology as a pragmatic programme in which experiential and neural accounts constrain one another, and Bitbol and Petitmengin (2017) are explicit that micro-phenomenological description is a disciplined accomplishment with its own conditions rather than a transparent window onto experience. We accept this reply, and our caution should be read accordingly. It concerns not these methods’ self-understanding but the interpretive drift that can occur when their findings circulate, that is, when a correlation between reports and recordings comes to be received as access to experience itself.

The framework that we are proposing therefore does not endorse first-person methods over third-person ones, nor does it endorse hybrid methods that promise to bridge them. It locates all of them at the units level and asks researchers to be clear about what their methods can and cannot reach. What cannot be reached at the units level is unity itself, the immediacy of experience prior to its parsing into describable units. The framework's contribution here is not to provide a method that reaches it, but to make explicit why no method does.

A Worked Example: Reinterpreting the Neuroimaging of the “Self”

The difference a nondual paradigm makes can be shown with a concrete case. A well-replicated finding is that experienced meditators show reduced activation and altered connectivity in major nodes of the default mode network, a network associated with self-referential processing and mind-wandering (Brewer et al., 2011). A related finding is that self-related neural processing can be selectively attenuated or reorganised while awareness is maintained (Dor-Ziderman et al., 2013; Josipovic, 2014).

Framed postpositivistically, such a study measures the brain correlates of a thing called “the self” or “self-processing”. That *thing* is assumed to exist independently of the measurement, and what participants say about their experience is treated as an imperfect window onto it. The conclusion is then worded as a closer approximation to a fact that holds regardless of any observer: Meditation training reduces self-referential processing, and the neural basis of the self has been pinned down more precisely. Through such framing, the “self” would enter the study as an object whose signature the method gradually reveals.

Framed nondually, the same data support a conclusion stated with different scope. The study has correlated two descriptions, both of which belong to the units level. One is neural activity parsed into regions, networks, and measurement intervals. The other is experience parsed into report categories such as “self-related” and “selfless”. Neither description is a window onto the other, and neither reaches pre-discursive experience itself. What the study shows is that the sense of being a bounded self, the “me” that seems to be doing the observing, can fade while awareness itself continues. In other words, the observer side of experience behaves like something the mind builds and maintains, not like a fixed starting point. Read this way, the finding is not just a curiosity about meditators. It is a concrete, measurable illustration of the paradigm's central point. It is worth being clear about what changes between the two framings and what does not. The data, the statistics, and the imaging procedures are exactly the same. What changes is what the

study is understood to show, how its conclusions are worded (no claim is made to have measured “the self” itself), and which new questions it opens up. One such question is how the split between observer and observed is built and kept in place from moment to moment, rather than only which brain measures track it.

Recent micro-phenomenological work shows what sustained empirical research on that further question looks like. In micro-phenomenology, a participant is guided through a slow, step-by-step recall of one brief moment of experience. Petitmengin (2026) reported that this act of becoming aware itself “subtilizes”, or thins out, the habitual separation between subject pole and object pole. She proposed that this dual structure is not simply given. It is created and sustained from moment to moment by ordinarily unnoticed micro-tensions, a position she develops as a “dynamic ontology”. From within a working empirical research programme, this converges with the structural claim made here: The subject-object distinction is derived and actively maintained, not fundamental. Our earlier caution about neurophenomenology is therefore not a criticism of such programmes. It is a specification of their scope. Micro-phenomenological descriptions remain units-level descriptions, and the analysis by Petitmengin (2026) of how the act of becoming aware transforms the experience being described makes this point from within the method itself.

Methodological Honesty in Practice

We define “methodological honesty” as saying openly, when research is reported, at what level the study's methods operate and what those methods cannot reach. In practice, this comes down to three reporting habits. First, results are worded as claims about descriptions of experience rather than about experience as such. We thus encourage wording such as “neural activity correlated with reported moments of selflessness” rather than “the neural signature of selfless experience”, and “participants' accounts of mindfulness were characterised by...” rather than “participants' experience was...”. Second, when methodological limitations are discussed, researchers are encouraged to state that measures, codes, and reports are units-level constructions, and that no method reaches experience before it is put into words. A single sentence suffices, for example: “Our measures capture structured descriptions of experience; no inference is made about experience prior to its articulation”. Third, researchers refrain from presenting constructs such as “the self”, “awareness”, or “mindfulness” as countable entities sitting in the data. None of this requires new journal infrastructure. It requires only that the standard parts of a peer-reviewed article, are used to state the scope of the method consistent with a nondual position.

