

## WHAT IS INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY: TRANSCENDENCE IN AND WHILE THINKING

Sangeetha Menon, Ph.D.  
Bangalore, India

*ABSTRACT:* In Indian psychology ideas about self-transformation and spiritual experiences are presented in concurrence with a philosophical position. When we present Indian psychology the challenge is how effectively and integrally can we highlight the models of application and preserve the underlying metaphysics. This challenge is addressed throughout the article, since the primary focus of Indian Psychology is on mental health and understanding spiritual experiences in the light of mental health; and the enrichment and transformation of human experience. The foundational issues that are embedded in the *Darśana* (Indian ways of thinking) are two-fold: about human mind, consciousness, and experience; and about self-identity. The guidelines for the exploration of these issues are to: (a) identify the unitary in the discrete, (b) have a mental as well as spiritual meaning for any experience, its object, and its experiencer, (c) address the ontological cause (not merely the cognitive or mental component) for therapy, and, (d) have values, compassion, and discipline as essential guidelines for self-exploration.

*Seeing these people of mine facing each other to fight, my limbs are failing,  
mouth is parching, my body is trembling and hair standing on their ends.*

*My bow is slipping from my grip, my skin is burning all over,  
I am not able to stand steady, my mind is whirling, and I also see bad omens.*

*Bhagavad Gītā 1:28–31*

*My delusions have gone, got back memory of my traditions and values, all by  
your grace. I am settled and firm, all my doubts have vanished and I am ready  
to carry out your instruction.*

*Bhagavad Gītā 18:73*

These verses, which present two states of Arjuna's mind, depressed and motivated, are from the opening and closing chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a foundational text of Indian philosophy. Arjuna is a warrior hero who was not able to confront the battlefield owing to a clash of values. A dialogue he initiates with Krishna, his

---

The first draft of this paper was presented at a national conference on "Self and Personality in Yoga and Indian Psychology", and the Editors' Meet for Indian Psychology book series for Universities, supported by Infinity Foundation, Princeton and organized by the Institute for Human Science and Service, Vizakhapatanam, India, 9–10 December 2003.

The final version of the paper upon which this article is based, was written as part of the *Global Perspectives on Science and Spirituality Award* ([www.uip.edu/gpss](http://www.uip.edu/gpss)) program for the study "Consciousness, Memory, Agency and Spiritual Experience: Perspectives from Scientific Discussions and the Indian Discourse" managed by University of Elon, North Carolina, and Université Interdisciplinaire de Paris, and supported by the Templeton Foundation.

From the start to the finish of this paper, I had extensive discussions and exchanges with my spiritual teacher, Swami Bodhananda, who helped me complete this paper with his insightful and critical comments. The most comprehensive comments from the anonymous reviewer helped me fill in many blanks and clarify several ideas. At various stages of writing this paper I was benefited by exchanges with Rajiv Malhotra, K Ramakrishna Rao, RL Kapur, Janak Pandey, BV Sreekantan, Roddam Narasimha, Stuart Sovatsky, Don Salmon and NP Rajalakshmi.

Email: [prajnana@yahoo.com](mailto:prajnana@yahoo.com); [smenon@nias.iisc.ernet.in](mailto:smenon@nias.iisc.ernet.in); URL: [www.geocities.com/prajnana](http://www.geocities.com/prajnana)

Copyright © 2005 Transpersonal Institute

friend-charioteer-teacher-counselor, brings to intimate discussion many psychological, practical, and spiritual aspects of Arjuna's predicament. Krishna begins the dialogue "as if smiling" (*prahasanniva bhārata; Bhagavad Gītā: 2.9*) and concludes with presenting many-sided views about the conflicted Arjuna and the conflict itself, asking him to make his own decision by taking into account the complete picture of the situation (*vimṛsya etad aśeṣena yedha icchasi tathā kuru; Bhagavad Gītā:18: 63*). The *Gītā* ends with a rejuvenated Arjuna being able to resolve his conflicts deciding to fight the battle.

What fascinates a student of psychology in the *Gītā*, is how the dialogue leads to a discussion on the therapeutic connections between anxiety, depression, and performance. What is usually considered as a "lesser" state of mind such as depression transforms to a spiritual tool—*viṣāda* becomes Yoga—building a bridge for transcendence between the sense of loss and the sense of wholesome perspective. The verses above indicate how depression caused by a mental crisis transforms to a spiritual tool: how *viṣāda* creates a mind set for change and recovery of long forgotten values and traditional disciplines; how a mental meltdown, with proper counseling, presents the possibility of self-resurrection and to connect to a stronger self-identity.

As illustrated by the *Bhagavad Gītā*, transformation of attitudes, perceptions, and "getting back to work" are crucial in redefining a healthy self-identity. The spiritual process is not only placed in the existential condition of the person but also develops from the existential predicaments, emphasizing an integral method. Many epistemological and metaphysical discussions we find in Indian philosophical literature focus on how to create a dynamic and continuous process of spiritual uplift that is not distanced or alienated from the lived experiences of the person. The methods and design of such analyses and discussions often do not wish for a disconnected meaning of a word or an event, but for an experience that has personal relevance and potential for change. The storytelling in the *Upaniṣads* for instance "charts the transformation of the inferior to the higher self to atman-being," and "knowledge serves as a transformational force guiding man and woman to a higher plane" (Grinshpon, 2003, p. 25)

#### WHAT IS INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY?

A response to the question "what is Indian *psychology*" is not possible without considering the philosophical underpinnings. This perspective, however, will also carry with it a potential danger. The one potential danger when we consider Indian *psychology* is the possibility of overriding metaphysical theories taking center-stage without the context of experiences or the practical spiritual goals indicated by them. If we take the list of books published on or about Indian psychology *per se*, on account of this danger, it will be found that many of them would rank as good philosophical accounts under the titles and subtitles of Indian *psychology*.

