

# **Towards a Spiritual Psychology**

## **An Indian Perspective**

K. Ramakrishna Rao

### Abstract

Spiritual psychology is defined as the study of mind/consciousness at the point of science-religion interface. The paper (i) presents a perspective of spiritual psychology drawing from classical ideas in the Indian tradition, (ii) points out significant differences between it and the prevailing western perspective and (iii) argues that the two perspectives may be seen as complementary rather than conflicting.

In the Indian tradition, the person (*jiva*) is embodied consciousness. Consciousness-as-such is fundamental and irreducible to brain states. Mind is different from consciousness. Mind, unlike consciousness, is material, albeit very subtle. It is conceived as the interfacing instrumentality between consciousness at one end and the brain at the other. Consciousness in the human condition is clouded by a vortex of forces generated by the mind-body complex, causing the existential predicament of ignorance and suffering. Therefore, the spiritual quest is one of *liberating* consciousness in the person from the limiting influences of the ego, desire and attachment and thus overcome anxiety, stress, distress, and suffering. Such liberation is possible, it is believed, by restraining and retraining the mind so as to transcend the conditioned existence of the person. There are methods by which such a restraint and retraining may be achieved. These include various kinds of yoga based on knowledge (*jnana*), unattached commitment and love (*bhakti*) and selfless action (*karma*).

The Indian perspective differs from the western in three important respects. First, unlike in the western tradition, a distinction is made between mind and consciousness. Second, consciousness-as-such is conceived as nonintentional and devoid of any content. Third, the Indian perspective emphasizes the practical and applied aspects of spiritual psychology, emphasizing the transformation of the person from the conditioned to the unconditioned state as the primary goal. The paper concludes with a discussion of the complementarity of the western and Indian perspectives and the implication and application of spiritual psychology in the areas of education, health, and conflict resolution within and between individuals.

### Biography

*Professor K. Ramakrishna Rao is the Founder President of the Institute for Human Science & Service. He studied at Andhra University and received Ph. D. and D. Lit. degrees in philosophy and psychology respectively. He attended the University of Chicago as the Smith - Mundt Fulbright Scholar and a Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation and later carried out research at Duke University. Dr. Rao's academic appointments include Professor and Head of the department of Psychology & Parapsychology, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, and Director, Institute for Parapsychology, Durham, NC. He served as Vice-Chancellor, Andhra University; Advisor on Higher Education, Government of Andhra Pradesh; Chairman, Andhra Pradesh State Council of Higher Education; and Vice- Chairman, Andhra Pradesh State Planning Board. Professor Ramakrishna Rao taught at Andhra University, California Institute of Human Science, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He served as the Editor of Journal of Parapsychology and the Journal of Indian Psychology and published over 100 research papers and 12 books, the most recent being "Consciousness Studies: Cross-Cultural*

*Perspectives” (McFarland, 2002). Dr. Rao is also Chair of the LSI grantee Center for Study of Science & Religion.*

## Introduction

Psychology, which began in antiquity as a subject dealing with soul, moved gradually away in modern times from those aspects of human nature that may not be reduced to psychical processes. With the advent of behaviorism concepts such as “consciousness” and “mind” became suspect, treated as empty without scientific merit and were tabooed in academic psychology. The rise of cognitive psychology during the second half of the twentieth century brought “mind” and “consciousness” back into psychological discourse; but their understanding is still sought in reductive exercises. Disciplines such as transpersonal psychology and parapsychology, which one would have expected to widen the scope of psychology to include mind/consciousness as a primary postulate of one’s being, made a disappointing debut. Neither of them was able to cross the threshold of resistance and meet the enthusiastic initial expectations.

Transpersonal psychology is an offshoot of humanistic psychology, which was projected as the third force in psychology under the influence of such stalwarts as Abraham Maslow (1962). Notwithstanding the widespread currency of such concepts as “self-actualization” and “peak experience,” which found their way into mainstream psychological discourse, the impact of humanistic psychology on psychology in general is marginal at best; and the visibility and influence of transpersonal psychology is almost negligible. To begin with, transpersonal psychologists sought to emphasize altered states of consciousness and those aspects of being that are “beyond the personal.” What has haunted transpersonal psychologists ever since is the implied cleavage between the transpersonal and the personal realms. The attempted amendments later, such as those by Ken Wilber (1977; 1982), who asserted that the word transpersonal simply means “personal plus” or “more than personal” made little headway. Much of transpersonal psychology remains essentially a theoretical enterprise postulating a transpersonal realm and has difficulty in generating testable hypotheses (Rao 2002) and in carving out fruitful areas of application beyond the development of certain transpersonal psychotherapies with questionable successes. The true challenge of the transpersonal, it would seem, is to enhance the personal and transform the person to higher levels of awareness and achievement. This aspect has not received its due attention in transpersonal psychology. The concerns with pathologies of consciousness rather than the concerted attempts to trace the pathways to higher states of awareness have limited the scope and substance of transpersonal psychology in a significant sense.

