Mind and consciousness in yoga – Vedanta: A comparative analysis with western psychological concepts

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ABSTRACT

Study of mind and consciousness through established scientific methods is often difficult due to the observed-observer dichotomy. Cartesian approach of dualism considering the mind and matter as two diverse and unconnected entities has been questioned by oriental schools of Yoga and Vedanta as well as the recent quantum theories of modern physics. Freudian and Neo-freudian schools based on the Cartesian model have been criticized by the humanistic schools which come much closer to the vedantic approach of unitariness. A comparative analysis of the two approaches is discussed.

Key words: Mind, consciousness, dualism, Vedanta, Upanishads, Purusha, non-duality

INTRODUCTION

Though the word ‘Mind’ is very often used in scientific literature, the exact definition has never been easy. It involves describing something that is subjectively experienced in the first person and explaining it in an objective form in the third person. Mind has not been clearly defined in psychology. The definitions given often are more descriptions of its functioning aspects and do not describe what it actually means. Mind is often considered as the software and the brain its hardware. Is it matter, energy or a field or an emotional state? In most of the scientific literature, particularly conventional psychology, mind is considered an epiphenomenon on the body (particularly the brain)-a mass of matter. Brain is considered the seat of mind. The neurobiological approach tries to explain the mind as a byproduct of physicochemical processes involving the billions of neurons in the human brain and its various components are the thought process, emotions, intelligence and awareness.[1]

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines mind as follows: “The collective conscious and unconscious processes in a sentient organism that direct and influence mental and physical behavior.” This definition attributes mind to sentient organisms and identifies it with processes that control behavior. The word ‘Consciousness’ refers to one’s awareness of his unique thoughts, memories, feelings, sensations and environment.

Consciousness and mind are often considered synonymous. The neurobiological approach of elucidating the consciousness suffers from certain flaws in that it only defines and quantifies the consciousness by way of certain parameters like levels of awareness and discusses consciousness in terms of its mechanisms like a cerebral state characterized by electrochemical flow in the certain group of nerve cells like reticular activating system (RAS). It fails to explain the experiential aspect or the subjective state of being oneself or the ‘I’ experience which everyone experiences in day to day life.

Despite the voluminous information already available and being added every day, the question, whether we are nearing identification of neural mechanism underlying

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consciousness, leave alone mind remains unanswered. [2]

The studies of ‘Mind’ as well as ‘Consciousness’ through established scientific methods of research are often difficult due to the observed (object) and the observer (subject) dichotomy. The difficulty of objectivizing an entity which is purely in the experiential domain is immediately apparent. The root of the problem is that most of such interpretations are based on the dualistic and the reductionist approach of Rene Descartes, who considered mind and matter as two different entities. The Newtonian determinism taught that the physical world is governed by iron laws and everything in the physical world is predictable and thus ultimately controllable. His strict distinction between observer/observed left us in a dualistic world where there is no place for human struggle for higher evolution. [3] This mechanistic approach is what is being seriously questioned by the Quantum theories of modern physics. ‘We are mind machines or gene machines, our bodies are a collection of parts, our behavior is conditioned and predictable, our souls – an illusion of archaic religious language, our thinking the mere activities of the cells in the brain…… How can we find the meaning of our human experience in this picture?’ laments Dana Zohar. [4] The body and mind have always been considered to be two different manifestations of the same grosser and less gross aspects of the same reality a position taken over centuries by the thinkers of the Orient.

Unlike in other disciplines of medicine mostly when infirmity affects a body part whether internal or external there are normative values defining the structure or functioning derived after objective research. Psychology and psychiatry as scientific disciplines often have to grapple with the difficult dilemma of defining as to what is normal. They tend to base their inference on some general terms on a scale which may not entirely be acceptable to all and may not stand the scientific scrutiny as one encounters regularly an observed-observer bias. This dichotomy puts limitations because the observer has to use the same faculty of ‘Mind’ to analyze the data related to deviations of another ‘Mind’ that is being observed. The objectifying of the subjective experiences of another person can be erroneous when interpreted.

