

Report on Sufi-Yogi Dialogue Delhi, Feb 7th, 2011

On Feb. 7th, 2011, the fourth in a series of Sufi-Yogi Dialogues organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women was held at the Dargah of Hazrat Inayat Khan in New Delhi, India. The gathering, entitled “A Sufi-Yogi Dialogue: The Nature of Oneness,” brought together fifteen leaders from the Sufi and Yogi traditions to deepen the exploration of the nature of ultimate reality as represented by these two ancient traditions, and its relevance in meeting the critical global challenges facing us all today.

The Dialogue followed on from the three previous gatherings in this series held in the past year in India, Nepal and Japan, investigating the essence of Divine Reality, the path of awakening, the common unity of the traditions, and avenues for the much-needed expression of sacred realization in the world.

The inspirational setting of the Dargah of Hazrat Inayat Khan, infused with the energy of this great leader of the Chishti Sufi tradition, as well as the honoured presence of his grandson, Pir Zia Inayat Khan, and the direct descendant of the original lineage from Afghanistan, Sheik Ahmed Shah, lent the meeting an atmosphere of great power and sanctity. The gathering followed on from the sacred Sufi festival of Urs, which had saturated the Dargah with the sacred vibrations of music and meditation over the previous three days. Eminent Hindu yogis such as Swami Veda Bharati, Sraddhalu Ranade, Swami Asangananda, and Swami Mangalananda met the Sufi leaders, including Pir Rashid al-Hasan Jili al-Kalimi, Waris Miyan, Professor Meem Hai Zaffar and Syed Aslam Andrabi, in this spirit of common reverence and unity.

The intention of the fourth dialogue was to focus on the deeper understanding of oneness in the Sufi and Yogi traditions. Swami Mangalananda, from the Hindu tradition of Anandamayi Ma, set the tone with a stirring bhajan by the poet Kabir, who himself bridged the Yogic and Sufi traditions, proclaiming “only by finding our unity with the Divine can we find our unity with each other.” Dena Merriam, founder and convener of GPIW, then opened the Dialogue with the following questions: What does it mean to be one with the Divine and all of creation? What does oneness mean in the context of relationships among the human family? And how does this affect our perception of everyday reality?

The morning and afternoon sessions had different emphases. The morning’s discussion centered on the more traditional exposition of the nature of reality, its expression in both traditions, and the common elements in which they are united. The afternoon was

dedicated to the contemporary context, and how to bring this sacred wisdom of unity to bear on the critical issues facing today's world.

The morning session, "Knowing Oneness with the Divine," posed questions of an ultimate and perennial nature. What is the relationship of the human to the Divine? Can we know oneness with the Divine Reality? What does this mean in the Sufi and Yogic context? Much valuable groundwork in this area -- identifying the universal and eternal aspects of spiritual truth, and the common unity between the traditions -- had already been laid in the three earlier dialogues. Resuming the discussion in this the fourth of the series, the Sufi and Yogi leaders started from a point of basic agreement, articulating at greater length and, to a large degree, consolidating the insights that have been taking shape throughout the series.

The leaders expounded these universal aspects of sacred wisdom, found equally in both traditions, with increasing precision and eloquence. Swami Veda Bharati reminded us, and guided us into, the sacred nature of the breath, a universal entryway into the Source of all existence. "The same breath that God blew into the first man flows in us also. His presence unites us all; that presence in all of us is One. In Sufism, in Yoga, in every religion, people seeking the light of God take the path of breathing the God's name. That light is one and the same, that breath is one and the same. Then we know we are not many nations, many religions; we are all the children of God."

Sheik Ahmed Shah likewise affirmed that the Source of the breath is Divine, and that as we merge with it into the Divine, we will realize we are not separate from the Divine for even a second. "Restricted identities, limited identities," he asserted, "are based on ignorance. In truth we all belong to the same family... I don't find this [the Yogic] tradition very different from my own tradition. Speaking with them, it is as if I am meeting myself." In the same vein, Swami Asangananda asserted "We are all part of the same Parashakti. We breathe Parashakti from the Cosmos." He also, like the other leaders, stressed the importance of meditation: "By meditation and contemplation, get to the root of reality, God. You are the light itself; but you need to divest yourself of the sheaths hiding the light from itself. No use talking; contemplate on yourself, then on the universe, because you are the image of that ultimate reality."

It was affirmed repeatedly, by those from both traditions, that we ourselves are all the creation and expression of the same one Divine Reality. If we are all That, who are we to create divisions and conflicts where none actually exist? -- and especially not in the name of religion, which is meant to unite us. As the Sheik so cogently put it, "If God has created the whole Universe, who am I to differentiate between one sect and another?" Both Sraddhalu Ranade, a yogi from the Sri Aurobindo tradition, and Pir Zia Inayat Khan poetically expounded upon what is perhaps the essential theme of all mystical paths: our

true identity with the Divine, and yet our mutual relationship with it, expressing, honouring and enriching it, even as it creates, sustains and *is* us.

