

**Discussant Paper on Ravi Ravindra's Paper**

**EXPLORING YOGA AND KNOWLEDGE: IN SEARCH OF A NEW  
PARADIGM FOR EAST-WEST DIALOGUE**

by

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(A Response to Ravi Ravindra's Paper on "Yoga and Knowledge")

Committee VI is exploring eastern approaches to knowledge and values. The notion of 'Qi' is used as a point of interaction for eastern philosophical and religious thinking and contemporary western science. Within the proceedings of the seminar the term Qi may be rendered as "life force", "vital force/energy", "cosmic force/energy" etc.. The central aim of this seminar is to explore a paradigm (rather than a model or a theory) which will facilitate a dialogue between traditional eastern thought and the new developments in the recent physics. The new physics for instance treats the totality of existence, including matter and consciousness as an unbroken whole. But this perspective has generated new relationships for man in terms of other disciplines like biology, medicine, psychology etc..

It is against this background that Ravindra makes his presentation of the science of yoga, some what on the lines of an east-west dialogue. I find his presentation of the science of yoga a lucid, authentic and a penetrating one. But his attempt to relate this presentation to the wider issues of the seminar are some what abrupt. His brief impressions on 'yoga and physics' and 'yoga and oriental thought' leaves some thing to be desired and some attempt to discuss these issues against the wider lay out of the paper would have been most welcome.

Specially in this context, I find some problematic issues in the role that he ascribes to prāna. I shall first briefly sum up the thematic content of the analysis of the science of yoga and raise a few problems and observations in the context of the relevance of this paper for the wider issues of the seminar.

## II

- i. Ravindra points out that it is the aim of yoga to generate a transformation of the human person from his natural and actual form to his potential perfect and real form. Thus man instead of being subjected to the mechanical forces of nature and the law of karma should rise above his condition and attain a true state of liberation. This procedure has a kind of basis in the very root meaning of the word 'education', to draw out from man, what is potentially found there in man. This undertaking concerns the whole man, mind, body and emotions.
- ii. Though there are different yogas, in general, their central aim is harnessing the entire body-mind for the purpose of the spirit. The mind itself is beset with limitations in the search for knowledge. The mind uses the modes of judging, comparing, discussion, association, all within the frame of the subject-object duality. Also, mis-identification of the person with the sense organs is a fundamental error generating types of egoism, particularisation etc. Thus normal sensory knowledge as well as conceptual and linguistic categories through which

knowledge is obtained are defective. It is the science of yoga which can purify man's consciousness from these factors of projection and distortions. What yoga does is the preparation of the ground for the emergence of real discernment and insight (prajñā). The basic research method of yoga is to completely quieten the mind without agitation and projection, letting the object reveal its true nature.

iii. In all these processes of training the mind and body, proper breathing takes a central position. Ravindra says that breath can be considered as the, "whole subtle energy of life, connecting mind with consciousness". In Indian thought, it is the vital energy, the quality of being etc.

### III

As the central notion of Ravindra's analysis is prāna, it may be useful to probe into this concept more closely, as the notion seems to submerge more finer contextual distinctions in the usage of the word in oriental thought. Ravindra makes the following observation: "Proper breathing plays an extremely important function in Yoga. The quality of breathing in a person is intimately and directly related with his inner state... Traditional appreciation of this fact is reflected in all ancient, particularly languages, in which the words for spirit, breath and air are either the same or very close to each other. This is, for example, true in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Hebrew, Arabic and

Greek...Prana, which is translated as breath, is in fact the whole subtle energy of life, connecting mind with consciousness". (Ravindra's paper, pp.16-17).

In Pali Buddhism, the pali word pāna is associated with breathing or the presence of life, not in the sense of spirit or a metaphysical principle of energy. In fact the analysis the levels of being and consciousness cutting across Hinduism and Buddhism, presented in what may be called the 'perennial philosophy' also makes these distinctions:

- i. Physical - non living matter/energy
- ii. Biological - living, pranic, sentient matter/  
energy
- iii. Mental - ego, logic, thinking
- iv. Subtle - archetypal, trans-individual,  
intuitive
- v. Causal - formless radiance, perfect  
transcendence
- vi. Ultimate - consciousness as such, the  
source and nature of all other levels

(see, Ken Wilber, "Physics, Mysticism, and the New Holographic Paradigm", in, Ken Wilber ed., The Holographic Paradigm, (Boulder, 1982)

The Buddhist tradition, which also discusses breathing in the context of meditation considers breathing as a representative of bodily functions (kāya-sankhāra).

