

## Yoga and Group Relations Conferences

Gouranga P. Chattopadhyay

This article is not one with any conclusions or discussion of a body of related hypotheses. It is an open ended writing resulting from free flowing thought, offered to the participants, both members and staff, of Group Relations Conferences (GRC), also known as Working Conference, in the Tavistock Tradition (Chattopadhyay and Gangjee:1999; Chattopadhyay: 1999; the brochure of the GRC jointly sponsored by GRI and HIDEF: 2015) to encourage further wondering about one's experiences and exploring them, while keeping at bay, as far as possible, the explanations and rationalities that culture seeks to impose on us as "realities" from the time that we began to interact with our environment and think. This is also in line with a suggestion made by Bohm during one of his dialogues (Nichol:1996) in which he suggests the idea of postponing pre-conceived ideas and conclusions for a while to allow a "free space" to develop in which people with different views can appreciate what the other is actually presenting.

Yogis (yoga experts who have spent many years in *Yoga sadhana*) are fond of, among many other *shlokas* chosen from various *Upanishads* and other texts like some of the *Vedas* and *Vedanta*, the following *shloka*:

*Om purnamadah purnamidam purnat purnamudachyate*

*purnasaya purnamadaya purnamevavashisyate.*

The general meaning in English of this *shloka* is something like: If you take the full out of the full, the full is still left there. As Sri Swamiji (Paramahansa Satyananda Saraswati) used to say, this is a peculiar exercise in arithmetic, in which subtraction loses its meaning! What this *shloka* reflects is the notion of the multiverse (modern astrophysics hypothesises the presence of multiple universes that exist simultaneously). The Sanskrit verse represents the idea of an indivisible whole, which is actually an indivisible formless force, i.e. the terms *atman*, *paramatman* and *brahman* represent the all pervading indivisible force. Since it is both all pervading and indivisible, it defies subtraction. All things that our naked eyes as well as the most powerful microscope and telescope so far invented perceive are but illusion or *maya*. They are illusion based on the experience of Indian seers who have experienced the ultimate enlightenment through years of yoga and meditation. These are non-existent in the sense that what we "see" are the gross

representations of the subtle aspect of existence, and the Sanskrit word *Sat* represents this ultimate reality.

Based on this idea, human existence has been summed up by the four so-called *Mahamantras* or *Mahavakyas*, one of which is: *Tat twam asi*, which means “thou are that”. There is no he or she as the supreme being in *Tantra* or *Vedanta* philosophies. The all pervading force is mentioned as “it” or “that”. The humans are also then seen as gross representation of the ultimate reality. This reality is to be experienced and when some seer experiences it, the ancient literature have spoken of the phenomenon which is translated into English as enlightenment. The idea of a personal soul is therefore absent in ancient Indian thought, in the Brahminical religion now called Hinduism, in a much modified form and influenced by Judeo Christian philosophies as well as indigenous and ancient Greek animistic ideas. Yoga, to be sure, grew in a period much earlier than the advent of the Vedic culture bearing tribes. Yoga was developed simultaneously with the *Tantra* philosophy from around 10,000 BCE (see Chattopadhyay and Mathur: 2010). Present day true adherents of *Tantra* have nothing to do with the bunch of blood thirsty people and the astrologers as well as those advertise to know how to bring people under their total control, who make money by hoodwinking people who are unable to take charge of themselves or build skills.

This notion of an all pervading indivisible force has been of late supported by the experimental learning after years of hard work by physicists working in the discipline known as quantum mechanics (Bohm: 1989). According to them the limited capacity of the human eye cannot discern the cosmic reality of all “things” as different configurations of dancing, moving, sub-atomic particles. This actually makes the idea of difference between even the living and the dead or the inert irrelevant. This has been elegantly described by the physicist Bohm as “That which is IS is IS and that which is not IS is also IS.” (Zukav: 1979). The mental phenomena of consciousness and the existence of the unconscious being based on our limited perceptual ability are therefore also illusion. However, being identical with the *Sat*, we can get in touch with that ultimate reality and be enlightened through years of *sadhana* (applying oneself whole heartedly to a spiritual primary task). Then one becomes a *seer*, i.e. one who has ‘seen’ or experienced the *Sat*. In effect questions are raised about the nature of boundaries that we the humans create or believe to exist. At one level, such an intellectual understanding, whether or not backed up by individual experienced reality, puts science and spirituality in the same boat in the sense that both are boundaryless (Chattopadhyay: 2001)

