

Holding Two Opposites at Once

Where dialectical therapy, Buddhist philosophy, and particle physics meet

To hold two contradictory truths in mind at the same time can feel like a flaw in our thinking. Three very different traditions suggest the opposite — that this capacity is a sign of a clearer, more accurate mind.

Dialectical Therapy

The therapeutic stance (DBT)

- Dialectics: every truth holds its opposite, and growth synthesizes the two.
- Radical acceptance AND active change — both fully true at the same time.
- Wise Mind: the integration of Emotion Mind and Reasonable Mind, not a compromise.
- The shift from a rigid “either / or” to a flexible “both / and.”

“You are doing the best you can — and you can do better.”

Buddhist Philosophy

The contemplative view

- The Middle Way: wisdom rests between the extremes, collapsing into neither.
- The tetralemma: a thing may be, not be, both, or neither — logic with four corners.
- Two truths: the conventional and the ultimate are simultaneously valid.
- Equanimity: one steady, open mind meets pleasure and pain alike.

“Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.”

Particle Physics

The physical world

- Wave–particle duality: light and matter are both wave and particle at once.
- Complementarity (Bohr): opposite descriptions are both needed for the whole.
- Superposition: a system holds many states together until it is observed.
- Uncertainty: position and momentum can never both be perfectly known.

“Contraria sunt complementa — opposites are complementary.”

The Shared Insight

A modern psychotherapy, a 2,500-year-old contemplative path, and the physics of the very small each reached the same conclusion: holding two opposing truths together is not confusion or weakness of mind — it is often a more faithful description of reality. When Niels Bohr was knighted, he chose the yin-yang for his crest and the motto “opposites are complementary,” physics bowing to a far older intuition.

- Paradox is a feature of reality at its edges, not a failure of thinking.
- “I accept myself as I am, and I am working to change” — both at once, is health.

A practice · When you next feel pulled between two truths, try replacing “but” with “and,” and notice what becomes possible.