The three questions we could ask to avoid a solipsistic philosophic discussion are: (a) Can we understand theories and practices of *Darśana*, Indian ways of thinking, by employing psychological models, concepts and categories? (b) Can philosophers and psychologists jointly draw a larger framework that will effectively present the

wisdom of *Darśana* from a psychological point of view? In other words, can we put together a model of Indian psychology without being overshadowed by philosophical concepts? (c) Can this psychological model still be situated in Indian philosophical traditions?

These three questions might help us orient Indian psychology as a psychology of panhuman experience, and also develop indigenous knowledge traditions covering physical, mental, and spiritual disciplines. In the course of these efforts the conventional definition of psychology could be expanded from the “science of human behavior” to “human possibility and progress.” Such a definition might help us build cross-cultural psychologies. The development of human possibility involves physical, mental, and spiritual disciplines drawn from global experiences. Human possibility enhances as one integrates diversity, and expands and deepens awareness. Whether we need to confine to watertight compartments of cultures or traditions is an important question. The lives and works of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, et al. are lessons about drawing spiritual principles that are of pan cultural nature.

#### SIEVING INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

A major challenge before us is to sieve the diamond of Indian psychology from the enchanting treasure of Indian metaphysics and Indian mysticism, which many of us find difficult to dispossess when we write on Indian psychology. We invariably fall for the temptation to write using exclusive philosophical or mystical expressions while maintaining that it is all about the human *mind*. An experience like the death of a near and dear one, or the thought about one’s own end may be better integrated when framed in mystical explanations. But that might also involve the risk of developing a tendency to avoid the rigors of thinking and nurture the habit of mystifying every experience by framing it in metaphysical jargons. The possibility for the unconscious and the superconscious to overpower the conscious will be more. And, human enterprise and thinking could fall into a marsh of superstition with such a tendency. Considering this undesirable outcome, a rational and practical explanation is better compared to mystical engendering, as far as psychology is concerned. The psychological practices and therapies that are developed based on mysticism will have to be founded on honest practical implications in the real world.

The road from mind to spirit is certainly a difficult one, not only when we try to understand it for ourselves but also when we try to present and report it for an audience. For instance, we can take the common expression “*Brahman*.” When we try to give a psychological presentation for the Upaniṣadic concept of *Brahman*, we say “*Brahman* is universal consciousness.” It will be difficult to make much propositional knowledge from such an expression, although by the juxtaposition of two “big” high-sounding words we can create awe for the listener. The way out is an interpretation relating to body, mind, and our attitude towards life, our own identity, and our worldviews based on such metaphysical statements. Interpretation could be done as well in the context of what we consider as absolute principles. In short, it should be possible to relate to the meanings and expressions of

philosophical ideas in an experiential way. To use them as mere additions to our vocabulary and burdensome scholarship may not serve a creative enterprise.

The greater challenge is to reconcile between the overriding metaphysics and practical psychology in *Darśana*. The challenge is greater since the task is not only to sieve the psychological elements but also to retain the foundational metaphysics. A few examples of comparison could be: (a) The Sāṃkhya philosophy with the concepts of *puruṣa*, *prakṛti* with three *guṇās*, evolutes such as *mahat*, *ahankāra*, five elements, mind, sense/motor organs, is more metaphysical. Whereas the *Yogasutrās* based on the Sāṃkhya metaphysics that focus on the discipline of body and mind, and description of mental states, moods, and attainment of higher and quieter states of consciousness, are of practical import. The function of this focus is practical; (b) The Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika categories of substance, quality, relationship etc. have more of a theoretical and speculative basis. Whereas their system of logic and epistemology is of applied nature; (c) The Mimāṃsa philosophy of rituals has a metaphysical foundation. But the discussion on theory of language is pertinent in effecting cognitive changes.

When we present Indian psychology the challenge is how effectively and integrally can we highlight the models of application and preserve the underlying metaphysics. This challenge is to be addressed throughout, since our primary focus will continue to be mental health and understanding spiritual experiences in the light of mental health, and the enrichment and transformation of human experience.

#### CONSCIOUSNESS AND EXPERIENCE

A major area that needs attention in the context of the discussion on Indian psychology is consciousness studies. Consciousness studies today, being one of the cutting edge areas, invites participation from conventional disciplines and emerging areas for specialization. “Binding experiences”<sup>1</sup> has been the most important issue in the last decade of discussions on “consciousness.” These discussions have crossed disciplines: neurobiological, quantum mechanical, computational, theoretical, psychological etc. In these discussions, although the details of what constitutes “experience” differ according to method and perspective, a consensus has emerged that (a) to explain “consciousness” is to explain “experience,” and, (b) to explain experience is to explain its unity, qualitative, subjective, and binding nature.

The discussion about consciousness for many is a discussion about experience that can be understood in “objective” terms such as neural correlates, cortical functions and neurochemistry. In spite of the attempts for removing “subjectivity” as much as possible from a very subjective phenomenon, it is interesting that the crucial discussion about experience is that which concerns the discussion about the “self.”

