

Report of the Third Sufi-Yogi Dialogue

Organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women
in collaboration with Shinnyo-en, November 2010, Kyoto, Japan

The Path of Awakening

Thirty spiritual practitioners from the Sufi, Yogi and Buddhist traditions gathered in November 2010 in Kyoto, Japan, to spend three days in dialogue to deepen their understanding of these three spiritual approaches to life. The purpose of their contemplation and discussion was to continue to build bridges between these traditions, to do collective spiritual work, and to gain insights that may help to foster global peace and an ending of violence, injustice and suffering.

The Global Peace Initiative of Women has now convened three Sufi-Yogi Dialogues that have brought together Muslim Sufis from Pakistan, Hindu Yogis from India and guests from other traditions and other nations. The first dialogue focused on the shared wisdom of the Sufi and Yogi traditions. The second focused on the nature of the times in which we live and how these spiritual traditions can help address some of the key challenges. During both dialogues there was interest in greater sharing of the deeper truths of these spiritual lineages – that is, what is the ultimate goal of the spiritual journey and what is the process we undertake to reach that goal? This report strives to capture a small portion of the dialogue and experience of a rich, multi-dimensional and wonderful community. The report author's sincere apologies are extended to the participants for any errors, misunderstandings and important omissions.

The group's study of 'The Path of Awakening' took place through meditation, contemplation, dance, music, tea ceremony, temple visits, sacred art, walking meditation, observation of nature and the chanting of sacred texts as well as through discussion. The strike of the brass singing-bowl tolled the beginning and end of periods of silence between periods of conversation.

Throughout the dialogue, many common threads surfaced, certainly more commonality than difference. Sradhdhalu Ranade, an educator and scientist from Sri Aurobindo Ashram in India, encompassed this coherence in diversity, referring to "separate starting points on the same journey." Drawing upon the Isha Upanishad, he explained that "everything is profoundly the experience of a single Oneness." The transcendent Oneness of a higher state appeared across perspectives, as did a focus on the heart and the role of love, and commentary about the nature of consciousness. Great respect was accorded the sacred texts, and "yogis" or wise teachers were acknowledged irrespective of lineage. Spiritual practices often demonstrated a common focus, for example, on the breath as a bridge to inner awareness, and the importance of service as part of the path. Yet, as Taimoor Mumtaz Khan, practitioner and scholar of the Shadhili Sufi Order in Pakistan, asked, "How come our traditions have not respected these common teachings between us all, inside and between our traditions?"

The group spoke from time to time of the difficulty of language as a dividing force. Mohammed Suheyl Umar, Director of the Iqbal Academy in Pakistan, pointed out that everything starts with language, which becomes an agent of division – you become like Shiva, yet you are not Shiva. How can we help without it being 'service', asked Sradhdhalu Ranade? To describe an action as service is already a separation. Language also offered challenges to describing the dual or non-dual nature of the relationship of God and humanity - the questions of whether we become like Shiva or are Shiva, whether we are the manifestation of the world and not God or are one with God when

awakened – these seemed to be expressed differently among the traditions, but that sense may have been a function of language or of the need to more fully explore the matter.

Following chanting from the Nirvana Sutra, the Vedas, and the al Quran, the discussion began with fundamental questions about “Awakening, Liberation, Union, Salvation: What is that final state we seek to attain? Each spiritual tradition describes an end state that is attained through spiritual practice, right living, etc. It is the end goal, the purpose of life. What is this state in the Yogic, Sufi and Buddhist traditions? How do they compare?”

Daniel Odier, a teacher in the Spanda School of Kashmirian Shaivism, spoke from the perspective the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition, one of the oldest lineages of Hinduism. “What is the ripened fruit in terms of Spanda? To produce a human being with the will to function, to be totally alive, to respond to reality, spontaneity – to be deeply human is to be Shiva/Shakti.”

Dr. Shahzad Qaiser, an author and poet from Pakistan, spoke from the Sufi tradition about these questions. He quoted a Muslim thinker Muhammad Iqbal in this context: “The main purpose of the Qur’an is to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe.” The essence of the Sufi tradition is a spiritual and living relation with God. This relation can take many forms. God Manifests Himself in His Names and Attributes. He is colourless, for example, but wants to be colourful in multiplicity. He is manifest in all mediums in the simultaneity of His transcendence and immanence unaffected by any medium. “The Reality (God) takes all forms including the human but no human whosoever can take the Divine form. There is no ‘ilah’ (self-subsistent or autonomous reality) except Allah, the Reality (God)”.