Search for spirituality in the dark recesses of human ignorance and suffering with the torch of consciousness is the need. Many of the transpersonal psychologists are of course interested in the spiritual and transcendental aspects of our being. According to Cortright (1997) transpersonal psychology is “the melding of wisdom of the world’s spiritual traditions with the learning of modern psychology” (p.8). Grof & Grof (1992) suggest that the term “transpersonal” means “transcending the usual way of perceiving and interpreting the world” (p.40). To incorporate the diverse and not uncommonly disparate approaches advocated by transpersonal psychologists, there is a need for a cohesive system of psychology that integrally incorporates the personal and the transpersonal, the secular and the sacred aspects and the normal and the paranormal processes of knowing in human nature. It would seem that such a system of psychology is foreshadowed in classical Indian psychological writings and more recently in the profound insights of Sri Aurobindo.

Parapsychology has a history of over one hundred years as a scientific discipline, and yet it continues to be a controversial subject unable to secure an entry into the sanctum

of science. This is not because parapsychology had failed to accumulate data it was searching for. Rather it was a victim of its own success. It has raised serious questions about the very assumptive base of science by calling itself a science and by attempting to do precisely what other sciences do. Notwithstanding the professed concerns for the profound nonphysical aspects of human abilities (Rhine 1937), parapsychology subscribed scrupulously to one of the most positivist and rigid behaviorist methodologies. Consequently it remained a study of certain anomalies without a subject matter of its own. The concepts such as extrasensory perception (ESP) are defined in a negative manner and not by their positive attributions. Therefore, we know what ESP is not, and do not know what it is. Like in transpersonal psychology, there appears to be a gross divide between the normal and paranormal abilities in parapsychology. This dichotomy has had a crippling effect on the development of hypotheses for theoretical testing. Whereas transpersonal psychologies remain essentially a bunch of theories with little empirical and factual base, parapsychology rests on a huge heap of data hanging loose without a viable theory to tie them together.

Parapsychology in the past was not able to go beyond accumulating massive data in support of the existence of a set of anomalies that question the self-imposed limitations of science, what C. D. Broad (1953) called the basic limiting principles. Further progress of parapsychology decisively depends on introducing radical changes, conceptual and methodological, based on innovative theoretical advances consistent with the profound insights in the spiritual traditions around the world. Here again, psychological ideas in classical Indian thought and their application in a variety of yogic practices have relevance. They appear to be extremely relevant and potent to provide a strong theoretical base for developing what may be called spiritual psychology, which may supply the theoretical glue that binds the dichotomies of personal and transpersonal, normal and paranormal in human functioning.

What is spiritual psychology? Spiritual psychology is both a branch of psychology, like child psychology and social psychology, and a system of psychology, like psychoanalysis with a set of basic postulates that provide an overarching theoretical orientation. The basic postulate in this case is the primacy of spirit defined as the principle or center of consciousness in the embodied human condition. Spiritual psychology, acknowledging the primacy of the spirit, explores its relation to the mind and the body in the person. Spiritual psychology is then the study of the unity of the spirit, the mind and the body manifest in the human context. It serves as the bridge to connect the otherwise disparate realms of personal and transpersonal, the secular and the sacred, the normal and the paranormal.

Spiritual psychology shares a great deal with religious psychology and yet is very different from it. Religious psychology, as the Cambridge psychologist R. H. Thouless (1971) defined it, seeks “to understand religious behavior by applying to it the psychological principles derived from the study of non-religious behavior.” Spiritual psychology goes well beyond this. It seeks to understand human nature itself from the study of the spiritual aspects in our beliefs and behavior. Postulation of the primacy of spirit is the defining characteristic of spiritual psychology. Spirit (*atman*) in the Indian tradition is consciousness-as-such. Consequently, the study of consciousness-as-such in its relation to the thinking-mind and the knowing-brain constitutes from the Indian perspective the subject matter of spiritual psychology.

