

Life Space Exploration : A perspective derived from *Yoga* and *Sankhya*:

Introduction:

Yoga speaks about the nature and quality of the encounter between the self and the world. How the self in the form of one's body meets food, separates out the nourishment from the bulk, throws out the bulk and spreads nourishment throughout the body. How the self in the form of one's breath meets air and through respiration spreads energy and life into the body. How the self in the form of one's senses meets the world of other living and non living things and transacts with them creating a niche for the person to live in. How the self in the form of one's intellect meets the subtle realities around and makes meanings and gains insight into the nature of the world and oneself. How the self in the form of one's being meets life itself and discovers bliss.

Sankhya speaks about the composition of the world and of oneself. It enumerates the elements that create the manifest world. *Sankhya* describes the process of perception and action.

The canvas of life is infinite and human potential is unbounded, yet, we live in relatively confined spaces and deploy only a small portion of our potential. *Sankhya* and *Yoga* theory states that this is due to our propensity to live within a world limited by our conditioning. This conditioned world is called "*Avidya Khetram*"- The ground of limited erroneous understanding of the world and oneself. Within this limited world, we live by a set of interpretations and meanings of the world and ourselves. This set of meanings in turn offer a set of action alternatives and role repertoires with which we respond to the world.

Basic Definitions - *Buddhi, Ahamkara and Manas.*

The human psyche, according to *Yoga*, consists of three broad levels of response-capabilities. The foundation is a level called *Buddhi*- which we can loosely translate as mind, the second is *Ahamkaara*-the level of self-consciousness the third is *Manas*- the level of planning and acting in the world. This is not similar to western frames and definitions of sub conscious, unconscious ego, id etc.

Buddhi or mind is undifferential, non-personal and subtle. It is the fundamental ability of the psyche to be aware and conscious. It can be experienced as the deepest state of awareness and insight one is capable of. The *Ahamkaara* is that level at which a deep and fundamental choice is made (from the universe thrown up by the *Buddhi*) between "I and not I". This level of choice can best be understood by wondering about how our body

and mind retain the form and idea of “self”, we know through scientific discovery that the body consists of atoms and molecules, and that atoms are actually huge empty spaces with minute points of electrical charge rotating at high speeds. We also know that the matter that makes up the body changes completely every forty days or so. Yet, the brand new set of atomic and molecular particles retain the gross and subtle forms I call myself. The energy or capability we wonder about when faced with this reality is *Ahamkaara*.

Once this separation from the undifferentiated mind/matter of *Buddhi* is made, the personal attributes of the individual thinking-mind and senses are formed. This sensing thinking system interacts with the world around. This part of the psyche that thinks and plans is called *Manas*. Our every day existence is circumscribed by the *Manas*. In the process of living and growing, the interactions with one’s world are distilled into knowledge, action abilities, action potentials, beliefs, assumptions, conclusions etc. all of which form a ground from which one responds to the world. This ground is called *Avidya*.

Avidya - The Ground of Pain and Sorrow

Avidya means “Other than actual” and therefore implies a mixture of partial, erroneous and accurate impressions of the world which together form a limited and inexact picture of the actual. This ground then generates and nourishes the every day living processes within the person: Processes of perception, meaning making, choice making and action. This ground also called *the “Upaadaana kaarana”* the inherent and unmanifest cause of a response.

One must take a pause here and reflect on some of the Indian assumptions on cause-effect relationships. Indian thought does not make linear cause-effect connections. At least four elements must come together for an event to occur: The *Nimitta Kaarana* or the explicit cause; the *Upaadaana kaarana* or implicit cause; the *Sahakaara Kaarana* or the context and the *Karana* or trigger. For e.g.: When a bell is struck, a loud sound emanates. The explicit causes and trigger are obvious and clearly visible. A person pulls the gong. However, the quality of the sound, its pitch and its resonance are all dependent upon the material of which the bell is made and its design. Where it is placed and the shape and form of its surroundings affect not only the sound itself but also how a person will respond to it. Placed in a school compound, it would cause students to rush in or out of a class room, placed in a temple, it would cause the devout to say a prayer.