As another speaker explained the Sufi “ripened fruit”, it is “The permanent, perpetual remembrance of God – Islam – when you are there, it will radiate – then wherever you are, this state will not go away – even if in the marketplace – whatever you do stems from that consciousness.” Presenting this idea slightly differently, Shahzad Qaiser cited the expression, “I don’t remember God because I never forget Him – I am in a constant state of watchfulness of Him.”

Rev. Minoru Shitara of the Shinnyo-en Buddhist Order described the Buddhist goal as nirvana and mahanirvana. These require an enlightened, awakened mind. Nirvana is a controlled state of one’s mind – it is an historically evolved term for Buddha Shakyamuni, who reached nirvana – to live with a higher state of mind. Minoru Shitara concurred with the idea shared across perspectives of the transcendent, the Oneness of a higher state, as part of the nature of awakening. Esoteric Buddhism focuses on seeking to be one with the greater existence – as we see in the image of mountain monks attaining enlightenment. Nithya Shanti added that from a Theravada perspective, nirvana is the end of suffering.

The discussion then moved to the nature of the self: “We speak about the Ultimate Reality, the goal of life, but who are we in relation to That? What is the nature of the Self and how do we realize it?” Swami Bodhichitananda, monastic of the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, India, noted that speaking about self requires speaking about That, and that there are many layers, all useful to where people are regarding the nature of the self. From the Yogic perspective, “the world is illusion, Brahman is real – the absolute, unconditional – Brahman is the world.” As the Mahavakyas state, “(1) Consciousness is Brahman (That); (2) This Self (Atman) is Brahman; (3) Thou art That; and (4) I am Brahman.” He went on to say, “Vedanta is the theory and the goal. Yoga is the means.” Variations of yoga include karma yoga (service without desire), bhakti yoga (devotion), and gnani yoga (yoga of knowing or wisdom and relating to the realization of oneness).

Asked to address the nature of the self, Suheyl Umar commented that “libraries have been written about this topic,” attesting to the scale of the questions. “Our bodies”, he said, “are set up in consciousness. That we have a body and mind, all are agreed. Is there anything more – a reservoir of reality, a ‘treasure’? Why did the All manifest an alter ego? From an inner necessity of love to radiate, because manifestation is also a possibility and if not, then something has been missed. If the treasure chest is attributes of the Brahman – humans have all the attributes of the Brahman (as opposed to the fixed situation of animals). The way back is the whole human vocation to embody those attributes that are specifically human.”

Sraddhalu Ranade explored the Vedic understanding of the nature of the Self and its realization, beginning with its origin in absolute reality. “Absolute reality can know that it exists – it is utterly conscious – and knows it as sheer bliss – ‘sat chit ananda’. Bliss is indivisible – oneness – unconditioned. The utter freedom of consciousness includes the ability to experience itself in myriad ways – for example, to know itself in the terms of its opposite – as conditioned, as limited, divided, ignorant, bound and lost in itself. This leads to the divided domain – one whole, two domains. There is an inherent Divine urge of Divine will to return, and Agni descends to push forward the return to the Divine. The return journey consists of an awakening unfoldment, where we become aware of the fragmented mind and can begin to take charge of our own growth – conscious transformation is possible. Yoga systems offer a way to realization and begin with different starting points: hatha yoga starts with the body; Raja yoga starts with the mind to find liberation; karma yoga speaks to the urge to act; bhakti yoga attends to the urge for the outpouring of feelings.

Another path is that of Tantra in the Yogic tradition. This path is built on the principle of the wisdom of the Divine and suggests if we were to submit ourselves to that Divine power, she who can speed up the process, that is, self-surrender to Divine Mother, the attainment of immortality here, now in this world is possible – perfection can be realised here. Every activity of life can be turned to this purpose. Life has to be fulfilled and divinized.”