## Psychology in the Indian Tradition

Indian tradition is very pluralistic with diverse languages, religions and schools of thought that flourished on the Indian soil for millennia. Therefore, in a significant sense, it would be wrong to speak of *the* Indian tradition. However, in relation to psychology in general and spiritual psychology in particular, it may not be misleading to suggest that there are shared assumptions implicit among the dominant Indian traditions that provide a foundation for a meaningful theoretical exercise and discourse on spiritual psychology. The following is an outline of a model drawn from classical Indian psychological thought I find very helpful. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that the following is a heuristic derived from classical ideas in Indian psychology that appeals to me as a viable way modeling the emerging discipline of spiritual psychology.

Psychology in the Indian tradition is an “inner” discipline in search of realizing truth and perfection in the human condition. The goal is to find oneself in an unconditioned and unmasked state. While assuming that consciousness is the ground condition of all knowledge, Indian psychology studies consciousness in its multifaceted manifestations and seeks to explore the experience of its true nature in one’s being. Indian psychology is not only a body of generalizable principles but it is also a set of practices that can be used for the transformation of the human condition towards perfection. It has its own methods appropriate to its subject matter and objectives. The methods are observational, but they are different from the externally oriented observations of “outer” sciences. They are a peculiar blend of first-person and second-person perspectives. They provide for personal, subjective, and non-relational authenticity and in-group inter-subject validity (Rao 2002). The strength of Indian psychology consists in the potential it offers for transformation of the person, through successive stages, to a state of perfection. The scope and substance of Indian psychology may be summarized thus:

1. Psychology in the Indian tradition is the study of the *person (jiva)*.
2. The *person* is a composite of spirit, mind and body.
3. Spirit is consciousness-as-such, which is irreducibly distinct from the material objects, including the brain and the mind.
4. Mind is different from consciousness as well as the body/brain machine. Unlike consciousness, the mind is material, albeit subtle. Unlike the brain, the mind has nonlocal characteristic, i.e., it is not constrained by time and space variables, as gross material objects are.
5. The mind is the facilitating principle and function that interfaces consciousness at one end and the brain processes at the other.
6. Consciousness in the human context appears circumscribed, conditioned and clouded by a vortex of forces generated by the mind-body connection. Consequently the conditioned person becomes an instrument of individualized thought, passion and action.

7. From individuation arise, on the one hand, subjectivity, rational thinking and relativity of truth and values. On the other hand, there arises the ego as the organizing principle.
8. With the ego, come attachment and craving which lead the person in turn to experience anxiety, insecurity, stress, distress, disease and suffering.
9. Situated in such an existential predicament of ignorance and suffering, the goal of human kind is *liberation (moksha)* by a process of deconditioning training and consequent transformation of the person to achieve higher states of awareness and achievement.
10. Endowed with consciousness, mind and body, the person is capable of brain-processed *learning (sravana)*, mind-generated *understanding (manana)* and consciousness-accessed *realization (nididhyasana)*.
11. Yoga is a method of liberation via realization, which takes different forms to suit the different dispositions of the seekers. These include knowledge focused *jnana* yoga to meet the thought needs, devotion filled *bhakti* yoga to deal with one's passionate nature and action oriented *karma* yoga for those dominated by the impulse to act.

The above appear to be the main tenets and assumptions of Indian psychology, a system of psychology rooted in classical Indian tradition. Let me repeat, there is no one perspective that adequately and appropriately characterizes all of Indian psychological thought. Indeed there are important differences among classical Indian thinkers on ontological and epistemological matters having a bearing on psychological assumptions. However, there are some basic ideas that are generally shared by the prominent thinkers in the dominant schools that constitute the foundation as well as the blueprint for building a system of psychology that has contemporary relevance and which offers sustainable research programs and applications for growth and well being of humankind. In the above account I have drawn from Samkhya-Yoga and Advaita Vedanta traditions. Also, the model in its essentials is not inconsistent with Buddhist psychology.

The Indian model, as mentioned, makes a fundamental distinction between 'consciousness/spirit' and 'mind', and a secondary distinction between 'mind' and 'brain'. Consciousness is the knowledge side of the universe. It is the ground condition for all awareness. Consciousness is not a part or aspect of the mind, which, unlike consciousness, is physical. Consciousness does not interact with the mind or any other objects or processes of the physical universe. However, in association with consciousness mental phenomena become subjective and are revealed to and realized by the person.

In this view, the mind is the interfacing instrumentality that faces consciousness/spirit on one side and the brain and the physical world on the other side. The mind thus gives the impression of having two faces -- the physical side in its relation to the brain and other physical systems, and the subjective side facing consciousness/spirit. From the physical side, the mind collects information by processing the inputs it receives. When this information is exposed to consciousness at the other end, i.e., when the light of consciousness is reflected on it, there is conscious experience of the phenomenal data. In a

reflexive situation, where the reflection of consciousness reflects back in consciousness (*pratibimba*), one has subjective awareness.

