

Polarity Maps: Polarisation and the Dharma Door to Non-Duality



By Katannuta and Aranyaka

(Open to all)

Often when we meet with a difficult issue or problem in our relations with others, we can assume it is a communication problem. However there is one particular and quite common kind of situation in which, counter intuitively, *the clearer you try to make your communication, the worse you make the problem.* We are concerned that some of the communication within the Order at the moment is falling into this common trap. But the good news is that there is a relatively straightforward way out, and we hope that this article will provide some practical tools to help improve our debates in the Order.

The idea of ‘polarity maps’ and ‘polarity management’ comes from an American called Barry Johnson (from whom we have lifted most of the ideas for this article). According to Johnson, issues and difficulties come in two distinct flavours... some are “problems to solve” and others are “polarities to manage”.

“Problems to solve” are those with one right answer (A or B), or with two or more right answers that are *independent* (A or B or C or D) - if one of the solutions gets wiped out, the others still stand as viable alternatives. Johnson suggests that the vast majority of problems in formal education are of this sort, with the effect that we have a tendency to approach most difficulties as problems we must solve.

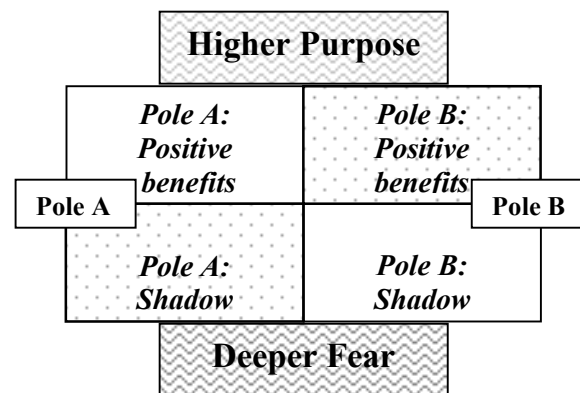
By contrast, “polarities to manage” have two or more right answers that are *interdependent* (A and B, or A and B and C and D). (For simplicity’s sake, in this article we’re going to talk mainly about simple polarities, the A and B type). Although the poles can superficially seem to be in conflict with each other, in a

polarity *both* poles are needed for the situation to flourish rather than founder. Polarity management involves moving from focusing on one pole as the problem and the other as the solution (*either/or thinking*), to genuinely valuing both poles (*both/and thinking*).

Polarities are ongoing tensions and balances that cannot be ‘solved’ on their own level. They can have a positive dimension, for example Bhante’s presentation of the five spiritual faculties as two pairs of qualities (polarities) kept in balance by the fifth faculty, mindfulness. And there is one of the most famous discourses in the Mahayana literature, Vimilakirti’s teaching on the Dharma Doors to Non-Duality. But more commonly we experience them as chronic, unsolvable difficulties. Bhante uses slightly different terminology to describe the same phenomena when he talks about: the oscillations of the reactive mind; avoiding the premature synthesis; and difficulties (problems) that can be solved on their own level and problems (polarities) that cannot.

So, **the fundamental question to ask** when encountering a difficulty is: “Is this a problem we can ‘solve’, or is it an ongoing polarity we must manage well?” If it’s the latter, applying traditional problem solving skills will *increase* the problem and make things worse, rather than helping. Good polarity management gets the best of both poles while avoiding the limits of either, opening the way to the potential for a creative synthesis that goes beyond each pole, even, ultimately, transcending them – what you could call opening the Dharma Door.

Johnson has developed a method of plotting out the structure of a polarity which he calls a ‘polarity map’:



There are 8 pieces to the “map”:

- Two boxes at the sides, with neutral terms for the poles.
- Two “upside” boxes, in which you put the positive benefits from focusing on each of the poles.
- Two “downside” boxes, in which you put the negative results of over-focusing on one pole *to the neglect of the other.*
- The box on top is for the Higher Purpose. This contains the answer to the question, “Why invest in managing this polarity?” The answer goes beyond getting the upside of each pole.
- The box on the bottom is for the Deeper Fear. This is usually the opposite of the Higher Purpose and represents the worst-case situation if the polarity is not managed well.

