

# Personhood, Practice, and Transformation

Ravi Ravindra, *Dalhousie University, Canada*

*Editorial note: The 2012 McGill Centre for Research on Religion Graduate Students' Conference took place on October 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> at McGill University in Montreal. Dr. Ravi Ravindra kindly agreed to be the keynote speaker for the conference, and we are including his opening address in this volume for the benefit of our readers.*

*Dr. Ravindra's academic career combines a deep, long-standing interest in both natural science and the humanities. Dr. Ravindra is Professor Emeritus at Dalhousie University in Halifax where he served for many years as a Professor in the departments of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Physics. Dr. Ravindra obtained a M. Tech. from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Toronto, where he also completed an M.A. in Philosophy. Dr. Ravindra has held post-doctoral fellowships in Physics at the University of Toronto, in History and Philosophy of Science at Princeton, and in Religion at Columbia University.*

*Dr. Ravindra has been a member of the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, as well as a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla. He was also a member of the Board of Judges for the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, and is the founding director of the Threshold Award for Integrative Knowledge. Dr. Ravindra is currently a Fellow of the Temenos Academy in England.*

*Throughout his academic career Dr. Ravindra has had a deep interest in the mystical teachings of the Indian and Christian classical traditions. He is the author of several books on religion, science, mysticism, and spirituality. Dr. Ravindra's best known work is The Yoga of the Christ (published now in the USA as The Gospel of John in the Light of Indian Mysticism), and in its annual meeting in 2009, the Catholic Theologians' Association of America had a special session dedicated to a discussion of this work. His latest book, The Wisdom of Patañjali's Yoga Sutras, offers a new translation and commentary on Patañjali's Yoga Sutras.*

The theme of personhood, practice, and transformation is central to the great traditions. Let me begin with a quote from the Rig Veda, the oldest text in any Indo-European language and the seminal text in the Hindu tradition.

na vijānāmi yadivedamasmi niṇyah sāmnaddho manasā carāmi.

I know not whether I am the same as this cosmos: a mystery am I, yet burdened by mind I wander. (Rig Veda 1.164.37)

There are two great mysteries: *idam* and *aham*, this all (cosmos) and myself. What indeed is the person in this vast cosmos?

The same question is raised in Psalm 8.

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers  
The moon and the stars which thou hast ordained;  
What is man, that thou art mindful of him?

The only thing searchers of Truth need is to take themselves seriously. Then one wonders, “Who am I?” or “What am I?” The Sanskrit equivalent, “*koham?*,” is regarded as the fundamental existential question in the whole of the Indian tradition. And the associated question naturally arises: “Why am I here?” All of myself together is the instrument of knowing anything about the Truth. If I do not know the instrument, its possibilities and its limitations, I cannot be clear about the sort of knowledge this instrument can have.

If I take myself seriously, I realize right away that before I am a student or a professor or a scientist or an artist, I am a human being in a whole network of relationships—with the air, with other creatures, with other human beings, with the cosmos. I am a child, a parent, a lover, a friend, someone who breathes the air that is also breathed by other creatures, and needs the light produced by the sun and the earth to stand on. I cannot possibly exist without all these relationships. A few minutes of thought will show that I am a very minute part of an intricately interdependent net of relationships in this cosmos. I am not an independent being. The Buddhist idea of co-dependent origination is simply common sense.

It is worth pondering: “Is the body the person?” “Where do you end and where does the air begin?” “Where do you end and I begin?” To see the interconnectedness of all there is has a large effect on our attitude to nature and to the others. A very common idea is that *prāna* is in me and I am in *prāna*—as long as we realize that *prāna* is not simply the ordinary breath but that it is a whole spectrum of subtle energies. This is repeatedly emphasized in the Indian traditions, as also in China as *qi*. *Prāna* is the connecting link between the level of the Earth and of Heaven. As is said in the Torah, God made man from clay, from the earth, and breathed His own breath into him. It is no wonder that so many meditational practices focus on paying attention to breath. In all ancient languages the words for “breath” and “spirit” are intimately connected.

One of the ideas common to all the great traditions is that the death of the body is not the death of the person. There is something non-biological and non-physical that is necessary to being a person. In fact, the spiritual aspect, which is subtler than the body and the mind, is considered to be the most essential part of the person.

Every tradition has insisted that there are many levels of reality—corresponding to different levels of consciousness—from the Highest Spirit to the dead matter. These levels are outside us as well as inside us. And there is a correspondence between the interior and exterior levels. In the spirit of St. Paul, with a slight paraphrase, we can say that “the eyes of the flesh see the things of the flesh; the eyes of the spirit see the things of the spirit.” To develop the eyes of the spirit is the project of spiritual disciplines. It is useful to recall that there are very few remarks of Christ that can be found in all the four canonical gospels; among those few statements is “You have eyes but you do not see; you have ears but you do not hear.” Furthermore, this remark can be found in Prophet Isaiah as well as in a letter of St. Paul. It is clearly important for us to take it seriously and wonder how the eyes of the spirit can be opened. This naturally brings us to considerations of practice and transformation.

All great teachers have said that human beings do not live the way they should, and the way they could. In a Christian context we would find suggestions that in general human beings live in sin, but that they could live in the grace of God; in a Buddhist context the suggestion is that we live as if asleep, but we could wake up. This is what the Buddha did. In fact the very word “buddha” means “one who is awake.” Similarly, in other

traditions there are ways of indicating the gap between the way we live and the way we could. To live rightly needs education, *teriqua*, transformation; this in turn needs a discipline, a spiritual path, a yoga. Science is interested in discovering the way it is; spiritual traditions can hardly ignore the way it is, but they are more interested in assisting an aspirant to discover the way it could be. This requires a radical transformation of a person's entire being—mind, body, and heart.