The mind, though physical like the brain, is different from it. The mind is closely connected to different systems of the brain. It influences and is influenced by events in the brain. Most Indian traditions assert that the mind is comprised of subtler forms of matter than the brain. Consequently, it has different characteristics such as nonlocality. Its subtle character makes it possible to receive the light of consciousness/spirit to reflect its contents. In virtue of its implicit nonlocal nature, it is possible for the mind to act on systems beyond the body complex with which it is associated. Such a conception of the mind leaves open the possibility that the mind may survive the destruction and cessation of the associated body.

The mind thus enjoys dual citizenship in the physical world as well as in the realm of consciousness. As a material form, the mind's citizenship in the material world is by birth as it were. Its naturalization in the domain of consciousness/spirit is a matter of choice and an outcome of significant effort. Its citizenship in the material realm bestows on it the right to process information through its sensory channels and neural connections. The mind also has involuntary and passive access to consciousness in that the light of consciousness shines on it to illumine its critically poised contents, which become subjectively revealed. The mind also has within its reach the possibility of partaking in consciousness-as-such by disciplined practice so that it may have direct and unmediated knowledge. This possibility is otherwise remote because of mind's habitual involvement with the sensory and cortical processes.

In the dual roles of the mind, two distinct processes, the normal/cognitive and the transcendental/transcognitive, aid the mind. The sensory-motor processes are those that come under the category of the normal. The transcendental process involves accessing consciousness-as-such and achieving pure conscious states. In normal cognitive processes, consciousness is *reflected* in the mind. Awareness consists in those reflections. In transcognitive processes, consciousness is *realized* in the mind. Awareness in such a state consists in a relationship of identity with consciousness.

The main concern in the western studies is with the normal processes of the mind. Therefore, the spotlight is on the brain and the sensory processes that give us information. Observational techniques from the third-person perspective are appropriately employed to study mental phenomena. Consciousness-as-such, which is not accessible to third-person observation, is lost sight of in scientific discussions. The consequence is a physical paradigm of the mind functioning in a mechanical universe. Functions of the mind, it is assumed, are best understood by identifying the correlated brain states. Significant shortcomings of this approach include: (a) Consciousness-as-such is routinely ignored; (b) higher states of consciousness generally remain outside the scope of consciousness studies; and (c) the interest in studying consciousness is confined to the theoretical side, with little appreciation of its practical implications for developing higher states of awareness.

Indian and western ideas on consciousness represent two distinct conceptual streams that flow in two different directions. The eastern stream is possibly too narrow with steadfast focus on the spirit and consciousness-as-such. The western stream is too shallow involving only the periphery of consciousness and thus unable to navigate with the heavy

weight (hard problem) of the spirit and transcendental experiences. Together the two streams appear to comprise the entire spectrum of mental phenomena. Therefore, if there were a confluence between the two, we may be in a better position to understand the unity and nexus between mind, body and spirit.

## **Implications and Applications**

Important implications ensue from the above model that have relevance to psychological theory, therapeutic practices and social action. It is not possible in the available space to discuss all of them. M. K. Gandhi's thought and action is a significant outgrowth of Indian spiritual psychology. The concept of *satyagraha* and Gandhi's nonviolent action themes for social change and moral reconstruction are landmark experiments in spiritual psychology.

### ***Adjustment and Transformation of the Ego***

In spiritual psychology, one begins with the primacy of the spirit. The concept of spirit has diverse connotations. In Indian psychology, *atman* (Vedanta) or *purusha* (Samkhya-Yoga), come close to the English word "spirit". Atman is consciousness-as-such, unclouded by the accretions emanating from the sensory processes. Sri Aurobindo (1992) calls it the "psychic being" in the person. In western psychology, especially in its applied therapeutic aspects, the ego occupies the center stage taking the place of the spirit. It is the functioning of the ego that is of primary concern. Understanding the problems of adjustment of the ego and dysfunctions of the ego caused by chemical imbalances, childhood trauma, problems of sex and so on has been the saga of much of western clinical psychology and psychotherapeutic practices.