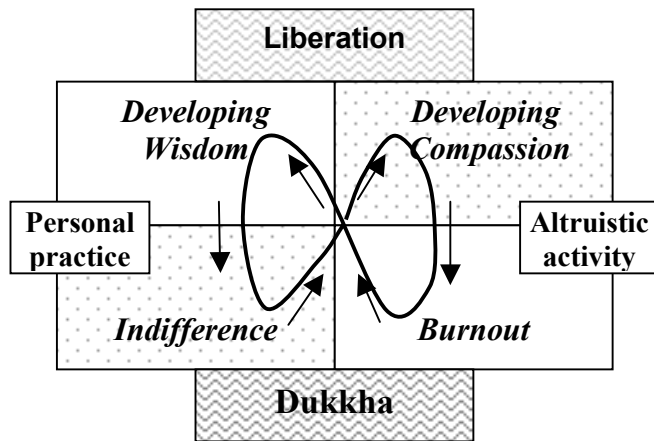
That’s the structure of the polarity map – but more importantly, there’s also a set of **dynamics** that function within any polarity, whether you’re looking at an organisation or an individual’s psychology. Understanding how these dynamics are put in motion by our views and actions gives us the opportunity to manage the polarity well, and avoid a few disasters. Here’s how the dynamics work in the very simple example of the breath:

- When you inhale deeply, it initially feels good to get the fresh oxygen in.
- If you hold your breath, you start to experience the downside of just inhaling: too much carbon dioxide. The longer you hold your inhalation, the more attractive exhaling becomes. So you
- Exhale to get rid of the CO2 and it feels good – at first.
- But, as you hold your breath, you quickly start to experience the downside of exhaling alone - the lack of oxygen.

In this simple polarity it’s easy to see how:

- 1) Over-emphasising the positive qualities of one pole to the neglect of the other will, over time, result in a gradual slip into the shadow of that pole.
- 2) As a consequence, there is a lurch towards the upside of the opposite pole, in an attempt to redress the balance.
- 3) After moving into the upside of the opposite pole, the pattern repeats if this pole too is over-emphasised in an imbalanced way - in time it reaches its limits and moves toward its downside.
- 4) This once again creates natural pressure to self-correct by moving to the upside of the original pole.

The resulting cycle of reactivity is neatly illustrated on a ‘polarity map’ by the fitting symbol of an infinity loop. For example, a simplified version of the polarity of personal practice and altruistic activity in the spiritual life looks something like this on a polarity map:



If developing compassion for others is overemphasised at the expense of developing the spiritual depth to sustain the altruism, burnout will result. Burnout will create pressure to withdraw from outward going practice, to consolidate personal practice. But if this in turn is over-emphasised it will descend into indifference to others – and in time that will increase pressure to resume altruistic engagement.

It's important to notice that there are three possible forces contributing to the ongoing oscillation from one pole to the other:

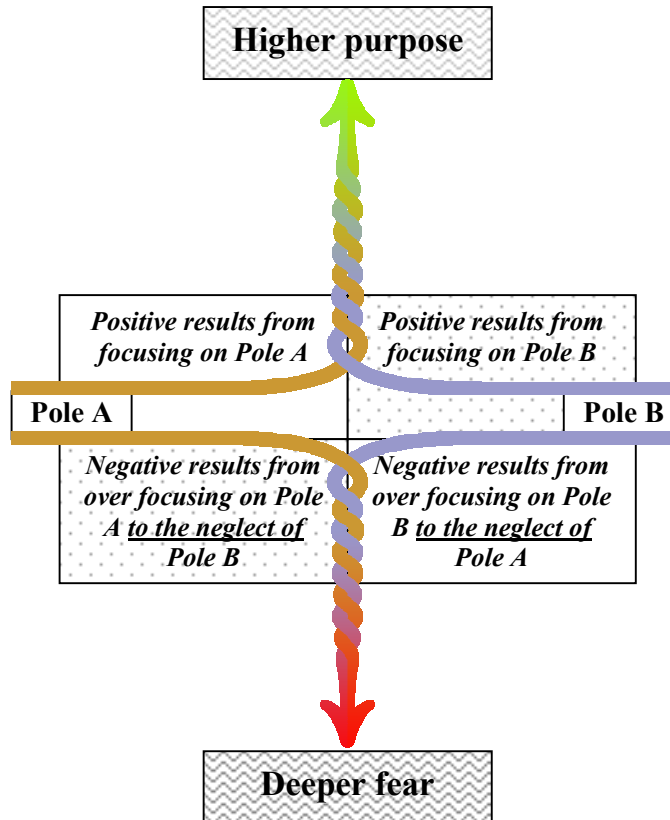
1. Increased **pressure from** anticipating or experiencing the **downside** of one pole.
2. Increased **attractiveness** of the benefits of the other pole.