Reflexivity, Paradigm Competition, and the Limits of Discursive Method

A nondual paradigm position has methodological consequences that are easily overstated. We want to be careful here, because two predictable misreadings would undermine the argument.

The first misreading would treat reflexivity as doing methodological work that, within the framework we are proposing, it cannot do. In postpositivism, researcher bias is something to be acknowledged and managed. In constructivism, the researcher's worldview shapes what counts as data, and the response is to be explicit about that worldview. It would be tempting to say that a nondual framing makes reflexivity *constitutive* rather than *corrective*. The thought would be that because the researcher is not antecedently separable from what is researched, reflexivity becomes essential to method rather than an add-on.

We resist this move. Reflexivity, as actually practised in qualitative research, is itself a units-level activity. It consists of verbal declarations such as positionality statements, acknowledgements of standpoint, and articulations of the researcher's situatedness. These declarations operate at the same level as the rest of the research write-up. They do not escape the units level by gesturing at the researcher's location within the inquiry; they add more units. Treating reflexivity as constitutive of method in a nondual framing risks producing exactly the empty convention that already characterises much positionality work, namely a paragraph that satisfies a methodological requirement without doing methodological work.

The nondual framing does not require the researcher to declare anything special, to occupy any particular state, or to engage in any particular practice. Unity, or *rigpa* in the Tibetan articulation (Choden, 2025), is pre-discursive experience. It is a natural arising, not a methodological achievement. It is the ordinary structure of experience prior to its parsing into descriptive units. A researcher does not need to be a meditator, does not need to have had nondual experiences, and does not need to make declarations about their standpoint for the framework to inform their work. The framework operates at the level of what is being assumed about reality and method, not at the level of what the researcher does in the moment of research.

The second misreading would treat nondualism as a paradigm position that claims superior access to truth, or as one that escapes the social processes through which paradigms compete for adherents. We resist this move as well. The evaluation of research, the recognition of paradigms, and the social and institutional processes through which some approaches flourish and others fade are all units-level phenomena. A nondual position does not stand outside this competition. It enters it on the same terms as any other paradigm

position: It succeeds or fails by whether it generates productive research, whether it dissolves methodological awkwardness, whether researchers find it useful, whether it competes successfully for attention in academic discourse. There is no view from nowhere from which the framework's superiority could be demonstrated, and no contemplative achievement that would settle the question.

What this means practically is that a researcher operating from a nondual starting point can conduct any kind of study: quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, contemplative inquiry, neuroimaging, or ethnography. What changes is not the method but the meta-question of what the research is doing. The framework's contribution is not a new way of doing reflexivity but a clarification of what reflexivity can and cannot accomplish. Reflexive declarations operate at the units level and have units-level consequences; they do not bridge the gap between the researcher and what is researched, because that gap is itself a units-level structuring. Researchers can continue to make reflexive declarations where these are methodologically useful, but the declarations carry no special weight in a nondual framing.

Practitioner Awareness and the Bigger Picture

Before closing the methodological argument, we offer a brief note about how researchers might relate to it personally. The framework operates at the level of paradigm assumptions, not at the level of what researchers do in the moment of inquiry, and we have been careful throughout to disclaim any requirement that researchers be meditators, have nondual experiences, or hold particular states of awareness.

Nonetheless, the framework invites a particular kind of attention from researchers who adopt it: awareness of their own process within the inquiry, and of the larger field in which that inquiry takes place. The neuroscientist studying the default mode network is doing so within a brain that has a default mode network. The ecologist studying interdependence is herself a node in an ecological web. The researcher articulating a nondual paradigm position is themselves a researcher within the institutional and discursive field that the paradigm describes. These observations are not paradoxes to be resolved but features of inquiry to be acknowledged.