In Indian approaches to understanding consciousness, primary importance is given not to just understand “what is a state of mind or consciousness” but equally, “what is it to *experience* such a state of mind or consciousness.” It is not just to understand in the sense of third person intellectual understanding, or the verbal meaning, but fathoming the meaning of descriptions by implied first person experiential meaning.

This practice might facilitate a deeper “understanding” into a consciousness of the unity of opposites, experienced as empathy, love, and intuition. Such a trend could be the reason why philosophy developed in Indian wisdom traditions cannot be alienated from psychology that deals with a practical body-mind discipline leading to self-realization. “Experience” and “self” certainly relate to something that is more than what is happening in the brain, more than abnormal conditions, more than ordinary conditions, and states such as trance, bliss-outs, religious absorption, near death, and out of body experiences. These states have both a transcendental and transient nature, and cannot be classified under the general category of experiences, which will preclude us from knowing the diverse nature of experience.

As I understand, *Darśana*—Indian ways of thinking—is not a linear structural method for a pure rational discourse. *Darśana* represents carefully developed tools for creating transcendence *in* and *while* thinking (Menon, 2002). That is why we see in Patanjali’s *Yogasutrā* or Vakhata’s *Aṣṭāṅgaḥṛdaya* or Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* or even in the ritual arts of the Malabar<sup>2</sup> an underlying deeper urge, presented through a bouquet of methods combining visual, mental, and spiritual tools. These ontological tools are designed to enhance and uplift human experience in and while in a participatory world. Yoga and meditation techniques have been proven to be effective in controlling anger and other intemperate behavior, depression, anxiety etc. These tools from a bygone past are today part of growing and living traditions. For instance Yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda are today practiced by a large number of the Western (and Eastern) world; and, there are many more modern applications such as logotherapy, transpersonal therapy, philosophical therapy, *kundalini* therapy, deep breathing therapy etc. that take cues from classical traditions. The importance given to group prayer and spirituality in work place is another instance.

#### MISINTERPRETING MENTAL HEALTH AS MENTAL DISORDER, AND THE VORTEX OF WORDS

The upper hand for pluralism not only in metaphysics but also in spiritual experiences is often considered a loophole to label any experience as belonging to either a spiritual category, or misinterpreting mental health as mental disorder. A defining characteristic of *Darśana*, starting from the Vedic traditions to modern Indian philosophy of Tukaram, Kabir, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Narayana Guru, and the Sufi and Bhakti traditions, is the well set goal in terms of discipline in thinking and practicing. Such a discipline is expected to lead to clarity about purpose, goal, and also the ability to express (verbally and objectively) the experience in a simple and coherent manner. Therefore we have *epistemologies* of spiritual experiences.

There is one more difficulty when we place Indian psychology in the context of Indian philosophy. The greatest danger faced by philosophers not only in the ancient past but also in the present is their dependence on an apparently clear vortex created by a whirlpool of words, without spending much effort to cross the theoretical boundaries and reach earthly domains. Often this could create an apparent silence for the listener or the reader too. But, the superficiality of such vortices, since short lived, cannot create lasting depth of awareness. The practical value of Indian

philosophy and the critical tests necessary to understand the meanings—relating to physical, mental or spiritual world—could be brought forth by understanding what is Indian psychology.

It will be hence necessary to keep in mind that we will not be able to understand one set of words by another set of words but only by extending the scope of their suggestive/indirect meanings, relating them to self-exploration and critical examination. If we do not become sensitive to and critical about our tendency to restrict ourselves in a theoretical circle and do not realize that going around the periphery of words will not give us a natural leap and liberation, then we will be caught up in worlds of words. Also, we lose sensitivity for specifics. Usage of hyperbolic words and expressions borrowed from Indian mysticism will not have the power for creating corresponding experiences which are but dependent upon a rigorous and critical system of practice and self-exploration. Interpretation is important. It is also important to integrate and connect the meanings with the totality of our life experiences.

A possible guard to avoid this trend is to have a working classification of the sources not only for Indian philosophy and Indian mysticism but also for Indian art, Indian literary theories, indigenous systems of health and folk medicine ranging from the origins in the past to contemporary ideas and practices. The working classification in its thematic structure could differentiate between sources of literature following a basic division of (a) mental health and therapy, (b) transcendental and spiritual experiences, and (c) extra-ordinary and unusual abilities (*siddhi*).

Such a classification could then locate under appropriate classes, sources for discipline of mind, discipline of body, discipline of ethical living etc. This would prevent homogenization of different issues and losing clarity about distinct purposes served by each. Also, what we work for is neither the “hybridization” of discourses and traditions, nor a clash of ideas without distinguishing between, whether they are about epistemological, experiential, mental or spiritual importance. It is not even an eventual reduction of these under standard categories guided mainly by Anglo-Saxon cultural and psychological notions.

#### HEALTH AND NOT CURE

Healing is the goal of Indian psychological traditions. It is not limited to cure, as we understand in the mainstream practice, but continues with therapy guided by one’s own mental disciplines and spiritual practices. Cure is more or less external intervention and the treatment is relatively passive, whereas healing involves more caring and counseling. Healing is more active and the whole process is interactive and integral. In Indian wisdom tradition, cure and healing do not have such a distinction. In Ayurveda, *svāstyaṃ*, coming to self or being in self, could be compared to the concept of healing; and *ārogyaṃ*, balance of *guṇās* or living according to one’s *prakṛti*, physical constitution, is similar to the concept of cure.

