Perennial Psychology of the Bhagavad Gita

By Swami Rama
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Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Hinduism or the *sanātana dharma* (eternal religion) is not only among the world's oldest spiritual traditions but one that comprises a complete and integral psychology or "science of the soul." The hegemonic dominance of modern science and its ideological offshoot, *scientism*, were spawned by the European Enlightenment; prior to which there were, as there are today, ways of being and knowing that do not conform to the truncated outlook of secular humanism and its reductionist tendencies. Rather, these alternative visions of reality offer a more complete and satisfying understanding of the human condition. For this reason, it is not widely known that just as there is a Hindu psychology, we also find psychological perspectives informed by the Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions (as well as those of various First Peoples and their shamanic heritage). These approaches can be conveniently termed 'perennial psychology' insofar as they are distinguished, unlike contemporary psychology, by their foundation in metaphysics, sacred science and spiritual principles.

The Bhagavad Gītā consists of a dialogue between the prince Arjuna and the *avatāra* Krishna, and for many millions of Hindus it is the most profound and important of all their scriptures. According to Shankara (eighth-century), the Bhagavad Gītā, "is an epitome of the essentials of the whole Vedic teaching" and he adds that it "is very difficult to understand."[1] Rāmakrishna (1836–1886) points out that: "It contains the essence of all the scriptures."[2] Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble, 1867–1911) says of it that "amongst the sacred writings of mankind there is probably no other which is at once so great, so complete, and so short."[3] Readers will find in it a universal and timeless wisdom that can confer enduring psychological wellbeing in addition to providing, more importantly, the means for our return to the Absolute. The spiritual aspirant is called to recognize that all Truth, wherever it may be encountered, comes from the Divine, as Krishna declares: "However men approach Me, even do I reward them, for the path men take from every side is Mine" (4:11).

The following review judges the book on its merits, and is not an endorsement or analysis of the teachings of Swami Rama (Brij Kishore Kumar, 1925–1996)—or his legitimacy as a spiritual teacher. Others have taken this task upon themselves and it is worth noting that they recommend observing a certain caution regarding Swami Rama.[4]

This work provides observations useful to those interested in psychology and to mental health professionals who want to better understand modern Western psychology and how it differs from more spiritual perspectives. And yet the reader needs to be discerning as not everything claimed in the book is necessarily accurate. We cannot assess the accuracy of this translation of the Bhagavad Gītā and other Hindu sacred scriptures contained therein, as they appear to differ from other well-known editions. Yet certain observations made by the author do deserve further reflection and are useful pointers to understanding the perennial psychology as found in Hinduism.

The study begins with some highly critical comments about modern Western psychology. The author writes, "Modern psychotherapists attempt to help the client modify his conscious attitudes and unconscious [subconscious] process and behaviors, but their analysis lacks the depth and profundity found in the Bhagavad Gita." (4) This point could also be made about all manifestations of the perennial psychology, not just its Hindu form, as each offers a unique framework for realizing wholeness. It is worth adding here that the notion of the *unconscious*, or rather *subconscious*, was not a novel discovery of modern Western psychology. It has been known since time immemorial, particularly in the Hindu tradition.

The author suggests, "Most modern therapists do not explore the purpose and meaning of life." (4) Although this statement is likely more accurate than not, there are mental health professionals who do delve into this dimension; yet, regrettably, it is not standard practice nor is it the same approach as found in spiritual psychology. In other words, modern psychology does not necessarily lead to an awareness of the true purpose and meaning of human existence, which is to live in conformity with spiritual truth. We should hope to become, as the Bhagavad Gītā teaches, like "the wise who have seen the Truth" (2:16).

A common complaint according to the religious perspective is that "Most modern psychologists do not go to the root of the problem but analyze it without understanding the fundamental cause." (4) Due to the Cartesian bifurcation that afflicts modern science, a human being is perceived to be distinct from the physical body, and the cognitive apparatus of the mind is too fragmented to allow for questions of existential meaning to be fully understood—which requires that we recognize the tripartite structure of humanity as comprising Spirit, soul and body.