Sigmund Freud, a neurologist to begin with, explained the human mind as a multilayered entity consisting of id, ego and superego. Many of his theories on aggression, Oedipus and Electra complexes were influenced by 19th century Victorian culture and mindset with poor transcultural applicability. Freudian, Neo-Freudian approaches held their sway over European psychology for years. Pre-occupation with drive reduction remained the theme of these schools. Carl Jung though widened the scope of human existence by bringing in the concept of collective unconscious ended up giving his own idiosyncratic explanations about various aphorisms of the Upanishads. For a native of Europe, it was not only difficult to understand what was mentioned in Sanskrit in the cryptic aphorisms of the Upanishads. This is amply clear from the amusing explanations that Jung gives about the interpretations of the nature of the ‘Brahman’ or the ‘Superconscious,’ which he explains as libidinal energy. A clear description of what constitutes ‘Libido’ itself is not available.

Behaviorists like Walson and Skinner completely shifted the emphasis in the opposite direction almost denying the existence of a conscious will. They described every behavior based on S-R (Stimulus-Response) theory. The Sociocentric theories gave lot of importance to social determinants of human behavior again discounting the ‘free will’ in human behavior.

Cognitive schools which came in later primarily emphasized on mental processes like memory, perception, imagery and thinking, which were also influenced by factors like culture, education, state of health of the individual. But, they too failed to explain the nature of ‘cognizer’ behind the process of cognition, the ‘man behind the machine’.

It is the ‘Humanist Existential theories’ or ‘Third force psychologies’ revolutionized western thinking in the recent years and accepted the concept of free will and its importance as a motivator of change. They gave importance to abstract concepts like empathy, love, altruism, truth and beauty. The theories of Carl Rogers, Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow, Eric Fromm and Roberto Assagioli, particularly the last were closer to the theories of the oriental philosophies. Roger’s ‘empathy’ Maslow’s ‘self actualization’ Fromm’s ‘ultimate union’ and Assagioli’s ‘transcending the self to achieve higher self’ are much closer to even though not identical to what Oriental philosophies consider as ‘liberation’ or ‘moksha’ or ‘nirvana’.

The vedantic truths enunciated in the Vedas (particularly the last portions of the Vedas referred to as Upanishads) from India possibly authored by several known and unknown thinkers referred to as ‘Rishis’ in cryptic aphorisms have described some universal truths, which have been followed and practiced in the orient for centuries. The treatises of oriental thinkers of the past like Patanjali and Vyasa are the examples of these. Emphasis in these was equally on the subjectivity component of free will and transcendental nature of the ultimate goal of self realization. Upanishads, brahmasutras, bhagawadgita and Patanjali’s yoga sutras are the well known documents dealing with these issues in the Indian subcontinent over centuries.

Sage Pathanjali an ancient seer had enunciated as early as 400 B.C. the practical steps of such introspection in his 196 aphorisms in the form of ‘Patanjali Yoga sutras’. Treatises have been written elaborately explaining what has been in these cryptic statements of Patanjali. Patanjali maintains
that the goal of existence is liberation from this ephemeral world of existence and exiting from the cycle of birth and death and attaining the central core of existence, which is a transcendental state of ‘Purusha’. This is stated as a transego state going beyond the phenomenal world of ‘ego’ which is at the periphery of awareness.[5]

The Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahmasutras which have been considered together as three important documents (Known popularly as ‘Prastanathraya’) have remained the three most important collections of such profound knowledge. Because of their complexity and stress on ritualism, the ordinary masses could not practice them and they remained with mostly the elite and the mighty in the society. Their revival was started by Acharya Shankara in the 8th Century A.D. and in later years by Acharya Ramanuja, Acharya Madhwa and various others.

The modern day philosopher-yogis and thinkers like Mahrshi Dayananda, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Vivekananda, Maharshi Aurobindo and Paramahamsa Yogananda or Swami Ramathirtha have revived the interest of the masses in to this area.