Since the focus is on mental health and not necessarily mental disorder, the goal for healing is not redemption but progress recorded in a scale which marks along health,

the order from mental health to spiritual uplift. The reason for the emphasis on health and spiritual progress is the philosophy that spirit is the crux (with the exception of a few schools) of mind and body, and hence continued mental health is continued self-exploration. To realize one's spiritual and real identity is to have a healthy identity, the spirit being core health. The quasi-philosophical issues about death and self-identity share a common platform with Indian psychology toward understanding and experiencing higher states of mental health and spiritual existence. Hence it might be even appropriate to alternatively term Indian psychology as *Indian health psychology*.

Ideas about self-transformation and spiritual experiences are presented in Indian psychology in concurrence with a philosophical position. For instance, for the idealist schools the division between ordinary and transcendental experience itself is incorrect, and any experience has the potential to be a transformative experience. Therefore, healing is not an event caused by the "other" but by the Self (the agent) via personal follow up. Although the experience could be described as therapeutic, the process is not therapy, but Self-healing. Healing is not by cathartic methods, according to their referent, but by creating transpersonal ideas, visions, thoughts, experiences, goals, world-views, and most importantly self-identity. One such method is an array of imageries and metaphors used which are different, both by kind and order, to create new experiences, to re-look and envision the given situation from a creative perspective and to act anew from that perspective. Spiritual healing is unfolding one's potential.

#### PROGRESS OF SEARCH AND PERSONAL GROWTH

The psychology of Self-knowledge to actualize ones potential is central to Indian philosophy. The difficult task in understanding the psychological significance of Self-knowledge is to avoid cognitive reduction of something basic to our identity, and a mere intra-psychic engagement, and at the same time relating the foundational to a world of experiences and responses. The notion of personal growth is mostly ruled by the idea that change has to happen to states of minds in a(n) (abstract) transcendental and other worldly manner. The usual pitfall in spiritual quest, or search for transcendence, happens to progress in thinking and conceptualizing, and spontaneity in responding because of conclusivity and division of experience into 'ordinary' and 'transcendental.'

What needs to be checked is whether transformation and evolution of consciousness imply basic attitudinal and self-identity changes and shifts. The concept of healing, thus, in Indian psychology, often is not just a solution to a problem but a state of perfection aimed for by one and all. The Bhakti traditions and its savants are exemplars, for example, in redefining spiritual uplift by connecting it to self-transformation and enrichment of positive emotions.

#### FOUNDATIONS OF INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

It is important to understand the foundations which hold together Indian ways of thinking. This will help us to know them as leading to a discipline of Indian

psychology. Such a core of foundations involves a thinking that connects the gross and the subtle, the particular and the universal, the outer and the inner, the objective and the subjective through a discipline of transcendence surrounded by a higher order of ethical living and exercises for precision in thinking and experiencing such as meditation.

Indian wisdom traditions perceive existence as connected with the outside world of objects and the inside world of experiences. There are several verses in the *Brāhmaṇas* that suggest the quest for both the source of objective knowledge and subjective experience. Beginning from the origins of *Darśana* to the classical schools and saints of Indian philosophy and indigenous wisdom traditions the focus is not to begin from the outside heterogeneity and unite the units by an emergent phenomenon. This is true even if we take the most realist schools.

There are two paradigms in the classical schools, in spite of the differences in their metaphysical and epistemological positions. These are (a) what we see and experience, which is constituted by the given (already created) and the immanent, (b) what we can see and experience which is constituted by the possibilities and the transcendent (Menon, 2003). It is within these two paradigms that the elaborate and detailed discussion on fundamental experiences such as pain and pleasure, sorrow and possible happiness, selfishness and selflessness, freedom and bondage, the given and the possible etc. takes place. *Darśana* is an attempt to bridge the seemingly two opposing paradigms through an exploration of the self, based on systematic discussions on (a) theoretical, (b) experiential, and (c) transcendental issues.

#### IMAGERIES FOR TRANSCENDENCE

Rational analysis, in Indian thought, is subservient to experiential paradigms. Indian schools of thought, in general, have one common thread. They all relate to a larger, deeper, and holistic concept/entity called “self.” Whether it is for affirmation or denial they spend considerable analytic and synthetic thinking to form a philosophy of “self.” Both analysis (structured and “leading-to-next” kind of hierarchical thinking) and experience are used as epistemological tools in an integral manner to form distinct but inter-related ontologies. Metaphors and imageries are used as epistemological tools for creating transcendence in thinking and thereby experiencing. The aim is not to arrive at structured and classified/listed knowledge of *another* object/phenomenon but understanding in relation to an abiding entity whether it is the self/no-self/matter.

There is an increasing amount of literature in present day cognitive science that shows metaphors and imageries are key to complex thinking and reasoning. Metaphorical thinking opens up new doors for perceiving things and also integrates the identity of the person with the whole process of understanding. This causes a difference in understanding not only the object of inquiry but also the one who inquires. It is interesting that it is mostly for institutional knowledge that we use linear thinking. This is not the case when we are left with our own individual experiences of the mental world. We do not try to fashion or

“construct” our experience according to the third-person knowledge we already carry with us. It is our day-to-day attitudes and life styles that define the nature of our experiences.