Taimoor Mumtaz Khan then addressed the nature of the self from a Sufi viewpoint in this way: “There are two in us – the ego doesn’t see itself as a reflection of the Self, therefore it’s difficult – there’s a layer of ice between the ego and the higher self. The condition of the ego is thus a house divided against itself. The individual ego is a reflection of God – but a cracked mirror. The spiritual work then begins and the soul starts to work to return to a space of higher self. One day the ego will fall from the spiritual work. Thus our little journey is to recover the primordial nature, the eye of the heart. Only when you reach the heart can you go beyond to the sun – then the real journey starts.”

The discussion on the nature of the self and how we realize the true nature continued. Conversation turned to the nature of the ego and the relation of the physical body to self-realization. Daniel Odier sought to clarify the confusion of tantra with sexuality – this is a misunderstanding – there is only one verse on sexuality in the tantric texts. However, tantra put back the body in the spiritual quest – it just wants to be one with everything. He went on to say, “I’d like to say something nice about the ego – if we can reunite the ego with consciousness, it can help us. Take the ego aside and tell it, ‘I have a very important job for you – I’d like you to be chief manager for the heart.’”

Appreciating the idea of tantra as surrender (contained in Sraddhalu Ranade's expression of "self-surrender to Divine Mother"), Ayeda Hussain Naqvi of the Chisti Sufi Order in Pakistan offered the idea of surrender as "giving in to higher powers", while Sarojini Murthy from Ganga Prem Ashram in India expressed it as "complete acceptance".

Swamini Pramananda, a teacher of Vedanta and conservationist from India, explored how attitudes within a culture can support self-realization:

"In the spiritual culture of India, two attitudes are central:

- (1) Gratitude is very natural – it arises from an attitude of acceptance: 'what I have is complete'.
- (2) The sanctity of life is acknowledged – the transcendent is immanent – all that is here is sacred – the Divine exists in all.

India has a spiritual culture that needs to be nurtured."

Sraddhalu Ranade continued on the thread of culture. "Three great realisations are infused in the Indian spiritual tradition:

1. There is one truth, one reality, one nature.
2. That reality is immanent – not separate from this world – we also therefore are That.
3. Each one of us can recover our identity in That, but each has our own way.

As many people as there are, so there are as many religions and versions of religions. If we could allow these three truths to seep into humanity – then we may be able to see transformation. The coming together of this group can set an example."

Dena Merriam, founder and convenor of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, then raised the question of whether it was time within this series of Sufi-Yogi dialogues to issue a vision statement to articulate what these meetings are about. (A statement was written over the days and is included in the Appendix.)

The group had the privilege of taking part in a Japanese Tea Ceremony led by a tea master of Chanoyu. The ceremony exemplified so much of what we had been talking about – such love, care, and mindfulness were dedicated to the offering of the tea. As the tea master pointed out, "This time is the only time of this tea ceremony." The hanging scroll, the flower arrangement, and the bowls were chosen to match the season. A 200-year-old bowl was used; its title is 'First Shower of Rain in Late Autumn'. The whisk made of smoked bamboo used to stir the tea was 100 years old. "There is a great spirit of appreciation in the tea ceremony – you show feelings and respect to your host and this should extend to other aspects of life, carrying out the practice of hospitality."

The group then moved to study the path of awakening through the heart, noting: "in most spiritual traditions the element of bhakti or devotion is essential in the process of awakening. Devotion, or love, enables the return, or union, of the individual part to the whole. How is this envisioned in the Yogic, Sufi and Buddhist traditions?" Kabir Helminski, of the Mevlevi Sufi tradition and based in the US, offered the idea of "the Knowing Heart – to see the heart as a human faculty through which we can know the universe qualitatively. The heart is the mirror and the faculty for this perception, a sense that enables qualities such as tenderness and relationship to the Divine."

Swamini Pramananda explained that bhakti is a Sanskrit word that comes from the root 'to serve', and refers to the one who serves as well as the service. "Bhakti is the form of love that is absolute in nature. Devotion is the relationship of the created with the Creator. The practices where we can develop this are spiritual disciplines and dharma life, including purification, inner composure and peace. Through these we evolve in our practice of devotion."