Science exists and progresses because it questions that horizon or boundary of all scientific concepts and theories. For e.g. I have mentioned above the phenomenon of our limited perceptual ability. Through science we have sought to increase our perceptual ability. One of this year's Nobel Prizes has gone to scientists who have invented never imagined before powerful microscope. We are yet to know what kind of new discoveries will be made by its use in science, i.e. what new perceptual ability will develop leading to pushing existing boundaries further. Thus science remains alive and advances through questioning existing thesis and hypothesis, existing scientific laws, concepts and theories through new experiments, observations and new classifications.

But religion over the ages has sought to put boundaries on scientific progress when new discoveries have questioned boundaries. The case of Galileo is one of the most notorious examples of that. In what is called Hinduism, examples abound of suppressing liberal and other religious ideas that have challenged older boundaries. There is the well recorded historical fact, for e.g., of Ajatashatru who, after making a palace coup, not only imprisoned his Buddhist father Bimbisara and starved him to death, but banned with death threat all Buddhist practices in his kingdom. The case of beheading of Sreemati, a maid serving the palace women, at the base of the *Stupa* under which King Bimbisara had enshrined a toe nail of Buddha is also recorded. She was a practising Buddhist who had dared to celebrate Buddha's birthday openly. Even today this process seems to be continuing. I am here referring to the historian Romila Thapar's 2014 Nikhil Chakravarty Memorial Lecture (*The Hindu*, ) in which she has taken to task today's academics who have remained silent in the face of the present government at the Centre, controlled by the party that is wedded to what is generally known as Hindutva (a kind of extreme right wing political philosophy based on sectarian and highly dogmatic ideas) tinkering with academic freedom and trying to banish the liberal and secular aspects of Hindu philosophy.

Many, if not most, Hindus believe in and practice the caste system, which has evolved over centuries from its earlier occupation based socio-economic structure called the *Varna* (Bose: 1976). Among other ideas, the caste system states that some people are born more impure than others and hence are unquestionably inferior. Not only the so-called superior people believe it, the so-called inferior people also believe it. It is a tragic dehumanizing boundary phenomenon, which has jumped across religious boundaries in India and have also become practices in Islam (Ahmad: 1973) and Christianity. The case of Reverend Krishnamohan Banerjee refusing to let the great Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta marry his daughter because the Reverend was a Brahmin convert while the poet was a

Kayastha convert is well known. Many such cases have been reported in India and are too well known to be justified by giving references. It reduces people's limited perceptual ability to almost blindness to the fact that such ideas of purity and pollution were Brahminical inventions to dominate over others. Sadly even the Dalits seem to believe in that system in practice by offering second position to sub-castes as Malas and Madigas, etc in committees.

This process of changing the broad based task of unifying the sub-continental reality of multiple cultures, multiple religious and cult based societal groups based on the socio-economic umbrella of the *Varna* system did not suit the Brahminical elite. So they changed the task to creating a hierarchic society based on birth and not on occupation and enforced it with physical threat by second position to the Kshatriyas. Their occupation was fighting backed up by spreading the fear about afterlife unless one followed the socio-cultural and religious edicts of the Brahmins of high hierarchic position. With these changes the primary objective of religion changed from revelation and liberation to that of salvation, bringing in a degree of dependency in the Indian metaculture (Chattopadhyay: 1975). This process of changing the main or the primary task continues out of hatred for an existing primary task by the power elite (see Chapman:1999), leading to the phenomenon of task corruption through task hatred. This hatred often arises from the seeming impossibility of the primary task, or the feeling that pursuing the primary task could be painful to oneself and to avoid that pain one "corrupts" it into something else. Liberation and revelation leads to the immediate need for taking charge of oneself fully, through interdependence, which has the prerequisite of mobilising within oneself compassionate feelings for all beings.