By the effective use of a rich variety of metaphors and imageries *Darśana* attempts to cause transcendence *in* thinking *while* thinking. The transcendence is not only in the form of a cognitive leap from the distinct to the whole, and a language game, but also the experiential interconnectedness between the two. Hence this is different from Wittgenstein’s idea of “philosophical therapy.” Philosophical therapy promulgated by Wittgenstein, “attempts to disclose the conditions that imprison us and the views that make us run up against the limits of our cage, that is, it transforms the latent, unconscious thought, into an explicit and tangible representation with which we can tamper. Philosophical therapy is concerned with the universal structure of subjectivity, with what it means to be a subject, and with the way a sense of self is structured by means of language” (Brand, 2000).

*Darśana’s* technique of interlacing analysis with metaphors and imageries is found to lead to an inclusive understanding of the relation of the “other” with the experiencer and the content of experience. Such a *jñāna*, cognition, is expected also to lead to a spiritual experience of experiencing the multitude as a whole (*na iha nānāsti kiñcana; Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad: IV.4.1*—there is no plurality here) and understanding “change as a mere matter of words, a simple name” (*vācarambhaṇam vikāro nāmadheyam; Chāndogya Upaniṣad: VI.1.4*).

The *samvāda*, dialogues presented in the *Upaniṣads* is one instance for “metaphorical thinking.” In many *Upaniṣadic* stories we find the teacher helping the student to take cues from simple experiments relating to her immediate environment, like the salted water, seed of the *nyagrodha* tree, web of spider, shadow on the water, and so on. “Simple experiments have universal validity and go deep into one’s heart. It does not provoke doubts and apprehensions and fill the blanks left by verbal descriptions. They are more direct and nonverbal. The test of a method of teaching is its architectural simplicity and verbal parsimony. That is what we find in the *Upaniṣadic* teaching” (Swami Bodhananda & Menon, 2003, p. 65).

Metaphors and narratives are employed to explain simple experiments and experiences as well as the ontology of the experiencer and the experienced. They reorganize experience by presenting a different kind of meaning and posit the distinct components in perspective and in one-to-one relationship, all the while suggesting an integral and whole background. A significant change achieved through metaphorical thinking is a change in the formation of categories of thinking, and thinking from multiple levels simultaneously. The idea of “sitting near” (the meaning of “*Upaniṣad*”) “emphasizes the importance of personality and the silence and quietness of communication . . . more is achieved by hints and suggestions than by words” (Swami Ranganathananda, 1987, p. 266).

Two classes of metaphors are used in *Darśana*: one for explaining the content of an experience and another for explaining its ontology. In the first class the focus is on the functional meaning of one theme of the metaphor, and in the second class, the focus is on two themes in the metaphor and their relationship. Astonishingly this

is true if we check the classical philosophy of Vedanta or the myths of more contemporary forms of ritual arts.

#### SAMVĀDA—PSYCHOLOGY OF DIALOGUING, AND SPIRITUAL INTROSPECTION

The teacher-pupil relationship has a significant place in ancient and classical Indian philosophy, and even today, from the point of view of pedagogy, character building, psychotherapy, and mainly in setting standards for the processes devised for transferring knowledge, formulating concepts and ideas, and building theories. The traditional criteria for the teacher are: well versed in wisdom teachings, established in the practice, free from self-aggrandizing needs, enjoys global vision, even-minded, motivelessly compassionate, fearless, willing and capable of sharing knowledge without entanglement (Swami Bodhananda, 2005).<sup>3</sup> A classical definition of the Guru is “one who helps remove the darkness of self-ignorance and brings the light of self-knowledge” (*Advayatāraka Upaniṣad* 14–18, verse 5).

An important characteristic of *Darśana* underlies the central concern for Indian thinking. This characteristic also defines the method of imparting and discovering a value for knowledge relating to the psyche of the person who does the teaching and the one who is taught. Through the structure and specificity of Indian metaphysics and epistemology is built a facility to develop a pedagogy fostering an integral development of not only the student but also the teacher. This is interesting because the hierarchy of teacher as the giver and the student as the receiver is often checked by the practice of teaching which adopts two methods that cannot be classified under monologue transference. The practice of dialoguing—*samvāda*—that we see in the Upaniṣads, Purāṇās and Epics, and maintaining two distinct styles of argumentation while presenting a position—*purvapakṣa siddhānta*—that is prominent in the literature of distinct schools of philosophy, make the classical tradition a living one. These two practices also consider the cognitive and emotive development of the persons involved while indicating an interactive socio-cultural context. *Samvāda* is a pan-Indian concept, occurring in Buddhist, Jain, and many other Brahmanical texts (Patton, 2004).

*Samvāda* plays a central role in understanding Indian psychology. The style of *samvāda*, though not of an argumentative style, is the essence of foundational Indian psychology, famous examples being the Upaniṣadic literature and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. As Yohanan Grinshpon says in his *Crisis and Knowledge*, “The Upaniṣadic literature illustrates and focuses on the difference between life on the margin—characterized by insufficient inner space for understanding latent instructions about the self—and the adequate mode of receptivity to such instruction. Renunciation, collectedness, personal crisis, and awareness of suffering are among the circumstances conducive—even essential—to the creation of inner space commensurate with the emergence of the self” (Grinshpon, 2003, p. 26).