## IV

In spite of the divergence of method and aim between yoga and modern science (Ravindra, p.16), it has to be emphasized that the progress in modern physics point towards a world which they can share with traditional eastern thought. The solid material objects of Newtonian Physics have dissolved into wave-like probabilities of interconnections and instead of isolated building blocks, what we have is a complicated web of relations. These dynamic patterns of inter-dependency, interaction and inter-relatedness points towards a kind of causal nexus shared by the scientist and the traditional philosopher. The search for a common nexus of causal relations, interconnections and interdependence would be the most intelligible terms in which we can place mysticism and science together, a common forum for discussion.

But eastern philosophers in general are more concerned with the mental and volitional aspects of the causal nexus. In the Buddhist tradition like most of the philosophical traditions of the east will be more concerned with laws pertaining to psychological, moral and spiritual aspects of man. For instance in the Buddhist tradition, we speak of different realms in which the laws of the universe operate 'physical laws (utu-niyāma), biological laws (bīja-niyāma), psychological laws (citta-niyāma), moral laws (kamma-niyāma) and laws pertaining to spiritual phenomena (dhamma-niyāma). The patterns of configurations within the causal relations are neither of a deterministic or an indeterministic

sort but rather present themselves as probable tendencies than inevitable consequences. Thus while the causal structure manifest in the universe provides some kind of basis for a dialogue between mysticism of the east and science, the focus of the sciences and religions are different. Their aims can have some resemblances as both are attempting to study the nature of reality, though the concept of reality in the eastern philosophical and religious systems is wider. Also, most important, east is concerned with emancipatory knowledge, the kind of knowledge which would free one self from the suffering and unsatisfactoriness in the human condition.

Thus though on these points, my emphasis (making possible a meaningful dialogue between science and mysticism) is a little different from Ravindra's point of view, I agree with him that as far as the methods are concerned there are very striking differences. Pure reason or speculative reason cannot help us to understand the nature of things (in the most comprehensive sense of the term). Experimental science with its methods of controlled observation guided by reasoning can take us only to a point, the experiential method by the development of meditational techniques helps us to develop extra-sensory perception. Western science can only draw conceptual maps about this realm of experience, they cannot enter the territory.

This difference seems to be an in-built feature of the concept of science and the concept of man we have. If a scientist practices meditation, in a sense during this period he ceases to be a scientist. This gap appears to be a conceptual gap, impossible to bridge. But there are few qualifying points. Any mechanical conformity to eastern religions or philosophical tracts will not produce any magic, it is a hard road to traverse. But the scientist can always derive inspiration from eastern mystical traditions (a fact which can be seen in the recent history of science). This can break through the routinized and mechanical ways of doing science and generate original and creative ways of doing science. A perspective of this sort emerges in the writings of David Bohm when he discusses the nature of the 'measurable' and 'immeasurable'. "This involves, of course, not only the outward display of measure in terms of external units but also inward measure, as health of the body, moderation in action, and meditation, which gives an insight into the measure of thought." (Author's emphasis. David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order (London, 1980), p.25. The illusion that the self and the world are broken into fragments, originates according to Bohm, due to the measures of thought we adopt. Bohm continues, "Such insight implies an original and creative act of perception into all aspects of life, mental and physical, both through the senses and through the mind, and this is perhaps the true meaning of meditation."



On the lines of Bohm's reflections, a scientist who practices yoga and meditation can use these techniques to break through his routinized habits of thought, the 'measure of thought' which restricts his horizons of what may be called the 'scientific imagination'. This is perhaps a more positive and a more productive line to explore, for the basis of a possible dialogue between 'yoga' and 'physics' or eastern mysticism and western science. Any way, it would be most encouraging in this era to find scientists exploring a 'humanistic imagination' instead of a 'technological imagination'.

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