Let us now get back to our original line of discussion. The *Upaadaana Kaarana* in the form of response capabilities or response propensities of a person is what we need to focus our attention on. *Sankhya* and *Yoga* state that all sorrowful experience that a person has is sourced in the nature of one’s *Upaadaana*. While the external triggers and explicit causes might vary, the pattern of our response is largely decided by our *Upaadaana*. The

same external situation might evoke a response full of confusion and dependency from one person while it might bring out qualities of leadership in another and a third person might seek escape and flight. The set of action choices a person makes falls into a pattern. These patterns could be more or less deeply entrenched. Ending sorrow, which is the primary focus of *Yoga* and *Sankhya*, means understanding the nature ones of *Avidya* deeply and discovering freedom from the repetitive, conditioned ways of being in the world.

Prana and Perception

Another “Story within Story” before we get back to the main flow. According to *Sankhya* and *Yoga* theory, perception happens because the energy of living called *Prana* that originates in one’s *Buddhi*, flows outward through the *Ahamkaara*, the *Manas* and the senses and effects a contact between the senses and the world outside. The senses retain the impression of the object. This impression is perceived and given meaning by the *Buddhi* enlivened by the spirit(or *Purusha*).

Perception is therefore , not a “stimulus response” but a proactive and inner directed seeking for experience. The movement of the *Prana*, however, is given direction and flows along the channels provided by ones senses and thought patterns. This according to *Yoga* theory is one of the prime determinants of why a person would scan for, experience and remember a discreet set of objects and events out of a million things that are happening simultaneously in any situation. *Avidya* therefore, is simultaneously a filter that affects the flow of *Prana* and attention outward and what flows in. *Avidya* also affects one’s body and senses deeply. Patterns of body use, sensing and the range and capability of the senses is formed and limited by *Avidya*. When the processes and patterns of *Avidya* get reinforced, one’s psyche becomes more and more opaque. The channels through which *Prana* flows become blocked. Crystallized and entrenched patterns occupy the entire space of the psyche. This crystallized pattern seems to have a force of its own. It distorts the flow of prana. The body becomes prone to disease and the mind become sorrowful-

“What is the profound meaning of Zen?” “Zen does not hide anything from you” “I don’t get it” “Come with me on a walk through the mountains” “The master and his disciple walked quickly for a while” “Can you smell the sweet osmanthus?” “No master” “See I am not hiding anything from you”.
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Role Sets and the Drama Within

To understand “the nature of ones *Avidya*” does not mean a linear-logical knowledge. It means getting a wholistic grasp of the patterns, their pulls and pushes, their feeling tones and spontaneous movements. It becomes relatively easier to get a sense of what these patterns may be by using analogical symbols. For example, myths and legends provide a rich source of such symbolic roles. The underlying “formula” of most Indian films is drawn from Ramayan. The Hero is a Ram type: a “good“ man, obeys his parents etc. The villains are clearly patterned on Ravana . Sita is the model for the heroine and a whole set of others make up the complement. “Family Entertainers” often follow the Mahabharata mould. Brothers fight over property. The good become victims of conspiracy and cheating. In western films, the James Bond formula has clearly definable motifs. A lone super hero who succeeds inspite of a dumb system to overcome vile (often alien) villain.

Looking at a few more such patterns will help flush out the idea further. The world portrayed by Charles Dickens sets out the basic characteristics and the dramatis personae of the “Industrial revolution” in England. “Lone Ranger” type of cowboy novels portrayed the role models of a white American Society focused on “conquering the wild west”. Today, John Girshams heroes-professionals fighting a corrupt system using their courage, intelligence and professional skills has captured the imagination of millions of readers across the world.

The ground of *Avidya* can be compared to a theatre. *Sankya* explicitly uses this analogy while talking about one’s psyche. The physical setting of the stage is like the contours of the inner landscape a person lives with and lives within. The framework or setting bounds out a whole set of events and realities and simultaneously. It defines the shape and form of his life space. Once *Avidya* takes root, a persons inner world get defined. The dramatis personae of the inner theatre are like a set of roles that the person can play in his life space. He will play some of them with more ease and facility than others. By choosing to play certain roles more spontaneously, he will evoke or provoke others to play complementary roles. The drama that unfolds in this setting than goes through a more or less predictable course. These “real life” situations are elaborated and drawn out in myths, plays and novels.