Although *samvāda* relates to logical and epistemological methods, the focus is on the states of mind that are important in the discussion about the primal nature of self. Hence, the discussions on metaphysical and ontological issues are always inter-related to understanding ethical, axiological, aesthetic, and spiritual issues. There is

a constant attempt to reconcile and integrate different experiences, and the existence of contradictions. The goal is to generate worldviews based on an understanding of life with answers for fundamental questions about self-identity, nature of world, creation, purpose of life, nature of knowledge, value systems etc. The dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* serves a therapeutic function, although formally considered a philosophical treatise. The question Maitreyi asks her husband and accomplished seer Yajnavalkya, “what is that which is most valuable for a person” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2:4), turns into an interesting discussion that leads to the quietude of the inner self and relativity of everything else in the context of the ultimate value of “self.”<sup>4</sup>

The pre-Upaniṣadic literature initiates dialogue in the form of prayers and hymns. As we come to the *Upaniṣads*, *Samvāda* is a distinct genre, with varied dialogues between the old sage and the young student, father and son, sage and king, sage and god, death and young boy, husband and wife, to list a few instances. The nature of *Samvāda* takes different forms such as formal debate, argumentation, instruction, loving sharing and discussion as we move from the pre-Upaniṣadic to the classical schools of Indian thought. Apart from the content of the dialogue, the process of dialogue plays an important role in contributing to the wellbeing of the partners involved. It gives total and one-time attention to how worldviews are formed, how mental and physical discipline are significant to conceive an idea, how way of living is connected with the self-identity of the inquirer (Menon, 2005a).

#### LIFESTYLE, TRANSCENDENTAL EXPERIENCE, AND SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

Another interesting feature of Indian psychological thinking is the importance given to the way of living or lifestyle subscribed to by the schools, no matter how realistic or idealistic their metaphysical position is. The understanding of a particular school of thought will not be fulfilled by “understanding” its epistemology or even worldview but by following a lifestyle which is prescribed. Experience is the core of understanding. This feat would primarily require the student’s mind to follow certain rules and discipline of forming integral and inter-related connections rather than individual and isolated relationships. This approach is a major difference when we compare with the dialogues in the West on mental health. When in Indian Wisdom traditions discipline of emotional needs is primary, in mainstream West structured thinking is more important.

In contemporary discussions the word “spiritual” has gained new meanings, many of which emphasize the role of personal growth, ecological awareness, empathy, intersubjective transactions, emotional wellbeing, efficiency in expressions and creative living. The distinct feature of the psychological traditions of Indian thinking is its spiritual openness, by which I mean not just a liberal philosophy, but the facility to integrate new experience and new understanding into an evolving scheme of ideas all leading and pointing to self-exploration. The ideal of spiritual living is given foremost importance more than moral and epistemological theories. It is not to say that the ethical guidelines and practices are less important in these traditions but to suggest that all such theories and discussions are addressed from a spiritual platform that discusses the nature of self and the world of experience, and the

relationship between them. The ethical implications such as balance of mind and equanimity stems from the knowledge of the nature of self, god, and their relation with the experienced and possible world.

Liberation is the key concept, however radically diverse the guidelines are, suggested by different schools. Identity and self are the key problems addressed with the help of metaphysical positions, epistemological theories, and ethical guidelines. The breadth and length of discussions in *Darśana* are interesting in their diversity. They are not just different discussions on what exactly the nature of self is, but mutually reinforcing dialogues on the consensus view that all discussions are to be guided by the coordinating concept of “self” and an agent who engages in the spiritual quest.

Invariably the discussions in *Darśana* are discussions leading from the recognition of “self” and “identity” as larger categories for thinking. It could be for this reason that epistemology does not have the supremacy in deciding the course of events and validation, but only with equal participation of reflective thinking (*vicāra*) in discourse. Analytical thinking could be delivering its goods only if it is accompanied by reflective (*vicāra*) and intuitive (*nidhidhyāsana*) thinking.

An interesting characteristic of the classical systems of Indian thinking is the overriding issue above all issues to connect and catapult from what could be considered as the given to what is possible. The concept about experience is not strictly what is caused by an extraneous factor(s) and the history behind, but what could be possible by the distinctive and unique nature of the individual. Therefore, experience is not merely a theme for understanding based on its immediate context such as cause, or results, but a tool for further exploration of the self. The ordinariness and extra-ordinariness of an experience is understood more from the *standpoint of the self* than from the standpoint of *what* causes it. The former could be best described as a spiritual introspection and the latter as a form of psychoanalytic introspection. Spiritual introspection also impels the understanding of the self along with the understanding of the object of experience. The object of experience, result of experience, and the experiencer constitute the triad of the complex phenomenon of experience, each one of which is significant in the understanding of the other.

Although Indian psychology does not consider the analysis of earlier experiences as the doorway to cure, it uses the theory of *vāsana/samskāra* and *guṇa*<sup>5</sup> to explain unconscious conditioning. *Vāsana* is the germinal residue of propensities acquired from past experiences (childhood, past life etc.) and can be positive and negative. The unconscious mental impressions manifest from the three primal elements or *gunas* (*Yogasutrās of Patanjali* 4.13). Negative *vāsana* affect social as well as personality integration and self unfoldment, and could be kept in check by cultivating positive *vāsanas*. It could be overcome by techniques such as *pratiprasava* (*Yogasutrās* 2.10), offered by Patanjali in his *Yogasutrās* that focus on awareful re-living of the event with non-judgmental awareness. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* the ideal of *sthītaprajña*, a state of unwavering self-abidance, is presented as the final step in the process of transformation of the person. From the state of immaturities such as being swayed by the functions of the *gunās*, and the physical duals of heat and cold, mental duals of likes and dislikes, the *bhōgi*—one whose identity is defined by and dependent on what

she consumes (physical, mental and intellectual food)—becomes a *yogi*—one whose identity is defined by and dependent on her inner stability.