The author goes on to add, "Counseling is a very noble profession, but it is taken too lightly." (5) If we view the present-day individual as a reflection of fallen or *saṃsāric* humanity that has lost its

center—and thus its connection to the Divine—it becomes obvious that modern psychology is itself a fallen discipline. People today suffer on many levels, and there are spiritual dimensions of the human, of which mental health professionals need to be aware; if not, a therapist could do more harm than good. While no doubt referring to extreme cases, the author conveys this point when he says: "Therapists … can be more dangerous than anyone else when they exploit the innocence of others." (5)

For example, if the therapist is trapped in ignorance (*avidyā*) and does not possess knowledge (*vidya*) of the Self, this will compromise their ability to help others. According to Hindu psychology, every individual has a unique *dharma* or "law" to fulfill in this life. The Hindu tradition offers spiritual adherents various paths (*mārgas*) to Deliverance (*moksha* or *mukti*), the most pertinent being *jnāna*, *bhakti* and *karma yoga*—the ways of knowledge, devotion and action. Krishna says, "Better for each one is his own law of action, even if it be imperfect, than the law of another, even well applied. It is better to perish in one's own law; it is perilous to follow the law of another." (3:35)

The word "religion", derived from the Latin *religare*, signifies the "rebinding" of the self to the Divine or transcendent Reality. In this context, we can better understand the statement, "It is through *sadhana* (spiritual practice) alone that one can come in touch with his inner self [*Ātmā*]. Without that, trying to help others is like building a castle in the sand: it will crumble in the first rain shower." (5) As all religions have their own spiritual practices, so does each corresponding "science of the soul." Modern psychology cannot access the spiritual domain or the higher reaches of the human psyche, as it does not possess the requisite ontological and epistemological foundations rooted in metaphysics.

It is in realizing that the Self (*Ātmā*) is the source of all knowledge that we can become fully human. The purpose of spiritual therapy,

then, is the recovery of our original identity with the Divine. Through the faculty of the intellect (*buddhi*), we are able to know our true self. The intellect allows for discrimination, judgment and decision-making and is distinct from the empirical ego. Existence, as a whole, consists of the Real and the illusory; that is, *Ātmā* and *Māyā* or the Absolute and the relative. Awakening our *buddhi* is needed to discern the Real.

The warrior, Arjuna, gives reasons for not wanting to fight, yet Krishna instructs him that he must follow his *dharma* which requires him to enter into battle—on the battlefield of life. Krishna tells him, "Renouncing all actions in Me, with thy thought resting on the Self, being free from hope, free from selfishness, devoid of fever, do thou fight." (3:30) Symbolically, the two opposing armies found in the Bhagavad Gītā represent ascending and descending forces, or the good and evil in our hearts. This battle is being waged within each of us to determine which of these two forces will prevail in the individual, and whether the self will recover the sacred within itself.

The ultimate goal of each human being is to realize the Self beyond all forms. In the Katha Upanishad, it is said that the Self is akin to the driver of a chariot, with the body being the chariot itself, while the horses pulling the chariot symbolize the senses. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Arjuna represents the individual soul (*jīvātmā*) and Krishna the supreme Self (*Paramātmā*). The task of the spiritual aspirant is to reintegrate the soul into the supreme Self. A similar analogy is found in several texts of the Upanishads: "two birds who dwell on the same tree" (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:1; Shvetāshvatara Upanishad 4:6).

The two birds illustrate the nature of the human being: one of them eats the fruit of the tree, meaning it engages in the world of phenomena, while the other looks on without eating—witnessing the transitory nature of all phenomena with equanimity. This distinction between corporeal and spiritual nature is found across all

sapiential traditions. It goes without saying that in the nondual perspective of *Advaita Vedānta*, any absolute dichotomy between the empirical ego and the transpersonal Self does not exist; otherwise (to use a traditional metaphor), one is apt to mistake the rope for the snake.

A perennial psychology, alone, is able to view a human being as a subtle amalgam of Spirit, soul and body. When one of these dimensions is impaired, it will have ramifications for the others, as they are inseparable. While this integral framework has been primordially known, some aspects of the perennial psychology are only now becoming better recognized. The author writes, "Modern psychologists and physicians are becoming aware that psychological disorders are the main source of many physical diseases and imbalances." (30)

Referring to the myopic vision of modern Western psychology, the author notes, "their understanding of the human being is fragmented; they have no insight into higher dimensions of consciousness." (39) This myopia leads to a precarious situation, as modern psychology is the *only* form recognized by most people in the West. It has been exported globally, influencing not only the intelligentsia but the man in the street, none of whom are aware that there are other, more complete, ways of understanding human nature. They are unaware that even Western spiritual traditions possess deep psychological insights that can guide them in their struggles. The young, especially, have long shunned their own religious and cultural norms because modern science—which they find so seductive—rejects them, so they are led to doubt their own spiritual heritage. Thus, many turn instead to modern Western psychology, not realizing the treasures and resources of their own sacred patrimony.

The teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā are compelling reminders of the need to live with detachment, not identifying with one's actions or

the world, these being a "divine play" (*līlā*) of the Absolute. Krishna teaches, "Therefore, without attachment, constantly perform the action which should be done; for, performing action without attachment, man reaches the Supreme." (3:19) It is by helping people to de-identify with the ego and realize the Self that the professional psychologist can provide genuine help. Therapists who are solely preoccupied with the empirical ego often cannot be truly present to another individual in their struggles, for they are lost in a maze of their own conditioned thoughts and feelings. The notion of a practitioner "suspending" or "bracketing" their own personal experience, in order to consider another's psychological problems, is more difficult than generally assumed, especially when considered in a spiritual light. The author advocates detached "empathy" on the part of the psychotherapist, making the following observation:

Modern therapists have theoretical knowledge to a certain extent, but they are still caught up in the unresolved issues emanating from their own unconscious [subconscious]. They have not gone through an adequate training program to reach a genuine state of equanimity and tranquility, though they may pose as though they are peaceful and content. Many therapists suffer from the same conflicts and problems as their clients. (52)

Without a metaphysical framework to allow for a full appreciation of what it means to be human, and without having received guidance in the spiritual path oneself, to attempt therapeutic counselling for other human beings is likely to be harmful. In many ways, modern psychology is like the blind leading the blind (Katha Upanishad 1:2:5). This does not mean that there aren't many mental health professionals with good intentions or that they are unwilling to help; a number of them are very competent at what they do. However, from the spiritual point of view, psychology bereft of a metaphysical framework is to put the cart before the horse and to overlook that many, if not most, mental health challenges have a metaphysical genesis.

Many mental health professionals enter the field and become therapists, driven by their own mental issues and the need to work through them. While understandable, this can be both an asset and a hindrance. It is important that therapists first resolve their own difficulties and understand how these might affect their ability to provide support to others. Failing to do so not only causes undue problems for themselves, but can also be harmful to those they are attempting to treat.

The author states that "Many modern psychologists do not understand the importance of discipline" (57–58), noting that self-discipline is important in life and has significant benefits for psychological health, general wellbeing and, more importantly, for spiritual wholeness. The human being is at once situated in two dimensions: the horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal is contingent and temporal and the vertical is unqualified and eternal. The Self is neither born nor dies, is beyond the senses, and cannot be known through ordinary mental cognition. The empirical ego can only be truly known by what is higher than itself, by the font of knowing. The spiritual traditions all concur that it is the Self alone that can know the Self, and Divine Reality alone can know Itself. By traversing the spiritual path, we can apprehend our inner realm of thoughts and emotions as well as the world around us. The author writes, "Sadhana alone is the way of knowing, understanding, and analyzing the internal states of one's relationship to the external world." (76)

Cosmology plays a vital role in Hindu psychology. For example, there are three principal qualities (*gunas*) of what is known as 'Universal Substance' or *Prakriti*: these are *sattva, rajas* and *tamas*. *Sattva* is indicated by luminosity and has an ascendant tendency; *rajas* is the horizontal and expansive tendency; and *tamas* represents obscurity and has a descendant tendency. Each human being comprises these qualities to varying degrees, yet the Self

transcends all the *gunas*. According to Hindu psychology, a *sattvic* way of life is optimal for psychological health and wellbeing but, more essentially, for realizing the Self. The author writes, "If modern therapy were to concentrate on helping one develop a sattvic way of being, many of the physical disorders and much of the psychological stress that we see would be eliminated." (439)

Although mental health professionals employ the five senses to engage the individual with whom they are working, it is often forgotten that reality transcends the psycho-physical domain. Empirical methods are praised by modern psychology, yet they overlook that Reality transcends the five sense. Sacred epistemologies, by contrast, have a more expansive outlook that recognizes that the invisible informs the manifest—not the other way around. The author notes, "Modern psychologists do not understand that which is beyond observation and the analysis of thoughts and emotions." (92)

Through the intellect (*buddhi*) one can discriminate between the empirical ego and the Self. Again, the Self can only be known by a principle equal to itself. As the author states, "The Self is known by the Self, and not through any other means." (104) An important requirement of the spiritual path is the need to regularly withdraw from our preoccupation with the senses. This is not to suppress the sensory world but, rather, to immerse ourselves into a vertical dimension in order to contemplate the Spirit (*Purusha*). This is critical, as Krishna reminds us: "For, the mind which yields to the roving senses carries away his knowledge, as the wind (carries away) a ship on the water." (2:67) A human being, a microcosm, is a miniature of the cosmos. This implies that, by knowing oneself, one can know the Divine. For this reason, the perennial psychology views the center of consciousness to be a transpersonal reality and not the empirical ego. As the author points out, modern "psychology consider[s] the ego to be the center of consciousness, but the perennial psychology … disagrees." (134)

People assume they are the doers of all their daily acts. This is because they are engrossed in the external world of forms, which follows their identification with the empirical ego rather than the Self. The author adds that "It is only the ego that leads the human being to think and feel that he is the doer, the performer of actions." (148) Through the purification of the empirical ego that is undergone by following a spiritual path, one learns to dis-identify with phenomenal reality and contemplate the Self as the true witness.