Ayeda Hussain Naqvi explained that the Sufi way is called the path of the heart. On this path there are three ways to learn: "read about the fire; see it; touch it – this is the Sufi way – experience it to learn. Awakening the heart can only happen when one surrenders and abandons the self." In the relationship of love, one can see the lover as a form, a face of God, and part of this way is to recognise the Divine in everyone around us. "In love abides all knowledge, and Sufis want to know that love." One Sufi practice is the zikr, the practice of reciting the 99 Names of God, which are attributes of the Divine. In doing this practice, the qualities "rub off on you."

Sarojini Murthy described the yogic path of devotion as a religious sentiment that leads to reconnecting with the Source. "This pure consciousness, this is the creator or Cause – That – not this. Vasudeva is the subtlest essence that pervades. Love is the nature of God." As Brahman is limitless, devotional practices help to "filter the unknowable", giving the mind "a focal point, a keyhole to go through and enter the abstract." These techniques include "arresting the senses; thread the needle – roll the thread to a point to get it through the needle [focus the mind on a single purpose]; and knowledge – that alone is knowledge (gyani) that teaches you bhakti – therefore bhakti is the greatest." We can worship God by serving humanity – through this we learn to love. "The non-dual experience of God is not some warm feeling in the heart – it is a vision of seeing equality in all life."

Kabir Helminski asked the group to consider the question, "what have you learned via the heart that you could not have learned through any other means?" Nithya Shanti gave examples of the improvement in his meditation practice when he began to serve within the retreat and of the opening of his heart through the inspiration of a story of a saint who prayed to be born in hell in order to serve there. Swami Medhasananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Mission in India, spoke of the natural love that arises because we are of the same essence – the God in me is God in you. "Seeing God in everyone – whether it is Buddha consciousness, Christ consciousness, Krishna consciousness – these are pure consciousness, the same in each."

Sraddhalu Ranade continued the exploration of the way of the heart, bhakti and love. Bhakti is not the same as devotion or prayer. It has to do with a unique character that emerges when we relate to the Divine. The essence of bhakti is the sense of being servant to the other. The distinction of bhakti from emotional love is critical – it is not same, although emotional love can imitate it. Bhakti finds its starting point in human emotions, and as growth gets purified, what appears represents true bhakti. 'Love' – the Divine love that we seek – in its origin has nothing of a human relationship. Rather, it is the relation of the Divine with us. The essence of Divine Love draws us. The quality of love is that we are happiest when we love but not when we are loved – whether I get love back does not matter.

Shahzad Qaiser explained that in the Sufi tradition the primacy of love or knowledge remains an open question. Love leads to gnosis, and this happens in different ways. Love and beloved are forms of polarisation. Through love we enter into the face of metaphysical realisation. Individual realisation gives way to metaphysical realisation, leading to the end of duality. Where love becomes mentor of someone, it vibrates one's heart.

“Nothing but love can explain love itself”, Kabir Helminski offered. “Stages of love – passionate love, spiritual love – wherever you find it, nurture it, because every form of love is a step on the way. There is no greater love than love with no object – this is when you reach a stage when you become love. You can’t explain love – because in order to explain anything you need something more subtle, finer. Love is the final explanation of everything. Love has precedence over knowledge but no ignorant person ever sat on the throne of love.”

Swami Bodhichitananda added that when you meditate deeply, the mind withdraws into the heart, and knowledge and devotion are not different any more. Daniel Odier proposed and demonstrated that dance can initiate communication between heart and the Divine.

These principles of the heart were expressed musically as Ayeda Hussain Naqvi sang a Rumi poem, with the teaching: Listen to the cry of the reed flute – whoever knows the pain of separation from the Divine, learn to be as empty as the reed flute so that you can be filled with love and the ending of separation.

The next topic considered was esoteric methods for awakening spiritual consciousness, inviting exploration of some of the techniques of the deep mystical teachings in each tradition. For the Sufi, according to Ayeda Hussain Naqvi, breath is the bridge to God, the rope that hangs down from the heavens, and methods are taught to purify the breath. Swami Bodhichitananda spoke of Kriya Yoga, the highest form of yoga also involving breath, and Advaita Vedanta, the highest form of knowledge. He noted the process of withdrawing consciousness from the body to the spirit body, explaining that the breath is the outward manifestation of prana and that awareness of the pranic body can lead to control of the mind. Daniel Odier demonstrated a tantric guided meditation to cleanse the breath.