The four definitions given to Yoga in the *Bhagavad Gītā* indicate such a transformation (Menon, 2005b). These definitions are the following: Equanimity is Yoga. Here Yoga is taken as a transcendental category and transcendence—Yoga—is equated with equanimity—*samatvaṃ* (*Bhagavad Gītā*: 2:48). The transcendental nature of Yoga could manifest as “skillfulness in action” (*Bhagavad Gītā*: 2:50). Yoga becomes a practice and state in the context of me-in-the-world situation. The state of Yoga is attained by “abidance on self” (*Bhagavad Gītā*: 2:53). Yoga is attained also by giving up the union with *dukha*, unhappiness (*Bhagavad Gītā* 6:23). The two concepts of *naiṣkarmya* (no-action) and *niṣkāma* (inaction) also serve the purpose of emphasizing the idea that the transcendence of *karma* is not in the giving up of it but being in it with the spirit of Yoga. The “being in” is backed up by the four definitions of Yoga (Menon, 1999). Yoga is presented as “freedom in action” and not freedom from action, as suggested by the concept of *brahma-karma-samādhi* (*Bhagavad Gītā*: 4.24).

#### LIBERATION

What exactly is meant by *mokṣa*—liberation—in Indian psychology? The question is whether it is an experience in space and time like any other experience, or a completely different kind of experience that is trans-spatiotemporal, or a special kind of cognition. *Mokṣa* (liberation) often is not explained in direct terms in Indian psychology. The student is encouraged to think about the metaphysical status of the “present” and “given” experience which is dualistic in nature. Experiences evoke either pleasure or displeasure (*Pañcadaśī* of Vidyaranya: Ch.1—*rāga dveṣāti sankulah*). Still the two responses originate from the experiencer. Sankaracharya’s (founder of Advaita Vedanta) most famous explanation for the much misinterpreted concept of *māya* comes herein—*māya* is in action when the “other” which is the basic epistemological component of experience appears to be having an independent existence. *Māya* is that which is real when experienced and non-real when awakened. (Swami Gambhirananda, 1965) *Brahmasutra adhyāsa bhāṣya: svakāle satyavat bhāti prabhode satyasat bhavet*). This happens when “I” mistake my identity to be defined by the “other.” When “I” awake to my true “Self” from the slumber of identity/identities it is seen that the existence of the “other” no more overwhelmingly defines my existence. It is to be noted here that the “other” corresponds to the responses (likes and dislikes) and basic attitudes (identity and difference) by which we relate to objects, people and events, and not objects, people, and events per se. That is the reason why the analysis of the basic epistemological component of experience, namely duality, is looked at from the psychological point of view of the experiencer. Although theories of *mokṣa* differ for the various schools, there is unanimity concerning the transformative and higher/deeper nature of the liberative experience. Through various ways of *ātma jñāna* (self-knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion to a chosen deity), or *yoga* (disciplining of mind), the attempt is to merge with a deeper and higher consciousness and define one’s identity and relation with the experienced world from there. How day-to-day experiences could be related

to and founded on a transcendental being, and how the transcendental being could be experienced in the “world outside” forms the crux of *mokṣa*.

The major experiential issues that are discussed in the classical schools are also interconnected with the major transcendental issues. Thus the experience and understanding of pain and pleasure are connected with guidelines for transcending pleasure and pain; experience and understanding of freedom and bondage are connected with the guidelines for transcending self-identities and rigid perceptions about the context; experience and understanding of different states of mind are connected with the guidelines for transcending words, verbal structures and attributed meanings.

#### JUNCTIONS AND MEETING POINTS

The junctions and meeting points between the discussions on theoretical, experiential, and transcendental issues are quite unique to *Darśana*. For instance: ethical and spiritual discipline is necessary for new experiences and knowing self differently; knowledge of self could change the way we understand; knowledge of self could reorient our experience and attitudes; knowledge of self could allow for new responses to the situation/context.

What distinguishes the Indian way of thinking from what we today call the Western way of thinking is the curious connection present in *Darśana* between theoretical, experiential, and transcendental issues. It is also this distinguishing feature of Indian thinking that is often misinterpreted as “mystic” and “other-worldly.” The important point missed here is that we fail to recognize that what interested Indian thinking was not the linearity and immediate conveniences through rigid structures of knowledge but an open-endedness where experience—*anubhava*—and reflection—*vicāra*—could together bring about a re-orientation of how we construe our self-identities and how we respond to the given.

The foundational issues, crossing the rigidity of being theoretical, experiential or transcendental, which are embedded in the *Darśana* are two-fold: about human mind, consciousness and experience; and about self-identity. The guidelines for the exploration of these issues are (a) to identify the unitary in the discrete, (b) to have a mental as well as spiritual meaning for any experience, its object and its experiencer, (c) to address the ontological cause (not merely the cognitive or mental component) for therapy, and, (d) to have values, compassion, and discipline as essential guidelines for self-exploration.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Binding experiences” is how physical, discrete, quantitative neural processes and functions give rise to experiences that are non-physical, subjective, unitary and qualitative. Also see David Chalmers, “The Puzzle of Conscious Experience,” *Scientific American*, December 1995, pp. 62–68. (Weblink: <http://consc.net/papers/puzzle.html>)

<sup>2</sup> A three-day “Festival of (declining) ritual-art forms of North Kerala” was held at Kozhikode (Kerala) from 14–16 February, 2004, and was video documented entitled “Ritual Arts of Malabar, 2004.” This documentary supported

by Sambodh Foundation, India and Infinity Foundation, Princeton, helped study the nature of the spiritual experiences, and epistemology, of ritual-arts of Malabar.