Who amongst us has not witnessed or even partaken in such oscillations in our own spiritual practice? And in the Order as a whole, examples of polarities that we might cycle through might be the ongoing tensions between conservation and innovation, or between cohesion and autonomy.

3. In addition, there's a potential for the tension between the two poles and the oscillations between them to negatively reinforce and condition each other, creating '**vicious circles**' that, in the worst case scenario, move the polarity toward the deeper fear. This is the place we would like the Order to stay out of – mutual disagreement hardening into opposition, even antagonism, escalating to eventual schism or dissolution. Not a pretty picture.

4. Fortunately there is a fourth force that can operate in the dynamics of the polarity, one that is particularly relevant for us as spiritual practitioners and as an Order as a whole – you can, as it were, be *drawn* by the higher purpose that goes beyond the

synergy of the two upsides. We can be 'drawn' by the Dharma Door of Non-Duality. This force comes into being when the 'upsides' of the two poles positively and mutually reinforce each other, spiralling upwards in a '**virtuous circle**' that moves the polarity towards the Higher Value:



An example of this fourth possible dynamic, the 'draw' towards the Dharma Door, could be the times when we experience the Order functioning at its best – perhaps at a large gathering – when what Bhante has termed the third order of consciousness arises, or is at least pre-figured. We bring the best of our individual qualities and aspirations, opposites and all, and somehow draw more and more of the best out of each other to give expression to something more than the sum of our parts.

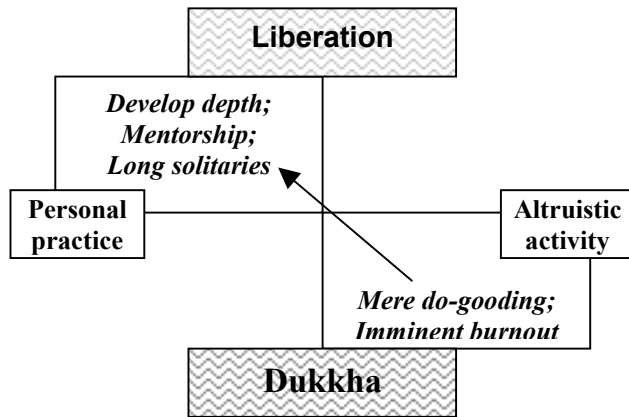
There is also, unfortunately, the possibility of the dynamics getting stuck. This can happen when an organisation does not recognise a polarity as such, but relates to an issue as an either/or problem to solve. It's possible that, with the best of intentions, those who have most influence, whether by virtue of number, position or personal qualities, keep the organisational focus on one pole to the neglect of the other. In any polarity, the more one pole is emphasised at the expense of the other, the greater the pressures will become to rebalance the system – like the increasing need to breathe in as you hold your breath – but it can be possible for an organisation to 'hold its breath' for quite some time. It's arguable, for example, that Yashomitra's letter, and to a lesser extent the Guardian article, prompted the Order to take a deep breath rather suddenly...

So, these are the dynamics that can function within polarities – either a cyclic, oscillation between poles, 'pushed' by the down sides of the current or anticipated pole, or 'pulled' by the upsides of the alternative pole. (Often we have a personal tendency towards one or other of these, but of course they can also act in combination). And there is the possibility of the best, or the worst, of the poles to mutually reinforce each other in a synergy that can lead to our deeper fears or our higher values. Sounds familiar? It's all there in Mind Reactive and Creative, bar the maps.... But lets continue, there is some new ground about how we can work with this.

Looking at these dynamics we can see that with polarities, over time, there is no such thing as win/lose - there is only win/win or lose. Which raises the question, if it's such a no-brainer to keep polarities balanced, **how is it that so often we don't manage polarities well?**

The main reason is that we are very often not **seeing the whole map**. What we see as an either/or problem that we need to solve, is often just one half of a polarity that instead needs managing over time.