GRCs are about wondering, questioning, exploring one's experience and not rationalising those somehow. Yoga also ultimately helps one to discard the notion of I-ness (ahamkara; aham is I and kara is the process) which results in realising its meaninglessness. If "I" has no meaning for "me", then what is to be salvaged? Salvation thus loses its meaning. What remains is the liberated self that works for what it considers as valuable in the sense of the term "Higher Values". Those become the values. Imagined Lower Values too vanish since the so-called non- higher values are all selfish in one way or the other. There is a well known Cherokee Indian legend handed down by word of mouth: An elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, 'My son the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, regret , greed arrogance self-pity resentment , false pride and ego. The other is good. It is joy , peace love , hope, humility , kindness, generosity, truth , compassion and faith'. The

grandson thought about this and asked his grandfather “which wolf wins? “ The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one that you feed” ! It seems to me that the first wolf stands for salvation while the second wolf stands for liberation. Both Yoga and GRCs stand for liberation through understanding, for which one has to work hard, giving up as much of one’s defences as one can as opposed to looking for readymade solutions for salvation!

But when it comes to spirituality, it has no boundary in the sense that the seer questions all boundaries in the illumination of enlightenment and any person grounded in spirituality can also question religious and any form of cultural boundary on the basis of one’s experience and intellectual understanding. We are, I believe, kept confused in this area by attributing spiritual power to too many religious heads as also to self proclaimed God men who do not question religious boundaries. On the contrary they impose those boundaries by invoking fear of reprisal and the afterlife and at times even organise violence against those who openly question those boundaries. This process, unfortunately, shifts the focus from religion as a way of life to the religious institutions (His Holiness the Dalai Lama: 2014). Thus, one of the supposed spiritual heads of Hindus, the Shankaracharya of Kanchi, repeated what several thousand years ago male Brahmins had proclaimed to dominate over women: women should not utter *Vedic shlokas* or perform *Vedic* rituals, i.e. a great body of knowledge should be kept away from women. In contrast to the rule bound religious heads Jiddu Krishnamurthy (1985, 1999, etc.), who was brought up to create an international religion denounced religion altogether and spent his life sharing his insights with all those who cared to listen to him.

There are also religious heads who have demonstrated that it is possible to ground ones spirituality in religion and even rise over such boundaries in an effort to create a secular ethical system grounded in spirituality (Yuktananda: 1989). His Holiness the Dalai Lama is preaching the necessity to create new ethical ideas, creating a new secular international ethical order that go beyond religion and grounds spirituality on science. He also recommends strongly the questioning of boundaries and the creation of new ones when scientific discoveries challenge the boundaries of earlier thought. It is not for nothing that he represents spiritual leadership for an ancient peoples who are continuing to struggle for autonomy against the boundaries set by so-called Marxists who are probably only a variety of undemocratic oppressive creators of boundaries (His Holiness The Dalai Lama: 2014).

The quest for finding out the many “whys” of life that trouble us individually and the process of our quest for understanding those lay the foundation for spirituality. It is not something out there but it is here inside our minds. Spiritual enlightenment begins to

dawn when one starts to seriously “look” for the meaning of so many socio-cultural, and religious boundaries and also of so much unease, grief, pain, sickness, violence of one kind or the other, the need for possessiveness and power struggles of all kinds and the inability to mobilize one’s compassion for all things in the perceived universe. In the course of that one remains in touch with one’s emotions, one’s feelings instead of rationalising those. For example, the present author was advised to “do away” with his grief when his spouse died and accept the “reality that when the time comes one has to die”. This was like saying not to cry over spilt milk as though the death of a life’s partner could be treated at par with some spilt milk. Therefore, where there are people, there is spirituality. If indeed multiverse is indivisible, then what is the meaning of individuality, relatedness and relationship?