We make no claim that contemplative practice equips researchers to do better science, or that those with experiential familiarity with nondual states have privileged access to the framework's implications. Such claims would reintroduce the hierarchy the framework has been at pains to dissolve. Whether and how contemplative training cultivates virtues that bear on scientific practice is itself an empirical question, one that has begun to be examined directly: Berryman et al. (2025) proposed that mindfulness-based ethical development may support scientific integrity through

cultivation of conscience, regard for consequence, and equanimity. Our argument is logically independent of the answer to that empirical question. What we suggest is more modest: that adopting nondualism as a paradigm position naturally encourages researchers to attend to the bigger picture of what their inquiry is doing, including their own location within it. This attention is not a methodological technique. It is an orientation, available to any researcher, that follows from taking the framework seriously.

Whether and how researchers cultivate this attention is their own affair. Mindfulness practice is one route. Sustained engagement with the philosophical literature on nondualism is another. Simply working with the framework over time, and noticing how it inflects one's reading of methodological choices, is a third. The framework does not prescribe a path. It articulates a paradigm position, and leaves the question of how researchers live with that position to them.

Boundaries and Clarifications

We close the methodological argument by being explicit about what the framework does and does not license, and by addressing the most predictable misreadings not already mentioned above.

The framework does not provide new research techniques. Methods at the units level, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed, are unchanged by the adoption of nondualism as a paradigm position. What changes is the meta-question of how method relates to reality, not the methods themselves. A researcher operating from a nondual starting point uses the same statistical tests, coding procedures, and interview techniques as anyone else.

The framework does not license sloppy inquiry. Rigour, replicability, transparency, and accountability remain constitutive of good research. The framework reframes the metaphysical claim of objectivity-as-view-from-nowhere but does not abandon the methodological practices that underwrite intersubjective reliability. Objectivity, in this view, is a methodological achievement, something won through careful practice, including attention to assumptions and constructions one might otherwise leave unexamined. This is consistent with how careful scientists have always operated. What changes is the philosophical account of what their care is achieving.

The framework does not adjudicate disputes within the units level. Quantitative versus qualitative, positivist versus constructivist, realist versus anti-realist debates remain meaningful at their own level. The framework does not settle them; it locates them. Researchers continue to disagree on units-level questions, and these disagreements are not resolved by appeal to nondualism.

This is not relativism. Adopting a nondual paradigm position is not the claim that anything goes, that all accounts are

equally adequate, or that there is no basis for distinguishing better from worse research. The criteria by which research is evaluated, namely empirical adequacy, internal consistency, explanatory scope, predictive success, and methodological transparency, remain in force at the units level (the level of scientific discourse), where evaluation takes place. What changes is not the standards of evaluation but the metaphysical assumption about the relationship between knower and known that earlier paradigms placed beneath those standards.

This is not idealism. A nondual position does not claim that reality is “all in the mind” or that the material world is a projection of consciousness. The denial of subject-object dualism is not the assertion that only the subject exists. Nondualism is not the collapse of two poles into one; it is the recognition that the two-pole structure was a derived organisation of experience rather than a basic feature of reality. Reality, in this view, is neither purely mental nor purely material; the question itself is being declined. Crucially, declining the question does not dissolve the conventional world: Emptiness does not entail that things lose their conventional structure and function. Anālayo (2024) made this point directly: The recognition that phenomena lack inherent existence does not license ignoring their practical reality. Even a seasoned practitioner cannot walk through walls, and the structural insight into emptiness coexists with continued engagement in the conventional world.