It's pretty inevitable that a lot of the time we look at things from our '**point of view**' – but often we don't realise how limited that point of view is – as we say, we 'lack perspective'. Using that example again of altruistic activity and personal practice, we can see how our point of view can very often be the view *from* the downside of one pole, which is feared and seen as the problem, *towards* the upside of the opposite pole, which is valued and seen as a solution:



So in this (highly simplistic) example, Dharmachari SrisriDepth thinks that the Order as a whole has over-emphasised altruistic activity, too much of the heroic ideal, it's all becoming unsustainable – he and his friends think that our problem is lack of depth of practice, imminent burnout. From this point of view the Order needs to look to the upside of the opposite pole – the ‘solution’ is more time for our individual practice, long solitaries perhaps, training and mentoring for the Order, going deeper...

Before we follow this example through any further, let's pause for a moment to look at what Johnson calls ‘pole preference’. In some polarities we may, individually or collectively, have a more long term preference for one pole over the other – the cycles will still be operating but they can sometimes take many years to work their way through, during which the situation can feel comfortably stable, or uncomfortably stuck.

Pole preference is a combination of values and fears. The reasons a person or group prefers one pole over another is that they value the upside of their preferred pole and/or they fear the downside of the opposite pole. When individuals or groups are in conflict over opposite poles, it is important to recognize that there are conflicting values and fears that are in tension. Both sides, naturally, want to move toward their values and away from their fears.

And this is where things get interesting - and that issue arises of communicating more and more clearly seeming just to make things worse....

When you have a ‘Problem’ and a ‘Solution’, it is quite natural to think that all you need to do is figure out how to bridge the “Gap” between them, that all you need is a good strategy to get

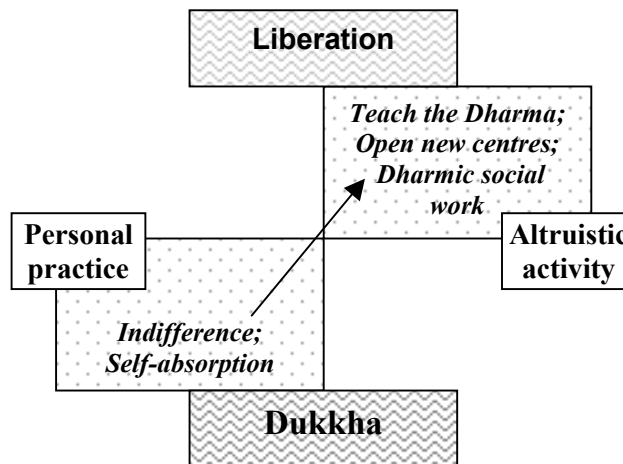
there. And, given how the problem has been defined, (perhaps without quite noticing), the solution is obvious. Indeed, so obvious why look any further? To play the thing up rather, from a problem solving perspective, anyone resisting such an obvious solution is either stupid, or immoral, or both!

This kind of “gap analysis” is driven primarily by a problem solving mindset which is satisfied if it has 3 elements:

- A. A clear understanding of the present “reality,” usually in negative terms (“The problem is.....”)
- B. A clear “vision” of where you want to go, which is an improved state representing a “solution” to the present “problem”.
- C. A clear strategy to get from A to B.

This is *very* helpful if you have a solvable problem – and please don’t take this article as knocking this sort of problem solving. It is inestimably helpful when applied to the relevant sorts of issues. But if in fact what you have is a polarity to manage, it is both an incomplete picture and an incomplete way of responding to it.

Why will there be resistance and/or big trouble in the future if you treat a polarity as if it were a problem to solve? The second half of the map holds the key:



Within the Order there will of course also be those like Dharmacharini SuActivist who resist SrisriDepth’s point of view with an equally valid, opposite one. According to SuActivist and her friends, the ‘problem’ with the Order is too much

indifference to the sufferings of the world - if we only engaged our energies in altruistic activity we would create more energy, galvanise the Order by helping the world, help ourselves most effectively by showing others the way to liberation....

SuActivist sees her potential ‘problem’ (indifference) in the very ‘solution’ SrisriDepth is prescribing (more solitaries) and accordingly she sees a different logical ‘solution’ (more altruistic activity). She, like SrisriDepth and the rest of us, tends to see problems as either/or. It is obvious to SuActivist that she is right, which makes SrisriDepth, her opposition, wrong. She thus resists this foolish move toward a false solution. Her resistance is legitimate and she knows it. Those pushing for an alternate solution are either stupid or immoral or both!