If we discover the process of projection and introjections within us while engaging with the primary tasks of the various configurations of groups in which we work in the group relations conferences, what do such experiences mean for us in terms of our notion of identity, our I-ness or *ahamkara*, our neurotic preoccupation with pride in realities that should be cause for joy and celebration? When someone expresses pride in one’s children’s achievements, does one ever realise that one is trying to attribute the cause of such success to one’s having had a hand in producing that child and denying the hard work that has led to that achievement?

Based on such ideas as we have enumerated above, we believe that both Group Relations Conferences (and most work based on psychoanalytic insights and frameworks - see for e.g. Lawrence: 1985) and Yoga (see for e.g. Ramakrishna Mission publications of writings of Swami Vivekananda and Bihar School of Yoga publications of Swami Satyananda, Swami Niranjanananda and Swami Satsangananda) have spiritual value, have the potential to set us in the path of discovering the spiritual self dwelling inside all of us, and spirituality pervading all kinds of work groups. That is to say, both are paths towards understanding one’s own spirituality. To expand on this idea, I have already given my definition (or understanding) of spirituality, which is different from religion ( Chattopadyyay 1999, Eds Vince and French). I have hypothesised that religion is a defence against spirituality. The argument is as follows:

Both ancient Indian wisdom gained many millennia ago through experiential learning (as recorded in, for e.g. the *Mandukya Upanishad*) and the theories of quantum mechanics arrived at through experimental learning (see, for e.g. Gary Zukav’s *Dancing Wu Li Masters [1979]* for a layman’s understanding of the basics of quantum mechanics as

understood in the late Nineteen Seventies) speak of an indivisible cosmos (which the author has termed as the *Cosmic Continuum* in his interpretation of the *Bhagavat Geeta* as a treatise in managing critical decisions - and not as a religious text - in 1997) in which there is no question of parts.

In fact physicist Neils Bohr (Cit. Zukav, 1979) wrote that the problem was that since human beings cannot see or experience this indivisibleness of the cosmos, no human language has the word for it. Human beings cannot see it because of their “limitation of perceptual ability”. Otherwise they would have seen every object, living and non-living, as moving (or dancing) elementary particles in various configurations through which other elementary particles continuously whiz through! Therefore we, and anything and everything else (consider the British physicist Bohm’s words: *That which is Is is IS and that which is not Is, is also IS*, Cit. Zukav) is identical with the cosmic continuum. This may be also understood as all microcosms representing the macrocosm. In the ancient Indian sages’ language, therefore the realizations were expressed as *tat twam asi* (thou art that), *aham brahmasmi* (I am the universe), etc. There is nothing about a Supreme Being described as a He or a She. So finally Hawkins wrote (something like) “If the cosmos does not have an edge (read boundary), there is no creation and therefore no place for a Creator.”

This “boundarylessness” is something that we deal with in GRCs when, for e.g. we hypothesise (interpret) processes of projections and introjections. We therefore emphasise minimum boundary conditions of time, task and territory, knowing that all three are manufactured or imagined by human beings as “realities” in order to make some sense of the cosmos, engage with tasks and survive and grow. We utilise this insight in our consulting projects (see for e.g. Chatopadhyay and Lawrence: ) when we help our clients redraw internal and external boundaries in order to engage with tasks that contribute to objectives. Behind all the work in GRCs (or our insight based consultancies) is, our assumption, our understanding of the apparent paradox of the unreality of boundaries at one level and the need for adhering to boundaries at another level to create “containers” in an uncontained and uncontainable cosmos. This can be, to be sure, a frightening thought. The author once tried to imagine, as an experiment with experience, both an unending sky upwards without a boundary by contemplating that “reality” for half an hour at a stretch as an exercise and at another time for half an hour he tried to imagine the presence of multiple galaxies and stopped when he felt that he would go stark staring mad! We also try to interpret such phenomenon in GRC as the microcosm (the SSG or each members’ territory in IE) representing the macrocosm (the LSG or the Conference as the

macrocosm.) Therefore there is, for us at least, a strong element of the quest for the process of one's spirituality in every GRC (Chattopadhyay; 1999a).