As Sraddhalu so beautifully put it “All is the play of the Divine through us, implanting within us the impulse to know, to love, to act. These three impulses are His will secretly propelling us to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him. In normal life, this is directed to forms. The seeker turns to the Divine hidden within the forms. Yet ultimately we learn not only that it is He we are seeking, loving and serving, but that He Himself was leading us from within to seek Him, love Him and serve Him. It was only Himself seeking Himself all along. The whole cosmos is his own Divine Self unfolding Itself; it is He who went forth to become the whole cosmos. In our consciousness of division, we see disharmony. But when we see all is Him, we see perfection, but an *unfolding perfection*, revealing itself stage by stage.”

“Today, it is His purpose to draw us all together, a synthesis of all the diversities which have been played out over hundreds of years. Earlier it would have been ineffective, but today is the right time. He has brought us together, and even if we disperse after this, each pursuing his own path, we will remain bound always, in this calling to Oneness, meeting in Oneness.”

Continuing on the theme to which Sraddhalu had alluded, Pir Zia conveyed with equal elegance this paradoxical relationship of the Divine to its own creations, who are capable of enriching, unfolding and evolving Its expressions, even as they are no other than Its own eternal Self. Though we are the creations of the Divine, he explained, we have and must honour our mutual relationship with It. It creates us, gives to us, but we must give back. “We receive from Allah existence, and in return we offer experience. We are nourished by the Divine, and we nourish the Divine. We do this through our own experience, through self-discovery, the awakening of the hidden treasure within us. We have been given Being, and we are to return it, to give our whole Being to the knowledge, service, love of the Divine.”

This unfolding of the Divine spirit through us in the world takes place not despite, but because of, our ultimate unity with the Divine; we express it precisely *because* we have no existence apart from It; because, however diverse our expressions, all that exists is That alone. In this ultimate context, as Pir Zia so beautifully put it, returning to the theme of the Divine breath, “Allah means the Source of all Breath. The whole universe is the exhalation, outflow of Divine compassion. It can also be seen as the Womb, the compassionate, loving Source that flows out in a great exhalation of love, of longing. From one undifferentiated Unity arose waves of yearning, this outflow of the Divine spirit into form. ‘I was a hidden treasure, and I longed, I loved to be known, and so I created the world that I may be known.’” This ultimate context of one unity alone embraces rather than contradicts the relative context of its unfolding through us, its

creations; for we are both, the expressions of the Divine's own forms, evolving to the recognition of our unity with Her.

In line with this acknowledgment of our personal responsibility in the unfolding of Divine balance and harmony, one other common theme was the recognition of the unbridled materialism rampant in the world today, not only as one of the major obstacles to spirituality, but the cause of many of the world's social, economic and ecological crises. The leaders from both traditions acknowledged this as a central, perhaps *the* central, problem today. As Pir Rashid al-Hasan Jili al-Kalimi urged us "The objective of these meetings is to make available to common people the essence of Sufism and Yoga. In contemporary times, there is cut-throat competition, materialism; we need to create conditions for the search for truth. There is no other way; only spirituality can bring us together, create unity... What is the message of Sufism, Yoga and other true spiritual paths? Leave materialism and take the path of God. The path is not important. The goal, the destination, God, is important. And it is through the route of the heart, love, not words, not objects, that we attain God."

"In the West now people are turning to spirituality. Man has reached the moon, created destructive weapons, but doesn't know his own identity. If he does, all his problems will be solved. Like a drop mixing with the ocean, all differences, and material aspirations, will dissolve. If people start following this path, there will be no need of police, courts and judges. This initiative for unity is the only way to save humanity from disaster. When we merge with the ocean, our light joins its light." Sufi leader Waris Miyan also cited self-centered materialism as the source of many of our most pressing issues, reminding us "We need to learn to have faith in giving, rather than receiving."

The morning's session thus reached a clear consensus on the universal wisdom of the traditions, and some of the factors impeding the much-needed influence of spiritual wisdom in the world today. The afternoon's session was intended to address the practical question of solutions: what steps can we take to bring the deepest spiritual wisdom of interconnection and Oneness at the core of all genuine traditions into action and manifestation in our crisis-torn world?

The questions posed in the afternoon's program went straight to the point: Can we affect the collective consciousness, the state of society, by manifesting or holding the consciousness of oneness? How can this lead to greater human unity and help create a more caring and compassionate world? How do we bring this consciousness into the present moment so that we can deal effectively with the problems at hand? These questions are big and challenging ones – perhaps the biggest and most challenging ones at this point in history -- and in the course of this brief afternoon session the leaders were only able to begin to make some preliminary forays on these questions.