Practical Implications for Mindfulness Research, Health, and Society

It is reasonable to ask what difference any of this makes outside methodological discourse, such as for health research, for population outcomes, and for the lay reader. Mindfulness-based programmes are now delivered at scale in health systems, schools, workplaces, and digital platforms, and the research supporting this delivery is vast but uneven (Goldberg et al., 2022). One well-documented consequence of that unevenness is overclaiming. Different constructs are run together, questionnaire scores are treated as direct measures of mindfulness or of experience, and findings reach the public with more confidence than the methods can support (Van Dam et al., 2018). Part of this problem sits at the level of paradigm rather than technique. When a questionnaire score or a neural signature is quietly taken to be the thing itself, rather than one units-level description of it, hype is the predictable result. The paradigm position set out here supplies a principled corrective, because it provides the grounds for the methodological honesty described above. Honest statements of scope in intervention research lead directly to more accurate public communication about what mindfulness programmes do, for whom, and within what limits. For a field whose findings inform clinical guidelines and

public spending, this is a practical contribution rather than an abstract philosophical concern.

The framework also changes how evidence may be interpreted in health research. Because first-person and third-person methods are located at the same structural level, qualitative accounts of practice can enter the evidence base as data of equal standing *in principle* with trial outcomes, rather than merely as supplementary illustration. Such accounts include reports of difficulties and adverse experiences that questionnaires are poorly positioned to detect. A participant may describe feeling anxious or detached after a period of practice in terms that no item on a standard scale was written to capture. This matters for patient safety and for intervention design, where the phenomenology of practice has clinical consequences. Making the field's implicit philosophical commitments explicit also supports cultural and intellectual fidelity. Interventions derived from Buddhist practices can then be studied and adapted with their philosophical context acknowledged, rather than silently replaced by a default positivism, a concern raised repeatedly in the critical literature on the secularisation of mindfulness (Sharf, 2015).

Finally, for the many researchers and clinicians who are themselves contemplative practitioners, the position removes a standing incoherence. At present, when paradigm declaration is expected, they are required to declare paradigm commitments that may be foreign to their actual starting points. What the nondualism framework offers such researchers is to let them state plainly, in methodological terms, the commitments their work already carries. In this specific sense, the contribution is wider than strictly being methodological. Research paradigm positions that are stated accurately are easier to evaluate, easier to replicate, and easier to communicate responsibly.

Conclusion

Qualitative methods textbooks often frame paradigm selection as a choice among positivism, postpositivism, constructivism, critical, and poststructural positions. Chafe (2024) has shown that this is one paradigm conception among several, and that the typology's contingent commitments, namely that paradigms are worldviews held by individual researchers, that they require declaration at the outset of every project, and that they are organised around the subject-object axis, are not features of paradigm thinking in general but of one particular tradition descending from Guba and Lincoln (1994). Once that is recognised, the question of what other paradigm positions are available becomes a substantive one.

We have argued that nondualism, articulated philosophically through the Kyoto School and rendered methodologically accessible through the unitlessness framework, offers such a position. It is not the only viable alternative; Indian psychology, Confucian-rooted Indigenous psychology, and

other traditions generate further options. But nondualism has particular relevance to mindfulness research, contemplative science, and consciousness studies, where Buddhist philosophical commitments already shape the practices being studied while the methodological framing typically defaults to paradigms whose assumptions are foreign to those commitments.

The methodological consequences of adopting nondualism as a paradigm position are more limited than might initially be assumed. The framework does not replace methods, does not elevate first-person inquiry, does not privilege practitioners, and does not license relaxation of methodological standards. What it does is locate the standard paradigm question, together with the long-standing disputes that organise around it, at a particular structural level (the units level), where they remain meaningful but no longer carry ultimate metaphysical weight. First-person and third-person methods are positioned at the same structural level.

The contribution we hope to offer is therefore not a new method but a clarification of the paradigm landscape. Researchers whose underlying commitments are nondual, whether on philosophical grounds, on contemplative grounds, or simply because the standard typology fails to capture their starting point, now have a position they can articulate and defend in methodological terms. Researchers whose commitments are not nondual lose nothing: The standard typology remains available, and the structural argument we have developed does not require them to abandon it. What is added is the recognition that the typology does not exhaust the options, and that the philosophical traditions implicit in much contemporary mindfulness and consciousness research have implications for the framing and interpretation of existing methods that are worth articulating openly rather than carrying as unexamined assumptions.

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