In Indian psychology, the ego is not the spirit. It is a manifestation of the mind and not of consciousness. It masks the spirit. Shrouded by ignorance, the ego masquerades as the spirit. Therefore, the tearing down the veil of ignorance, taming the ego, transcending the limiting adjuncts of the mind to allow the true light of the spirit to shine and reflect on the mind of the person, become the focus of Indian psychology. This is what is involved in the process of transformation of the person. Yoga is a method of training for such transformation. According to Sri Aurobindo, there are three intrapsychic processes involved in ego-transformation. They are aspiration, surrender and rejection. *Aspiration* is the motivating factor, the driving force to feel the presence of the divine spirit. If spirit is consciousness-as-such, aspiration is the desire to access consciousness-as-such. *Surrender* refers to the openness to witness consciousness-as-such with no prior notions, attitudes, and expectations. *Rejection* is the throwing out all those ego accretions that clouded consciousness-as-such, so as to allow the unencumbered play of the psychic being. The function of psychic being is accessing consciousness-as-such for experiencing pure conscious states (Sri Aurobindo, 1992).

The western perspective pays more attention to ego-adjustment than ego-transformation. For example, the discussions often center around the defense mechanisms. G. E. Vaillant (1993) in *The Wisdom of the Ego* provides a brilliant classification of the varieties of defense mechanisms and styles of functioning ranging from psychotic delusions to mature altruism and humor. All these styles, whether normal or aberrational, are attempts at adjustment and not transformation of the ego. Transformation involves tracing the route

back from existential suffering, controlling craving and attachment, and transcending the limiting adjuncts of the mind so that the clouds of ignorance hovering around the person are dispelled and the person experiences states of pure consciousness. Such experiences are the transformational resource and gateway to realization, the discovery of the spirit within. Spiritual psychology in the Indian tradition is positive psychology that promotes health, happiness and joy in a non-ego binding manner. It is the joy of the spirit and not of the ego that the transformed person experiences. Western psychotherapeutic approach is horizontal, traveling across the existential contours of the ego. The Indian way is vertical, elevating the person from the tangled ego to the sublime heights of the spirit, i.e., states of pure conscious experience.

In the western tradition, which conflates consciousness and the mind and considers intentionality as the defining characteristic of the mind, the possibility of the existence of pure conscious states, i.e., consciousness without sensory content, is preempted. Consequently mind/consciousness/spirit is either denied and reduced to processes in the brain or left completely unfathomable as in radical dualist postulations with an unbridgeable chasm between mind and body.

### *Understanding Psychic Phenomena*

There is indeed a general consensus among the research scientists involved in investigating psychic phenomena (Rao and Palmer, 1987) that there is significant evidence in support of the existence of ESP and PK. ESP (extrasensory perception) includes telepathy (paranormal awareness of others' thoughts) clairvoyance (awareness of information shielded from the senses) and precognition (extrasensory and noninferential knowledge of future events). PK (psychokinesis) is the direct action of the mind over matter. There is, however, a general lack of agreement as to what they mean. The explanatory void haunting psychic phenomena has resulted in labeling them as anomalous even by those investigating it. Also it has breathed a lot of skepticism among the scientists watching the researches from outside. We can hardly expect scientists to have interest in things that make little sense.

Psychic phenomena pose severe explanatory challenges within the western paradigm of science. Psi refers to events that cannot simply occur in the physical universe as we know it. The basic limiting principles, as C. D. Broad (1953) labeled them, governing the assumptive base of science rule out the possibility of mind-to-mind communication that does not involve meaningful transformation of energy between minds. Similarly noninferential precognition is an absurdity. All attempts to naturalize the supernatural, that is what psychical research hopes to do, result in the paradox of demolishing the very assumptive base of science by science itself. The attempts to find a naturalistic explanation of ESP and PK have not been successful. These include observational theories based on quantum mechanics (Irwin, 1999).

I am inclined to argue that parapsychology is unlikely to make much headway if the research continues to employ the disjunctive western conceptual categories. The most that could be established within western paradigm is to provide extensive and even compelling evidence for the existence of cognitive anomalies. Beyond this, I venture to hazard, few insights into the nature of the phenomena themselves could be gained by methods that basically assume their nonexistence.

In this context, spiritual psychology has much to offer and may give a new direction and a fresh impetus to parapsychological research. In Indian spiritual psychology, for example, there are concepts, methods and models that could make a difference. In the classical Indian tradition no sharp distinction is made between the natural and the supernatural, the scientific and the spiritual. At some level of awareness, even the subject-object dichotomy disappears. Consequently, neither the paradox of naturalizing the supernormal nor the perplexities of parapsychological research pose any serious threat for an understanding of the psychic process within the paradigm of spiritual psychology.

### ***Spiritual Dimensions of Health and Wellness***

Along with psychical research are the recent investigations in the area of epidemiology of religion and clinical studies of the effect of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices on health and wellness. There are now many researchers actively engaged researching in this area. Koenig, McCullough and Larson (2001) review in their *Handbook of Religion and Health* 1200 research reports and 400 reviews.