Swami Mangalananda, however, laid the ground with some possible directions. “This is the most crucial stage,” Swami Mangalananda emphasized, “how do we put this in action in the world? The root of all traditions is unity, unity with the Divine, unity with each other. This is a crucial time for us to understand and manifest this. There are no easy answers, no short-cuts. But there are certain salient points to keep in mind. One is our own practice, our own state of consciousness. By establishing ourselves in this Oneness, we can influence many others.”

“We have interesting and difficult times ahead of us. The world needs the understanding of unity so we stop abusing the planet, each other. Our survival depends on it now. By deepening our remembrance and consciousness of Oneness, it will begin to express and communicate itself to others. Ma taught that everything is my own Self. The Divine Mother is in every atom. The influence of one person can be great. The influence of a group like this is great, can spread like wild-fire.”

“In every generation there have been a small group of awakened people, but now this awakening needs to ignite in society as a whole. We receive grace, as is happening in this wonderful place today, and we need to express it. When we vibrate on the same wavelength by gathering here, focusing on unity, it radiates out to the world. The work Dena is doing, and has gathered us here to do, is very important.”

“The power of sitting together,” as Deepa Patel succinctly put it, “cannot be overestimated. As Hazrat Inayat Khan told us ‘Each religion is a beautiful note, but we can listen to the whole symphony.’”

Pir Zia concluded with a joyful acknowledgment of the same. “I know that my grandfather Hazrat Inayat Khan would be very happy with this. A natural confluence has come together here. Please consider this home. We can create a grid of such centers around the world, exchanging inspiration towards unity. We are all part of that caravan moving towards the full unity of humanity.”

The question of how we can manifest this unity in the world is of course the critical question today, and in the course of this brief afternoon session the leaders were only able to begin to touch upon this vital exploration. We foresee it, however, as a fertile point of departure for the next Sufi-Yogi Dialogue, and one to be investigated in increasingly greater depth in the subsequent dialogues in the series. In this spirit, it is with great anticipation that we look forward to reconvening the gathering at the next Sufi-Yogi Dialogue, now being planned for Kashmir in September.

Some Concluding Comments:

Some preliminary observations, however, can be made in summary of this fourth dialogue, and a prelude to the fifth, with respect to future directions. One thing that became clear was the difference in intention between *preserving* a tradition and *evolving* a tradition. And evolving a tradition, in the larger world picture today, emerges with a new meaning: it means delving deep for the core essence, joining together with other groups likewise committed to finding their common unity; and then applying it in the world in action.

There are two aspects to spirituality, its eternal and evolving aspects. Those who are committed to preserving a tradition are often fixed on the eternal aspect alone; while those who recognize the importance of marrying spirituality with the critical social transformation needed today honour and work with both the eternal and evolving aspects. *Evolving* means meeting the specific needs of the times; it is not a departure, dilution or defection from the core meaning of any genuine tradition, but rather a deepening of it, and at the same time a stripping away of the more superficial (and often divisive) cultural or ritual overlays and trappings.

Today *evolving* also includes looking at the specific ways materialism is expressing itself, in the contemporary context, and addressing them, with both spiritual awareness and practical intelligence, in order to bring the spirit of unity into direct expression in the material world. Rather than the traditional split between spirit and matter, which plays itself out as the black-and-white alternatives of spiritual renunciation on the one hand or secular materialism on the other, we need to consciously bring the deepest spiritual awareness into our material structures and governance.

Several of the senior swamis from both the Sufi and Yogi traditions spoke about materialism as being the central problem, the biggest obstacle to spirituality, and in a general sense this is true, but we need to look at the specific and often complex ways that materialism is expressing itself today, in ourselves personally and in the bigger socioeconomic and ecological context, in order to go beyond generalities and directly address the issues that face us. In other words, addressing the problem of materialism means not just being spiritual *rather* than materialistic (exacerbating the split) but bringing a spiritual perspective and approach *into* our use of matter, using it as a fulcrum from which to generate new social and material structures that reflect our true unity.

What is evolving is the *alignment* of spirit with its expression in matter, not, of course, spirit itself. Spirit is eternal, but it seeks to express itself more and more closely, transparently, congruently, in form at this stage, after a long play of separation and conflict, the lila of division. It does this by going *deeper* into its own essence, beneath the surface dichotomies, and then re-emerging to directly express its true unified nature on the material plane. This is what can be seen as “unfolding perfection”, as Sraddhalu so aptly called it, or “dynamic perfection”: the unfolding of the ultimate unity of

consciousness, through diverse stages and forms, in the material world. This is the direction the Sufi-Yogi Dialogues, and our work in the world in general, has to go in; a conscious co-creation with this awakening of the Divine unity within the world.

As Swami Mangalananda expressed it so beautifully in the closing bhajan, "We are all living in the womb of the Divine Mother, gestating towards the awakening to our true Oneness with Her, and with all Her creation."