Because we are trapped in ignorance (*avidyā*), without knowledge (*vidya*) of the Self, our problems can only be compounded. "Human beings do not intentionally want to create obstacles for themselves, yet they create them." (161) For this reason Krishna states, "Let a man raise himself by himself, let him not lower himself; for, he alone is the friend of himself, he alone is the enemy of himself." (6:5)

The author emphasizes the importance of finding a spiritual path and persevering with it until the Self is realized:

He will progress most directly if he absorbs himself in one tradition while respecting all others. When he starts practicing sadhana, the seeker is strictly warned to follow only one path, the path he is taught by his teacher, and not to follow other paths. For if one changes the path he follows every now and then, he will not be able to attain the Absolute. (175)

Ultimately, "there is nothing but the real Self, which is the Self of all." (398)

The author makes some useful observations about Hindu psychology as it applies to yoga:

Yoga therapy and training teach a definite and profound way to replace demonic qualities with the spiritual qualities that are the necessary means to pursue the path of knowledge. There is no such training program offered by modern therapists and psychologists. Modern psychology does not focus on the whole being or on helping one to set up a training program for self-transformation. Modern psychology is still learning to understand the cause of suffering, whereas yoga psychology has discovered the means and methods for self-transformation. (405)

He concludes with a parting advice:

To achieve the goal of life, one should learn to follow in the footsteps of the ancients whose experiences are recorded in the scriptures. The authentic scriptures serve as authorities and guide the aspirant. One who does not follow the teachings of the great sages but instead follows his own whims does not attain happiness and the goal of life…. Many have trodden the path of spirituality before us and have left accurate records that help one to know if he is properly progressing on the path. (411–412)

Although the paths leading to God are many, we cannot take that journey without following one of the authentic religions bequeathed by tradition. The author writes, "To attain the absolute truth, there are various paths that lead to the same summit." (428)

Knowledge for the ancients was not solely derived from sensory experience; this aberrant idea is the pernicious legacy of empiricism. Paradoxically, modern science—although secular in outlook—has its roots in metaphysics, which it repudiates. Indian philosopher Jadunath Sinha (1892–1978) states: "There is no empirical psychology in India. Indian psychology is based on metaphysics."[5] Modern science and, by extension, modern psychology have not come to terms with this problem. The quandary of modern Western psychology will persist until it realizes that any "science of the soul" requires a sacred foundation that is inextricably linked to metaphysics.

While one can certainly find common ground between the perennial psychology and its anomalous modern offshoot, the former does not depend on the latter because it has always remained fully integrated. There are constant dangers in adapting ancient teachings for contemporary readers because this can dilute the force of their message or, worse, distort them altogether. Spirituality is implicit in psychology, even if modern psychology does not recognize this.

Although this book can provide the interested reader or psychologist with useful information about how modern psychology differs from its perennial progenitor, especially in its Hindu form, it is not without its limitations. For example, some of its interpretations are not always accurate and, as already mentioned, the author's translations of the Bhagavad Gītā and other Hindu sacred scriptures often differ markedly from other more authoritative translations. While this work can be somewhat useful to discerning readers who take heed, it can be misleading to others who are less discriminating; therefore, we cannot recommend this book unreservedly.

In conclusion, it ought to be clear that modern psychology can never be a true "science of the soul." This is because it operates on a level that is beyond its level of competence due to a complete absence of metaphysical principles in which a normal "science of the soul" needs to be grounded. As Hindu psychology and its counterparts in other spiritual traditions affirm, the Divine is both transcendent and (to underscore the implications for subjectivity) immanent. In the words of Krishna: "I am the Self, O Gudākēsa, seated in the heart of all beings." (10:20)

Endnotes

[1] Shankara, quoted in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with the Commentary of Śrī Śankarachāryā*, trans. Alladi Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: V. Ramaswamy Sastrulu & Sons 1961), p. 4.
[2] Ramakrishna, "Sri Ramakrishna at Syāmpukur," in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 849.
[3] Sister Nivedita, "The Gospel of the Blessed One," in *The Web of Indian Life* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), p. 235.
[4] See Katharine Webster, "The Case against Swami Rama of the Himalayas," *Yoga Journal*, No. 95 (November/December 1990), pp. 59–69, 92, 94; Anne A. Simpkinson, "Soul Betrayal," *Common Boundary*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (November/December 1996), pp. 24–37; Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004).
[5] Jadunath Sinha, "Preface to the First Edition," in *Indian Psychology, Vol. I: Cognition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), p. xviii.