<sup>3</sup> Swami Bodhananda, in an email to the author in August 2005.

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/brdup/brhad\\_II-04.html](http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/brdup/brhad_II-04.html) for the dialogue between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi on the absolute self.

<sup>5</sup> The three *gunās* are the three aspects of *prakṛti* (the subtlest primordial matter or primary constituent, according to Sāṃkhya): *satva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. *Satva* is the aspect of *prakṛti* which has the nature of existence, light, illumination, sentience, harmony, or clearing. *Rajas* has the nature of activity, motion, energy, movement, or changing. And, *tamas* has the nature of stability, stasis, darkness, dullness, heaviness, insentience, obstructing, and veiling. For a description on *guṇa* see [www.swamij.com/yoga-sutras.htm](http://www.swamij.com/yoga-sutras.htm)

## REFERENCES

Note: First names are retained per request of author.

BRAND, ROY. (2000). Philosophical therapy: Wittgenstein and Freud. *International Studies in Philosophy*, Vol 32.1. Albany: State University of New York.

GRINSPON, YOHANAN. (2003). *Crisis and knowledge: The Upanishadic experience and story-telling*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

MENON, SANGEETHA. (1999). Understanding the ‘what’ and ‘where’ of consciousness: Revisiting the *Bhagavad Gītā* to ask a few more questions. In S. Menon, M.G. Narasimhan, A. Sinha, & B.V. Sreekantan (Eds.), *Scientific and philosophical studies on consciousness* (pp. 380–392). Bangalore: National Institute of Advanced Studies.

MENON, SANGEETHA. (2002). *Binding experiences: Looking at the contributions of Adi Sankaracarya, Tuncettu Ezuttacchan & Sri Narayana Guru in the context of recent discussions on consciousness studies*. Monograph published under the program Knowledge Dissemination series. Shimla, India: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

MENON, SANGEETHA. (2003). Binding experiences for a first person approach: Looking at Indian ways of thinking (*darsana*) and acting (*natya*) in the context of current discussions on ‘consciousness.’ In Chhanda Chakraborti, Manas K Mandal & Rimi B Chatterjee (Eds.), *On mind and consciousness*, (pp. 90–117). Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, and Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur.

MENON, SANGEETHA. (2005a). Self and self-transcendences in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In D.P. Chattopadhyaya (Ed.), *Self, society and science: Theoretical and historical perspectives*, (pp. 217–229), 10, Part 2 of ‘Project of History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization.’ New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations.

MENON, SANGEETHA. (2005b). Being and wellbeing in the Upanishadic literature. In K Ramakrishna Rao, & Sonali Bhatt Marwaha (Eds.), *Towards a spiritual psychology* (pp. 72–96). Delhi: Samvad India Foundation.

PAÑCADAŚI OF SRI VIDYARANYA (see Swami Swahananda).

PATANJALI’S *YOGASUTRĀ* (see Swami Prabhavananda, & Isherwood, Christopher).

PATTON, LAURIE. (2004). Samvada as a literary and philosophical genre. *Evam: Forum on India Representations*, 3(1&2), 188.

SWAMI BODHANANDA & MENON, SANGEETHA. (2003). *Dialogues: Philosopher meets seer*. New Delhi: Blue Jay Books.

SWAMI BODHANANDA. (2005). *Seven Hindu spiritual laws*. Delhi: Blue Jay Books.

SWAMI GAMBHIRANANDA. (1965). *Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya*. Almora: Advaita Ashrama.

SWAMI PRABHAVANANDA, & ISHERWOOD, CHRISTOPHER. (1987) *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math.

SWAMI RANGANATHANANDA. (1987). *The Message of the Upanishads*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

SWAMI SWAHANANDA. *Panchadasi of Sri Vidyaranya*. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math.

## The Author

*Sangeetha Menon* is a philosopher with a doctorate awarded for the thesis entitled “The Concept of Consciousness in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.” After graduating in zoology she took her postgraduate degree in philosophy and Ph.D. from University of Kerala. A gold-medallist and first-rank holder for postgraduate studies, she received a University Grants Commission fellowship for her doctoral studies for five years. She is a Fellow at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore since 1996. Sangeetha has been working in the area of consciousness studies for over fifteen years, and has given numerous lectures and presentations at various national and international forums on consciousness, spiritual and aesthetic experiences, and science-spirituality interface issues. Sangeetha has co-edited three books: *Science and Beyond: Cosmology, consciousness and technology in Indic traditions* (2004, NIAS), *Consciousness and Genetics* (2002, NIAS) and *Scientific and Philosophical Studies on Consciousness* (1999, NIAS). Her book *Dialogues: Philosopher meets the Seer* (2003, Blue Jay Books) is a set of nine dialogues with her Guru Swami Bodhananda on socio-cultural issues of contemporary importance. She has been awarded two national awards and one international award for her achievements in the field of consciousness and Indian philosophy and psychology. In 1988 she was awarded the “Swami Pranavananda Philosophy Trust of India Award.” In 2003 she was awarded the “Young Philosopher Award” for her research work from the Indian Council of Philosophical Research. Recently (2005) she won the international award entitled “Global Perspectives on Science and Spirituality Award” and is currently working on a theme relating “consciousness, agency, and spiritual experience.” She is an avid photographer, artist, and web-designer.