Why is transformation needed? When we look at ourselves without self-pity and self-justification, we find ourselves conflicted, doing things that we do not want to do, and saying what we do not want to say. "I do not even acknowledge my own actions as mine, for what I do is not what I want to do, but what I detest," says St. Paul. "The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will" (Romans 7:15–20). Similarly, Arjuna asks in the Bhagavad Gita (3:36), "Krishna, what is it that makes a man do evil, even against his own will; under compulsion, as it were?" Why do we do wrong, even against our own better judgment? Simply because we are self-centered and self-occupied. This is what *tanha* means in the famous Noble Truth of the Buddha, which speaks of *tanha* as the cause of *dukkha* (suffering). Being full of ourselves, we don't let Truth or God or Reality guide or run our life. There is a simple Hasidic saying, "There is no room in him for God who is full of himself."

If we become aware of the strong forces that keep us away from the Real, a deep-seated part in us, a particle of Divinity, wishes to be free of these constricting forces. Within each human being there is an element oriented to the Truth, to God, or to Brahman. As St. Augustine said, "Our soul cannot be at rest until it is stayed in God." Whatever other characteristics soul may have, it cannot not be drawn to the Source, just as a magnetic compass cannot not point to the magnetic north. However, if there are other magnets near the compass, or there are magnetic storms, the compass is unable to point to the true north. This is why great spiritual texts such as the *Yoga Sutras* attributed to Patañjali recommend the practice of *vairagya* (detachment, non-attachment) to everything visible or known. Or to use the felicitous expression in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, all things must be placed below the *cloud of forgetting* so that our soul can keep returning to its inherent love for God who is on the other side of the *cloud of unknowing*.

In addition to the force of repulsion from the unbecoming or non-harmonious situation in oneself as well as in the world, there is a force of attraction resulting from a vision of something sublime, or an experience of true love, beauty, or harmony. “The higher *vairagya* arises from a vision of the Transcendent Being (*Purusha*) and leads to the cessation of craving for the things of the world” (*Yoga Sutras* 1.16). Or we begin to sense the truth of the universal testimony of all the sages in the history of humanity that the entire space is permeated with subtle and conscious energies—variously called the Holy Spirit, Allah, Brahman, the Buddha Mind, or simply the One or That—and we wish to be in touch with that all-pervading Reality. We can be more and more convinced that transformation is needed in order to realize what the sages have attested from their experience as the Truth. Practice is needed in order to prepare one’s whole being—body, mind, and heart—so that one can be in contact with the Holy Spirit.

We cannot create this subtle Reality, but we can become receptive to it. This demands a lot of preparation and sacrificing of what one is attached to and ultimately of me-me-me. Prophet Isaiah speaks of hearing the voice of the Lord asking, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?” Only after his lips had been cleansed by a burning coal he could say, “Here am I. Send me” (*Isaiah* 6.6–8).

It is important to note that all spiritual disciplines aim at freedom not *for myself* but *from myself*. Christ said, “Everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (*Luke* 18:10–14). “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (*Matthew* 16:24–26).

This freedom from oneself is sometimes described in stronger terms of dying to oneself. “I die daily,” said St. Paul (*1 Corinthians* 15.31); and there is a remarkable reminder from the Sufi tradition: “If you die before you die, you will not die when you die.”

There are many obstacles (*kleshas*) to transformation. The most important one being ignorance (*avidyā*), primarily of our true nature and of our relationship with the cosmos. It is because of this deep-seated ignorance that we take the transient parts of ourselves—such as the body and the mind—for what is said by all the sages to be eternal, namely, the spirit. If

we begin to see more and more subtly, we begin to realize that human beings are the organs of perception of the cosmos. As is remembered in the Islamic tradition, “Allah said, ‘I was a hidden treasure and wished to be known. Therefore, I created man.’”

Human beings have a special calling. They can be not only organs of perception in the cosmos but also instruments of right action. With more and more spiritual development, they can invoke the help of higher levels within themselves as well as outside—the *devas*, angels, God—and fulfill their proper role, remembering that without God it cannot be done; without human beings it will not be done.

It is important for us not to fix an anthropomorphic image of God, as is sometimes necessitated for the purposes of transmission of culture and of visual arts—as we can see in the painting of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, ironically in the citadel of a tradition committed to struggle against making graven images of God. It is, of course, easier to be against other peoples’ images than our own. This is why a continual turning to an impartial self-knowledge is the *sine qua non* of any serious spiritual discipline. As Christ said, “The Kingdom is inside you, and it is outside you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realize that it is you who are the children of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, you live in poverty, and you are the poverty” (Gospel of Thomas II, 2:3).

*Theologia Germanica* reminds us: “As God is simple goodness, inner knowledge and light, he is at the same time also our will, love, righteousness, and truth, the innermost of all virtues.” The realization of this truth, vouchsafed to the most insightful sages in all lands and cultures needs to be continually regained, lived, and celebrated.

Ultimately we return again and again to the Great Mystery “What am I?,” “*Koham?*” Unlike scientific mysteries, real spiritual mysteries cannot be solved even in principle, but by a steady practice of contemplation the mind and the heart can soar to another level of insight and love where the mystery is dissolved. Then one does not deny it, or reject it, and is not frightened by it. One celebrates the Mystery in song or dance or poetry or philosophy or physics. However, the person has been transformed by the mystery, somewhat freed from oneself, and born of the Spirit.

Only thirteen days before his death, the celebrated poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote a short poem in Bengali, his native language, which in an English translation would read:

In the beginning of my life,  
With the first rays of the rising sun,  
I asked, 'Who am I?'  
Now at the end of my life,  
With the last rays of the setting sun,  
I ask, 'Who am I?'