Buddhism and Jainism branched out due to dissatisfaction of the masses with the orthodoxy and complexity of the rituals prescribed by the Vedas. Many of the treatises of Buddhism and Jainism too emphasized on the subjective and transcendental nature of mind and consciousness.

Vedantic schools, which were primarily the products of intuitive understanding of the seers (rishis of yore) were in the non-perceptual paradigm and hence were not easily available for the measurements and scientific validation that are insisted by the present day science. Science as it is known today is primarily based on the perceptual paradigm. Oriental psychologies do not subscribe to the body-mind dichotomy. Instead, these philosophies considered mind and body as the gross and grosser aspect of the underlying unitary reality which is described in vedantic texts as ‘soul’ or ‘atman’ or ‘brahman’. Here consciousness is explained in the singular and as the only reality but appearing in its manifold manifestations as plural due to ignorance (Avidya) or false identification as self (Asmitha). According to them the one appearing as many is a perceptual error (‘ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti’). The Vedanta philosophy has considered mind as the subtle form of matter where in the body and its components are considered the grossest forms. Consciousness, on the other hand, is considered finer than ‘mind matter’ and is considered as pervasive, omnipresent and omniscient. The ancient seers (the rishis) claimed that such truths are revealed only by intuitive research by diving deep in to the self in the process of absorption (Samadhi).

Swami Vivekananda explained the mind-body relationship from his own transcendental experience “The body is just the external crust of the mind. They are not two different things; they are just as the oyster and its shell, they are but two aspects of one thing; the internal substance of the oyster takes up matter from outside, and manufactures the shell. In the same way, the internal fine forces which are called mind take up gross matter from outside, and from that manufacture this external shell, the body—We shall find how intimately the mind is connected with the body. When the mind is disturbed, the body also becomes disturbed. Just as a physicist, when he pushes his knowledge to its limits, finds it melting away into metaphysics, so a metaphysicist will find that what he calls mind and matter are but apparent distinctions, the reality being one.”[6]

Oriental philosophies of mind, matter and spirituality often have been ridiculed as being esoteric, unscientific and not verifiable by the rigorous standards of present day science. Logically speaking it is incorrect to put any limits to science of what is possible in the future discoveries. Two hundred years ago if it was stated that it is possible to fly in the sky freely like birds it would have invited ridicule. Wright brothers proved it wrong and today we see aeroplanes weighing hundreds of tons flying at greater than the speed of sound. Charles Eugene Guyes a Swiss physicist who maintained that it is the scale of observation, which creates the phenomena. Thus, it will be completely incorrect to say that bacteria did not exist before the microscope was made or the stars did not exist before the first telescope was made. The range and capacity of some of our special senses are much less than those of some animals. Human retina has difficulty in seeing lights on either side of 400-700 nm wave length and similarly human ear has inability to hear sounds outside the range of 20 to 20,000 Hz. It is well known that many species have much higher capacity to perceive the stimuli, which a human being cannot ordinarily perceive. With instrumentation and sophisticated techniques, it has been possible to deduce the existence of such objects which we never knew existed. On the same analogy, it will be unscientific to put limits to science of self a science which takes an intuitive approach in its ventures and discoveries. In studies of mind and consciousness, the difficulty of using conventional scientific indices of deduction based on the principle of observability, repeatability and demonstrability of a phenomenon is immediately apparent as the subject of observation and study is the one that is being used as a measure too.

The mind-body dichotomy that has been mentioned earlier is at the root of the problem here. Einstein’s theory of inter-convertibility of energy and matter was a land mark in physics. Modern physics-particularly the quantum theories are looking at the particle as a bundle of energy and as a unitary entity.[7] The finding that subatomic particles seem to have their own ‘mind’ and do not seem to be predictable in their behavior or follow any known rules as posited by quantum theories of modern physics finally may show that
body and mind dichotomy, a relic of Cartesian view too may fall flat in the future.