Religion of one kind or another has existed in all societies; and it has had profound effects on the lives of those who practice it. Prayer is central to all religious practices. It is universal and ubiquitous, crossing cultural and geographical boundaries. It encompasses all religions, even those that do not specifically acknowledge an entity like God, as in Buddhism. Although the form and object of worship may vary, offering prayers is a pervasive phenomenon that is considered neither unusual nor abnormal. According to a survey published in 1996 by Princeton Religion Research Center, 96% of US population believed in God or a supernormal power. Despite the universally prevalent and largely shared religious behavior and the belief that prayer is a means of propitiating Gods or invoking supernatural forces/abilities to help improve human condition, it is a largely unexplored area until recently by contemporary social scientists. However, during the past ten years, there are literally hundreds of research reports published in refereed journals.

There are several significant studies that explored the relationship between religiosity and a variety of health conditions. In about 150 studies on alcohol and drug abuse and religious involvement, most of the studies “suggest less substance abuse and drug abuse and more successful rehabilitation among the more religious” (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001). Also, numerous studies investigated the effect of religion on mental health, delinquency, depression, heart disease, immune system dysfunction, cancer, and physical disability. (For a comprehensive review of research in these areas, see Koenig, McCullough & Larson 2001).

Surveys of literature and meta-analysis of published research seem to confirm the claims of individual researchers linking religious practices with better health outcomes. For example, in a systematic and comprehensive review, Townsend, Kladder, Ayele, and Mulligan (2002) assessed the impact of religion on health outcomes. They reviewed all experiments involving randomized controlled trials published between 1996 and 1999 that assessed the relationship between religious practices and measurable health variables. The review revealed that “religious involvement and spirituality are associated with better health outcomes, including greater longevity, coping skills, and health related quality of life and less anxiety.” In a meta-analytic review of 29 independent samples, McCullough et al.,

(2000) report that religious involvement has a strong positive influence of increased survival ( $p < .001$ ).

If religious involvement does have beneficial health outcomes, as many of the published reports in the West seem to suggest, then we may ask: How does this relationship work? What is its *modus operandi*, the process that underlies the presumed effect? What is the channel? Who is the source? These important, though often tricky, questions have no easy answers. The favored explanation is a secular one. Religious beliefs and practices may have psychological effects, which in turn bring about somatic changes. If indeed religious beliefs and activities help to reduce anxiety, stress and depression, they could also help to shield their negative effects on general health and well-being.

As Koenig, Larson and Larson (2001) surmise, when people become physically ill, many rely heavily on religious beliefs and practices to relieve stress, retain a sense of control, and maintain hope and sense of meaning and purpose in life. It is suggested that religion (a) acts as a social support system, (b) reduces the sense of loss of control and helplessness, (c) provides a cognitive framework that reduces suffering and enhances self-esteem, (d) gives confidence that one, with the help of God, could influence the health condition, and (e) creates a mindset that enables the patient to relax and allow the body to heal itself. Again, the values engendered by religious involvement such as love, compassion, charity, benevolence, and altruism may help to successfully cope with debilitating anxiety, stress and depression. All this may be true. Yet, there are issues that go beyond these explanations. For example, if the observed effects of distant intercessory prayer on the health of patients, who did not even know that some one was praying for them, are genuine, as they seem to be, the above secular explanations become clearly inadequate. We need more than a healthy mindset on the part of the patient to recover from illness because someone, unknown to him, had prayed for his recovery. There may be more to religion than being a social and psychological support system. Let us therefore consider briefly the case of remote intercessory prayer and its ramifications for future research in the area that explores the effects of religious activities on health and well-being.

### ***The Case of Distant (Remote) Intercessory Prayer***

A number of studies provide positive evidence linking intercessory prayer with beneficial health outcomes. Intercessory prayer involves praying for others' benefit. In some of these studies, the patients did not know that someone was praying for them. Yet, their condition seemed to have improved compared to the controlled group of patients who did not have the benefit of someone praying for them. Michael Miovic (2004) referred to two cases published recently in the journal *Alternate Therapies*, which documents the effects of healing at a distance and "how an 'energy' healer used intention-at-a-distance to cure a girl of glioblastoma multiforme, a very aggressive brain tumor. In this case, the diagnosis and cure were so convincingly established with contemporary medical technology (biopsies and serial brain scans), and the disease itself is known to be so uniformly fatal that it is difficult to ascribe the healer's results to pure chance" (p.58).