Now we again come back to yoga. Several wrong ideas about yoga seem to exist. One is that it is a form of physical exercise. Many books on Yoga even use such titles as "Yoga Vyayam"! Yoga is not even merely learning postures and new ways of breathing (*asana, pranayama, mudra and bandha*) etc. Those function as preparation for purifying the body of accumulated toxins, steadying the mind, developing the ability to be one's own witness of the bodily and the mental activities. The ultimate in yoga, which to be sure too few ever realize, is to experience one's identity with the indivisible cosmos. One such Yogi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa (Paramahansa is a title bestowed upon Yogis of the highest order) was asked by some of his disciples what it was to achieve this realization. Like any other experiential learning, he could not describe it. So he used metaphors. He asked the person asking the question, "Do you think if a doll made of salt goes for a dip in the ocean it can come back and report its experience?" We have also heard that when Buddha was asked about his view about a creator (i.e. God) and about the creation process he evaded the issue and if he was asked about his enlightenment process, his answer was something like, "I went there and came back". Hence he is also known as Tathagata (Tatha = there; Gata = went or gone).

Yoga aims through its eightfold approach and various forms (*hatha yoga, kriya yoga, raj yoga, laya yoga, jnana yoga, bhakti yoga, kundalini yoga* etc) to detoxify the body and open up energy blocks in various joints and nerve ganglions known as the *Chakras* so that in the end free flow of energy activates the brain way beyond our use of average 8% or even Einstein-like 12% of the total capability. As we have mentioned before, this is necessary to be in touch with one's inner, so far unconscious or not noticed, activities that block us from expanding our consciousness. When our consciousness expands, it reaches a state that has been termed by Shri Aurobinda as the Supra-Conscious state, we get in touch with the blocks or boundaries that we create to defend ourselves from illusory threats. For the average person, of course, some defences, some inner blocks will remain unless one progresses towards enlightenment in small ways, step by step. My guru's (Paramahansa Niranjanananda Saraswati) guru (Paramahansa Satyananda Saraswati) described this state of his enlightenment as something he experienced as his "mind jumping out of itself" and the end of operating from the Ego (he seems to have understood a lot of what Jung wrote). So the ultimate aim of yoga too is to experience boundarylessness (Bion's "O"? - 1965) and one's identity with the boundaryless cosmos (Bion's ultimate aim of psychoanalysis being to be "at one with the analysand" and the



other impacts as by-products) and after that devote oneself to whatever one understood as socially responsible and useful way of living without feeling attached to anything (Bion's "without memory and desire"?).

The by-products of yoga are healthy mind and body, ability to achieve control over one's emotions (not getting out of touch, also something necessary for the skill and ability to deal with transference and counter-transference), slow down aging to remain effective in task engagement longer etc. And above all remain unattached and develop compassion for all things in nature. Emphasis on doing away from attachment in ancient Hindu thought, for example, has led to describing Sri Krishna, a great yogi, as *Bhagwan* or *Bhagvana*. This word has been altogether distorted in its meaning and is commonly believed to mean some kind of a Supreme Being, akin to the Judeo-Christian concept of God. But this word means in Sanskrit one who has several attributes. These are powerful body, great courage and skill, lot of wealth, being physically attractive and finally not attached to any of those. Sri Krishna of the *Bhagavat Geeta* fulfilled all those criteria when he served the Pandavas as the chariot driver of Arjuna, considered as a lowly caste occupation at that time.

Most of these thoughts led the author to his decision made some years ago as GRC Director to introduce yoga as an event in GRCs that he directed. I am happy that organisations like the Tavistock Institute, HID Forum and Group Relations India too have included yoga as an event in their group relations conferences.

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2. This article has been sent to Kolkata Kindle for publishing

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