Seers of the East proclaimed in the Upanishads (the essence of Vedas) the Unitary approach of Non-duality (Adwaitha) and considered the outer world as an extension of 'self'. They argue that the only thing that exists is 'Consciousness' (called by various names as 'Brahman' 'Purusha' etc.) The world as we see is just a projection of the unitary consciousness. The individualized consciousness is explained as a perceptual error due to ignorance (Avidya) which begets a feeling of 'I' ness (Asmita). The individualized consciousness then because of attachment to objects by way of love, desire, attachment or liking (Raaga) and hatred dislike or aversion (Dwesha) gets entangled in the web of the world there by forgetting the true nature of self as universal consciousness. The individualized consciousness thus also is fearful of losing its existence and that 'desire to cling to life' and that fear is described as 'Abhinivesha'.

The liberation (Moksha) is thus explained as the final goal of every being and the aim of existence and that can happen by getting rid of this ignorance (Avidya) that ‘I’ am different than the universal consciousness (Asmita) which is a perceptual error generated by attachment to the world by Raga and Dwesha, which also results in fear of losing individual existence (Abhinivesha). According to yoga philosophy birth and death are mere vantage points in the existence and till liberated from the cycle and move centripetally to the Brahman the cycle of birth followed by death and then again birth are inevitable. Clearly, death or disappearance of form is not considered the end of existence.

Yogic texts and Vedanta explain of four planes of consciousness. It is in the state of being 'Awake' (Jagritawasta or Vaisvanara) that we remain consciously aware of our surroundings. In Dream state (Swapna awasta or Taijasa) except for the movement everything that a person who awake experiences can be experienced. A person in dream, however, is not aware of the fact that he is dreaming and thus remains completely unaware of the fact that as a person (individual self) he was once in a state of 'being awake'. Similarly in deep sleep (Sushuptiawasta or Pragna) the individual who is experiencing it simply is not aware of the other two states of 'being awake' or “being in dream'. Thus, there is a 'stateboundness' for the individual who is experiencing these states. Who is this 'individual self' who remains but constant though is experiencing different states in different time lines? Upanishads proclaim that there is a fourth state of existence called 'Thuriya' where in the 'individual self' is capable of experiencing all other three states simultaneously and that state of existence is when the 'individual self' is merged with the 'universal consciousness' or attained the liberated state of 'Purusha' or 'Brahman' Purusha is a state of self existence which is static, undifferentiated and universal. It is a superconscious state which encompasses all other three states of consciousness-the 'Jagrat'(awake), ‘Swapna' (dream) and 'Sushupti' (deep sleep). There is no object-subject polarity (duality) in this universal state and it is unitary or singular.

On discussions of the faculty called mind, Patanjali uses the term 'Chitta' as an entity which encompasses much more than what the depth psychologists consider as 'unconscious' or 'subconscious' 'conscious ego' and also acts as a bridge between the all these and the 'superconscious core the Purusha'. Purusha is the master of Chitta and is never changing. Chitta vrittis are the waves or the angularities occurring in the ‘Chitta’ just like waves in a lake. These disturbances or the waves bring to existence the conscious world as we see it. Thinking, feeling, memory, behavior are all different vrittis. Patanjali further describes various states of ‘Chitta’ which are called Chitta bhums which can be equated with various mental states. Five states or Chitta bhums are (a) Kshipta (b) Mudha (c) Viskhipta (d) Ekagra and (e) Niruddha. It is a hierarchy and attaining a state of Niruddha is essential to experience the state of super consciousness. Most of us, the ordinary people remain in the first three states which only increase the bondage with the phenomenal world.

Einstein’s theory which established the inter-convertibility of matter and energy pointed towards this unitary approach in physics. Several studies in modern physics, particularly in quantum mechanics have offered further proof of this unitary concept. Early findings by physicists like Erwin Schrodinger, neurobiologists like John Eccles, Wilder Penfield, RW Sperry, Karl Pibram have advanced this thinking. EF Schumacher in his “Guide for the Perplexed” has gone to the extent of emphasizing the need for the scientists with dualistic thinking to take recourse to “seeking self-knowledge of inner world.”