Suhey! Umar explained methods of concentration, of which the most central practice is the concentrating on the Divine Name. In a mystical sense during the repetition of the Name, the Name and the Named become One. Swamini Pramananda described three categories in the Vedic model, practices of karma yoga, vipassana yoga, and jnana yoga – the knowledge of oneness, as well as the practice of the chanting of Aum, the final word that encompasses all.

Finally, the group turned to the Bodhisattva Vow as a representation of the awakening of the collective. Nithya Shanti explained that the term “Buddha” means to be awake, and the whole teaching of Buddhism is to enable awakening. Bodhisattva means commitment to the awakening of all – a daunting task, taking an extremely long time. The vow embodies the idea that all beings are a reflection of me; therefore my awakening helps others.

Bob Maat spoke of the work of the Buddhist monk Maha Ghosananda and the arising of deep compassion out of deep suffering. Maha Ghosananda initiated a month-long peace walk through conflict regions of Cambodia, and taught that the mother of the landmines in the ground is the landmines in the heart – greed, hatred and ignorance. One must replace greed with generosity, hatred with loving kindness, and ignorance with wisdom. The walk continues, in the tradition of the Bodhisattva Vow, the walk that never ends.

Sarajini Murthy spoke of a range of practices that connect the spiritual aspirant with the community and strengthen the effect of spiritual work. Making a conscious dedication – a *sankalpa* – helps transformation to happen. The power of quality thoughts is very great. “Take two

with you when the flood comes – become one species, forget your differences – sink them for the greater good. We can only unite when we move ourselves out of the way – this is the meaning of bowing. Begin to do group practices and meditate together – at a common time. Use mantras to help unclog the energies. Dedicate action – for example, to peace in Iraq – make a conscious dedication to something other than ourselves. Don't wait for somebody else to do the job – take responsibility on the heart level – remember, God dwells thumb-size in the cave of the heart. The heart is the only place where we can unite – forget the pain – practice forgiveness – practice forgetting a past injury (we are all specialists in vendettas) – this is the only way now for us to move to a place of light. Inspire your neighbour – India and Pakistan must forgive and move forward.”

Rev. Minoru Shitara considered the Bodhisattva Vow in light of Doudou Diene's question: what can we do to face world problems? The Shinnyo-en Buddhist perspective begins with gratitude, but as he said, “Japan is increasingly a materialistic, consumer society with loss of traditional values. We become indifferent to other people's pain and we lose inspiration and willingness to challenge issues collectively. I do not have concrete solutions but we have this group. Japan is increasingly indifferent to what we are doing – there is media indifference and indifference from academics, which is perhaps understandable because they don't understand spirituality. We should continue such efforts as the recent spiritual leaders gathering in Korea during the G20 Economic Leaders Summit. Regarding indifference, it is vital that we are interested in our neighbours and their life paths – if you care for them, they will feel it, and this can be the entry point for a greater path. How many start the path because of world peace? No one – they start the path to solve their own problems. I can give all my interest to the people I am with, and find what triggers the joy in people. Express gratitude to those around us – think, what can we give to the person we meet?”

Sraddhalu Ranade posed a question to Bob Maat, citing that some people in reaction to their suffering experience great anger as opposed to great compassion. How would Maha Ghosananda respond to this dilemma? “It's difficult” was the reply – “study the peacemakers.”

Dr. Doudou Diene, former UNESCO Special Rapporteur on racism and intolerance, reflected on the group's discussion around enlightenment – is awakening a method, a technique? Can it be reduced to technique? Is awakening a goal that can influence the transformation of the world situation?

Sraddhalu Ranade spoke to the impact of the Sufi-Yogi Dialogues. “In the meetings a shift takes place in us, changes in ways that can only happen when people of deep practice come together. This forum starts with this deep contemplative intuition. For example, when the Swami spoke of reading across traditions and how it affects him, this time I really experienced it – the resonance from the different texts – Vedic, Buddhist – has to do with the spirit in which people read. This has changed me fundamentally in the way I relate to each of the religions.”