To illustrate: A person whose inner landscape is very restricted, dry and featureless, would often experience monotony, lack of replenishment, feeling stuck and helpless. The set of roles that would be played out would probably comprise of victims and underdogs the deprived and discriminated, oppressors and extractors. The theme of the life’s drama would revolve around scarce resources. If this pattern is deeply entrenched, the persons universe of experiences, his world view, his hopes, fears and expectations would become

a prison within which he remains captive. Even if his experience of living in this inner world is painful, he would find no resources to break its pattern. He could at best develop a coping strategy and temporary escape routines. The patterns of the drama that gets played out repeatedly in his life will reinforce the prison like inner world. Let us say for instance that our protagonist meets a woman whom he falls in love with. The chances of his becoming very possessive of her is high. Her attempts at being autonomous would be experienced by our protagonist in frames of deprivation. His reaction might well be to seek evidence of her love for him and in the process be experienced as extractive. The ensuing struggle, she for autonomy and he for replenishment warmth and “wetness”, could easily leave our protagonist with only two possible roles to take: either the underdog begging for love or a victim of the woman’s insensitivities.

Meditative Introspection

In order to end the tragic course his life his taking, our protagonist would have to introspect and gain insight into several things. Firstly he would have to get a sense of the nature of his inner world. He will have to look at his experiences, responses and reactions without evaluation and judgement so that he can explore and discover the nature of his innerworld as it is. This exploration would reveal many things: What are the nature of assumptions, beliefs and conclusions that keep him restricted to this world? Are boundaries he has placed around his world a consequence of significant experiences, are they a matter of habit, are they world views internalised without much examination and thought? What patterns of meanings and interpretations reinforce this world? What is the nature of expectations that are being sought for through the action patterns? What fears restrict ones choice of action?

The exploration of his inner world and the drama being enacted there can be put into a meaningful framework through analogical, symbolic role models. Often there would be a discrete set of role repertoires that one plays almost spontaneously. The process of exploration and discovery, the process of articulating and owning up the nature of ones *Upaadaana*, (the ground of ones *Avidya*) also throws up insights, reveals resources that have remained latent, it melts the prison walls and opens up new vistas of choice and action. Ones repertoire of roles increases, ones ways of perceiving the world changes. Our protagonist comes upon an oasis that lies within him but in the “bad lands” his parents told him not to enter. He finds the courage to taste the sweet waters of its spring. Hopefully, he does not get overwhelmed by his own reflection like Narcissus, but comes back healed and renewed. A new world that is fertile and rich, inviting, restful, generous and beautiful starts to unfold within him. He and his lady love live happily ever after.

The primary purpose of the exploration is not to seek answers for one's problems but to let go of one's desperate repetition of old patterns. In this letting go, in discovering a slow contemplative way of examining one's own processes, in discovering a compassionate way of owning oneself up as one is, with one's beauty and ugliness, one's heroism and villainy, courage and cowardice, cleverness and stupidity, one also gives space for the intelligence and healing qualities of *Prana* to flow. In sustaining the letting go, in the practice of "non grasping", one sustains the flow of intelligence and healing. In grabbing hold of a new set of possibilities and roles that came up, one will set off a new cycle perhaps more expanded and spacious than before, but, inevitably, crystallising into another pattern.

After the monk Damei had attained enlightenment he went to live by himself in the mountain by the side of a gentle stream. One day a wondering monk became lost and happened upon Damei

"How long have you been in the mountains?" he asked

"I have seen the surrounding mountains turn green and yellow and green again a few times"

"Can you tell me how to get out of these mountains "

"Follow the flow"

Life Space Exploration

Life space exploration is the process of discovering the contours of one's inner space, its limitations and boundaries, the roles it nourishes, the patterns it keeps repeating. Life space exploration is the process of discovering new resources, new roles and a way of living that keeps in inner spring flowing gently and forever.

Post script:

The ideas explored in this paper are contained in a nutshell in sutras of chapter IV of the YogaSutra.

1. *Nimittam aprayojokam prakritiinaam varana bhedastu thataha kshetrikavat (Chapter 4 - Sutra 5)*
2. *thatra dhyanaajam anaashayam (Chapter 4 - Sutra 6)*
3. *Hetu phala aashraya aalambanaihi sangrihitatvaatt theshaam abhaave tat abhaavaha (Chapter 4 - Sutra 11)*

I have integrated my experience of process work with the explanation of these sutras offered to me by Yogacharya T.Krishnamacharya and T.K.V Desikachar during my period of study with them.

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