In a double blind study involving 393 coronary care patients, Randolph Byrd (1988) divided his subjects into two randomized groups. One group is the intercessory prayer group and the other is the control group. Neither the physicians attending on them nor the patients themselves knew which patients are being prayed for. Also, those who actually offered

prayers did not know the patients for whose recovery they were praying for. Results showed that the patients in the intercessory prayer group experienced significantly fewer episodes of congestive heart failures ( $p < .05$ ), fewer cardiac arrests ( $p < .05$ ), received fewer antibiotics ( $p < .005$ ) and required less respirator support and medication ( $p < .0001$ ). W.S. Harris et al. (1999) conducted a double blind study of distant intercessory prayer with 990 patients in the cardiac care unit. In this study with randomized controlled trials, it was observed that the experimental group (the prayed for patients) recovered better than the control group of patients. The results are statistically significant, even after correction for multiple analyses. In a meta-analysis of published studies, Mueller, Plevak, and Rummans (2001) found that randomized controlled trials had shown a significant positive effect between intercessory prayer and recovery from coronary disease. They observed that addressing the spiritual needs of the patient may enhance recovery from illness.

In an interesting study Cha, Wirth and Lobo (2001) investigated the effect of intercessory prayer on in-vitro fertilization. The study involved 219 women in Korea who were undergoing in-vitro fertilization and embryo transfer. The women in the experimental group were prayed for, unknown to them and their doctors, by individuals in other countries as far away as USA, Canada and Australia. It is reported that the women who were in the prayed for group showed 50% success rate compared to 26% success among the control group. The difference is statistically significant ( $p = .0013$ ).

If these effects of distant intercessory prayer are genuine, as they seem to be, how do we explain them? The secular explanations of the sort we considered earlier are clearly inadequate. What is the mechanism involved? Who is the source? What is the channel? It was clearly understood by those who offered the prayers that it was God who was involved, responding to the prayer to influence the health outcome of the patients. Are we then experimenting with God? Can science go beyond itself and deal with spirituality and the divine? This could be scary and frightening to those who assume the essential incompatibility of science and spirituality.

Impressed with the extensive publications in the area, Chibnall, Jeral and Cerullo (2001) toiled for a couple of years to do a methodologically sophisticated and conceptually unambiguous study to test the influence of distant intercessory prayer on health. They found themselves unable to proceed beyond a critical review of the published reports. Their paper "Experiments on Distant Intercessory Prayer: God, Science, and the Lesson of Messiah" turned out to be more a debunking exercise rather than a constructive contribution. They conclude that this area of research is simply unproductive. They argue among other things that the notion of intervention by supernatural beings does not simply meet the basic testability and explanatory requirements of science. They write: "Science does not deny God, miracles, and the like, it merely neglects them ... Science can not actualize spirituality, so why do we ask this of it?" This paper became quite influential among health professionals in the West for the reason that its rationale is quite consistent with the mindset that makes a clear separation between science and spirituality, between what is believed to be natural as distinguished from the supernatural, which is considered ex-hypothesis as beyond the scope of science. Such separation of the natural and the supernatural engenders among scientists the fear of trespassing into the sacred, which, it would seem, is one of the powerful reasons behind the efforts to fault researches in this and similar areas.

The argument that the researches in the religion-health area do not meet the testability requirements of science is unconvincing. In addition, there is no intrinsic reason to bring in God or supernatural beings as the source of observed effects of distant intercessory prayer on health. Consider, for example, the wealth of studies that show similar effects of the influence of direct mental influence on remote biological systems. There is a large empirical database accumulated over the years by William Braud and associates that provides strong evidence suggestive of the possibility of influencing the physiology of a remotely situated person by sheer mental intention of another person. Braud and Schlitz (1991) review eight separate experiments in which the subjects attempted to influence remote biological systems by simply wishing such a change. The crucial difference between prayer and such wishing is that no supernatural being is invoked in the wish phenomenon, unlike in the prayer, which is generally directed at seeking the help of God to grant the wish. The results of the experiments by Braud and associates show that a subject by mental intention alone could influence in the desired direction (1) the autonomic nervous system activity of a remotely situated person, (2) the muscular tremor and ideomotor reactions, (3) mental imagery of another person, and (4) the rate of hemolysis of human red blood cells in vitro. There is no reference in these studies to supernatural beings or non-testable entities. As Braud points out, based on the over all statistical results, the distant mental influence effects are relatively reliable and robust. The magnitude of the effects is not trivial and is comparable to self-regulation effects. The ability to mentally influence is apparently widely distributed. Thus, these experiments not only show the feasibility of scientifically studying such phenomena as healing through distant intercessory prayer, but they suggest also that the source of the effect may be a living person and not necessarily a supernatural entity like God.