Naturally, many questions were not resolved and remain with us. As Doudou Diene pointed out, “We have not touched the reasons why we are in such a sad state. The marginalization of women is certainly one of the explanations.” In response to the proposal offered by a moderator: “What if the purpose of creation is realised in human individuality – the supreme achievement of supreme reality is human individuality”, Doudou Diene commented, “part of the cause of human decline is possibly that some take human achievement as the highest achievement without including the spiritual aspects of human life.” Later he advocated for the inclusion of an ethic of actions in the

statement from the dialogue – to be clear that “we aim at the ethic of actions – not only staying in the realm of higher values but of ethical actions – not only meditate, recite mantras, we aim at action – service – action profoundly explained and guided by spiritual principles.” Finally, he encouraged the group to “strongly express that in our actual life we emphasize higher values, a spiritual dimension, the deeper meaning of everything.”

At the conclusion of the gathering, the group made a *sankalpa*: “We offer the merits of this work to peace in India, Pakistan, Kashmir, peace in America.”

Sincere gratitude was also expressed to our hosts, Shinnyo-en, for their generous hospitality and support of this dialogue.

Appendix

GLOBAL PEACE INITIATIVE OF WOMEN

Statement of the Third Sufi-Yogi Forum

Kyoto, Japan November 2010

The Vision of the Sufi-Yogi Forum

The Sufi-Yogi Forum is a community of Sufis and Yogis who have come together

- to acknowledge their many shared ideals, principles and values;
- to contemplate ways to contribute to the elevation of spiritual consciousness in the world;
- to foster peace and encourage resolution of the many critical issues facing the global community; and,
- to take part in contemplative practices as a group as an active means of service.

Initially conceived by a small group of Sufis and Yogis from Pakistan and India at the request of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, delegates have come together now three times to share the principles and practices of their traditions. In the dialogue of this Forum we find an appreciation of our commonalities of approaches as well as our diversity of formulations and an enriching of our shared aims.

The Sufi and Yogi paths within Islam and Hinduism embody the heart and essence of these two religious traditions. Historically there has been much deep and rich interchange between these two. The Sufi-Yogi Forum seeks to nurture a wider public understanding of that which is shared, that which brings peace, and that which can benefit all.

The goal of the Sufi-Yogi Forum is to build on the deeper, shared mystical and spiritual experiences to help cultivate greater human unity. The deepening of our human unity is essential now as we strive to meet the challenges facing our world.

We agree that to seek the truth is our aim and that the highest truth is one, expressed in many forms. Both traditions aim at deep experiences and realizations of the truth, and the deeper we go, the closer we come to the oneness of truth.

We commit to making this gathering an ongoing forum for as long as it provides benefit.

We agree to meet in different parts of the world in order to draw nourishment from the richness of sacred places, sacred art, and sacred Nature.

We commit to making this work of Sufis and Yogis known through appropriate media.



The third Sufi-Yogi Dialogue was hosted by Shinnyo-en, an international Buddhist community based in Japan, and held at Shinnyo-en's retreat center, Ryukyo-in, in the city of Kyoto, one of the most important spiritual centers of Japanese Buddhist traditions. Sincere thanks are offered for the kind and generous hospitality of Shinnyo-en.

To reach the Sufi-Yogi Forum via the Global Peace Initiative of Women, please contact Marianne Marstrand, marstrandm@ruderfinn.com, +1 212 593 5877 (New York).

About the Global Peace Initiative of Women

The Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) is a non-profit inter-religious organization that emerged from the summit of religious leaders held at the United Nations in 2000 – the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. For the past decade it has been organizing inter-religious gatherings around the world, often in places of conflict and tension, with a focus on the contemplative traditions.

For further information, see: www.gpiw.org

About Shinnyo-en

Shinnyo-en is practiced by around one million practitioners worldwide and has 168 temples in sixteen countries. Shinnyo-en has been involved in philanthropic causes since its creation, working closely with organisations such as the Red Cross and the UN. Under Her Holiness Shinso Ito's leadership, Shinnyo-en has established and supported a number of foundations that promote education, health, the arts, economic empowerment for the underprivileged, environmental awareness, and interfaith dialogue.

For further information, see: www.Shinnyoen.org