What is then the applicability of these theories to day to day practice of psychiatry? The psychiatrists deal with aberrations in functioning of the mind. When these aberrations because of their nonconformity to the norms set by the society – they get labeled as abnormal and are brought for treatment. The existence of psychiatric syndromes where there are gross abnormalities of mental functions though is unquestionable, many a time, there is a tendency on the part of psychology and psychiatry labeling anything as abnormal because they are not completely understood thus widening the scope of what can be considered as illness state. This approach has come to lot of criticism in recent days as is evident from the recent controversy about broadening the ambit of psychiatric disorders by DSM V. Mystic experiences often do not find a place any modern books of psychiatry or psychology. Often they get either ignored as not clearly understood or outright
rejected as vagaries of an abnormal mental state. It is here that what Alan Watts said in his treatise 'Psychotherapy East and West' seems most appropriate—“If we look deeply into such ways of life as Buddhism and Taoism, Vedanta and Yoga, we do not find either philosophy or religion as these are understood in the West. We find something more nearly resembling psychotherapy. This may seem surprising, for we think of the latter as a form of science, somewhat practical and materialistic in attitude and of the former as extremely esoteric (secret) religions concerned with regions of the spirit almost entirely out f this world. This is because the combination of our unfamiliarity with Eastern cultures and their sophistication gives them an aura of mystery into which we project fantasies of our own making.”[11]

Another issue that needs our attention is the psychotherapy as it is practiced today. Most psychotherapies are, to some extent based on imposing one’s personal views on the patient to the extent that the person's thought process, emotions or behavior does not conform to the norms of the society he is living in. A great many thinkers, artists have been victims of violence on them just because they thought differently, created works of art, which were not to the liking of some sections of society. Though conformity to the norms of society works well as a general principle in one part of world or one period of time, when it is pronounced as a gospel truth and universal in application in all time and space dimensions that appears illogical and too judgmental. Beyond a point when it comes to issues like higher meanings of life as enunciated by great religious personalities or who have advanced in spiritual life, wisdom is in accepting the limitations in our knowledge in the field and that we are not in a position to comment on it.

The relevance of the study and knowledge of oriental philosophies to psychiatry as it is practiced in countries in the East cannot be overemphasized. Most psychiatrists whose initial training in psychiatry is based on Western dualistic thinking and detailed study of theories with little transcultural applicability cannot help but feel uncomfortable with the universal theories of Vedanta. They are not even discussed academically in our training institutions and most often get denigrated as unscientific as not much is known about them in the Western studies.

Nobel scientist Roger W Sperry had this to say, “Subjective belief is no longer mere impotent epiphenomena of brain activity. It becomes a powerful impelling force in its own right. I no longer need to keep my religion and my science separate. This new outlook arose as the unforeseen, secondary result of a long search for a better answer to the age-old mind-brain problem. As things stand, I no longer need to believe, as a scientist, that I and my world are governed solely from below upward through the ‘fundamental forces of physics’ in a totally mindless and purposeless cosmos, indifferent towards human concerns. In our new downward-control paradigm, we are moved and surrounded in the modern world by higher, more evolved vital, mental, cultural, and other social forces. The related, so called New Age Movement of past two decades, which has increasingly challenged Judeo – Christian and other traditions of Western culture, I believe, also has its foundation in the consciousness revolution”.

The revised concept of consciousness as causal, with its recognition of mental phenomena as explanatory constructs in science, has brought a marked change during the past decade in the scientific status of consciousness and of mental and cognitive phenomena generally. Resultant materialist trends within science have been accompanied also by a corollary rise in acceptance of various mentalist-related concepts and dualist beliefs in the supernatural, the paranormal and in unembodied forms of conscious existence that receive no logical support from the new mind-brain concepts of neuroscience. Reasons are advanced to show that our latest mind-brain model is fundamentally monistic and not only fails to support dualism, but serves to further discount fading prospects for finding dualist forms or domains of conscious experience not embodied in a functioning brain.[12]

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