So, we meet with resistance to our solution, we assume it is a communication problem that will be solved by being clearer about: 1) How terrible the problem really is; 2) How terrific and essential our solution is; and/or 3) how thorough our strategy is. But in a polarity situation, acting on this kind of thinking actually *increases* resistance. It comes from those, equally caught in either/or thinking, who see the upside of the present pole as the solution and the downside of the pole that we, the ‘other side’, are promoting, as the problem to be avoided. **Your solution is my problem and vice versa.**

Crucially then, if you are promoting a solution within a polarity which you are treating as if it were an either/or problem, the clearer your communication the greater the resistance you will provoke. The more powerfully and clearly you articulate what is wrong from your point of view, and what is great about your solution to the problem as you see it, the more those holding the opposite point of view are convinced you are totally overlooking their reality.

And the point is, you are. But so are they overlooking yours. With a polarity to manage, both ‘points of view’ are accurate, but neither is complete. **Everyone needs the whole map.**

This has another very important implication - **the smaller your opposition, the more you need to listen to them.** If we make the switch from thinking of the situation as a problem to be solved, and recognise that there is a real polarity to be managed, the minority voice becomes a precious resource rather than a thorn in the side. They (though it could be ‘we’) will indeed resist a process which does not include their/our point of view, but, more than that, they/we have information and perspective to share on the other end of the polarity that most people have not been able to recognise.

One other area of Johnson's work that is worth mentioning here relates to the **dynamics of the re-balancing process** in an organisational polarity. He says that when a shift to another pole represents a relatively new experience, you are likely to get the downside of the new pole before its upside. The danger then is that in the light of the swing to the new pole, those who prefer the old one, or the old degree of emphasis on it, could then reactively over-emphasise 'their' pole and thereby shift into its shadow. Rather than re-balancing the polarity the organisation would merely swing back to the earlier pole – and thereby create the pressure for later attempts to redress the old imbalance.

So for example, 'conservators' in the Order could react to an up-swelling of innovation by wanting to regain clarity and focus, tighten guidelines etc, in the worst case to impose controls. Or 'innovators' could react to an up-swelling of calls for coherence by acting in isolation without regard for the effect on the collective, insisting on their need to follow their personal spiritual path without interference.

Johnson's suggestion for the way out of this unproductive dynamic is for those resisting the move to the relatively new pole being asked to hold onto the upside of their preferred pole, but to tolerate, to some degree, the downside of their less preferred pole as part of the learning process. Consciously framing the changes as relating to a re-balancing of an ongoing polarity, rather than the 'winning' of the 'other side', creates the space for the kind of trust and patience that is required.

He suggests **five steps for getting 'un-stuck'** from an imbalance in a polarity –

1. Affirm the upside of the pole in which you are stuck.
2. Legitimate the fears of the downside of the opposite pole.
3. Explore the upside benefits of the opposite pole, while
4. Holding on to the upside of the "Stuck" pole.
5. Seek a higher purpose supported by both upsides.

These five steps, in particular, seem like a very useful toolkit for the Order as we address the issues that face us at the moment. There is a danger of our debate becoming polarised, of lines being drawn and positions hardening into defensiveness or 'sides' – into 'points of view' that do not have a wide enough perspective to embrace the diversity *and* the coherence of our Order. Our hopes from having written this article are that the ideas and models it contains will help us all to make the shift from 'solving' issues that in fact are polarities, and to recognise when the real issue is how, over time, we can collectively maintain the balance between simultaneously necessary but opposite poles.

The point, as we see it, is to protect and **uphold the balance within a polarity**, rather than to be over-identified with either pole. Because if we get over identified with one pole or the other we've lost sight of the reality of the polarity – we've slipped into either/or thinking and we just store up pressure for the future, for a clumsy collective re-balancing that doesn't recognise itself as such.

By broadening our personal perspective, by searching for, including and valuing the 'other' point of view, we can make a radical shift in our perception - of the situation as a whole and of the most effective ways to respond to it. This shift in perception, from 'half maps' to whole ones, enables the collective to step free from inevitable swings between poles, and instead build on the strengths of both poles in a virtuous spiral - to open the Dharma Doors.

To conclude, we'd just like to say a big 'Thank You' to Jnanagarbha for the very illuminating conversation we had with him at last summer's European Combined Order convention, during which, with the aid of a pencil and the back of an envelope, in about two minutes flat he sketched out the first ever polarity map we'd seen and accordingly set us on the way to this article. We hope we've captured a little of the "Aha!" that Jnanagarbha managed to convey to us with his animated, unfolding image, and that this article makes a positive contribution to the quality our debates in the Order.