## **Science and Spirituality**

What follows from the above discussion is an acknowledgement of the limited application of current paradigm in science which is in need of expansion. Spiritual psychology of the kind we discussed may provide a way of dealing with phenomena that are undeservedly left out by the mainstream science. The assumption of the separateness of science and spirituality is neither intrinsic nor sacrosanct, as is often made. One could explore the possibility of an orderly and meaningful transition between them without the reduction of one to the other. Observation is the key to scientific validation, because it allows for inter-subject agreement; but what constitutes an observation has changed significantly over time. It is no longer limited to naked sensing of the phenomena. Instrumental observation is too remote from the observer and requires several interpretative steps in between. Yet, we consider meter readings and other indirect measures as genuine observations. First-person experience, which is denied legitimacy in science as a reliable datum, without the agreement of similarly situated other persons, may be brought into science by valid maneuvers as a kind of observation acceptable in science. When this happens, it might be possible to find a way of closing the explanatory gap between science and spirituality. For example, in the classical Indian tradition, as mentioned before, there is no unbridgeable gulf between science and spirituality, no serious explanatory gap between first-person and third-person perspectives. Inquiry is considered possible in both the domains. In a sense, the scope of science would be significantly enhanced by allowing the possibility of transition from first person to third-person, possibly via second-person mediation. In this context, the traditional Indian practices such as yoga may have important lessons for learning about the process of transition from the first-person experience to third-

person observation and for finding the common ground covered by science and the so-called spiritual phenomena (Rao 2002).

Yoga psychology has much to offer to bridge the science-spirituality divide. There has been a great deal of scientific research on the effects of meditation on the states of mind and body. These effects seem to parallel those observed in studies that sought to link religious activities with health outcomes. A number of studies consider meditation as a self-regulation strategy that has relevance for managing stress, hypertension and drug addictions (Goleman & Schwartz 1976; Patel 1993). Davidson, Goleman, and Schwartz (1984) report results that showed “reliable decrement in trait anxiety across groups as a function of length of meditating.” A meta-analysis by Eppley, Abrams and Shear (1989), involving about 130 studies, confirmed that meditation, especially TM, has the effect of reduced trait anxiety. John Astin (1997) among others reported the beneficial effects of meditation on stress reduction. A study by Alexander et al (1994) investigated the effects of various types of meditation on the mortality rate of elderly persons. They reported that one hundred per cent of the subjects in the study who practiced TM survived during the follow up period of three years, where the average survival rate was 62.6 per cent. Alexander et al (1994) also point out that epidemiological studies show that people practicing TM had significantly lower inpatient and outpatient visits and expenditure than comparable control groups. In addition, there is credible evidence suggesting possible association between meditation and psychic abilities (Rao, Durkham and Rao, 2001). The work of Braud and colleagues cited earlier and the positive relationship between meditation and psychic abilities provide a secular alternative to distant intercessory prayer. In fact, psychic healing practices are widely prevalent around the world. Therefore, study of prayer as a form of meditation has interesting possibilities for research.

As I have attempted to show elsewhere (Rao 2002), yoga psychology postulates the existence of nonsensory processes of awareness, which seem to work in tandem with normal sensory processes in generating extraordinary abilities and manifesting parapsychological phenomena. This is rendered possible because mind appears to enjoy dual citizenship in the transcendental as well as empirical domains. Mind is the interfacing instrumentality that connects at one end with consciousness and with the processes of the brain at the other. Acceptance of the mind as the mediating instrumentality between consciousness and the brain gives rise to an epistemology that overcomes the limitations of reductionism and radical dualism.

In its association with consciousness, mind manifests extraordinary phenomena and in interacting with the sensory processes it gives rise to normal sensory/motor phenomena. The essential and distinguishing characteristic of the former is that it has the mark of *realization* different from *understanding* that results from sensory awareness. The crucial and extremely important distinction between *learning*, *understanding* and *realization* is captured by the trimorphous formula of knowledge as mentioned in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and accepted by several systems of Indian thought. *Sravana*, *manana* and *nididhyasana* are three distinguishable processes of knowing -- (1) knowing from sensory data (brain), (2) knowing by reflection (mind) and (3) realization by accessing consciousness-as-such.

Acceptance of the trimorphous formula of knowing and the primacy of consciousness as an irreducible ground condition for true knowledge leads to a paradigmatic

shift in understanding human nature and the different sources of information. The future of mind sciences rests on how quickly the shift takes place and on the ingenuity of scientists in bridging the artificial chasm between science and spirituality by preparing the empirical ground for sacred travel.

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