

The Consciousness of Oneness and Social Transformation
The Fifth in the Sufi-Yogi Dialogue Series
September 13th & 14th, 2011
Srinagar, Kashmir, India

On September 13-14th, 2011, the fifth Sufi-Yogi Dialogue organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women was held in Srinagar, Kashmir, in partnership with Professor Meem Zaffar, Professor of Research at the Institute of Kashmir Studies, University of Kashmir. The Dialogue followed on from four previous gatherings held since 2010 in Rishikesh, India; Kathmandu, Nepal; Kyoto, Japan; and Delhi, India, and continued to develop the themes introduced in the earlier gatherings, as well as engaging themes specific to the Kashmiri context.

Dena Merriam, founder of GPIW, began by conveying the background and perceived need for this series. She noted that GPIW originally started as an effort not only to bring women's voices into interfaith and peace-building, but that of the contemplative traditions, whose deep recognition of unity at the spiritual level can be so potently applied to the quest for unity at the social and global levels so urgently needed today. GPIW is currently engaged in an active initiative to further an alliance of contemplative traditions that foster the realization of unity, both in the deepest spiritual sense and widest social context, as an essential basis for world peace and transformation. The Sufi and yogic traditions have powerful contributions to make in this regard, and especially those that flourished on the rich spiritual soil of Kashmir, where they set a powerful model for both spiritual and social harmony. Dena's question to the group was -- Can we bring back this rich interchange, and how can we apply it, both in the Kashmiri context and to the global crises facing us today?

This fifth dialogue in the series was notably lively and passionate, animated in particular by the presence of young people, including a number of students from the University of Kashmir. Earlier dialogues had established trust and a common ground; now new points were raised, and both points of difference and unity honed, energized by the expressed need – and stated goal of this dialogue – to establish a basis of common action for critical social transformation, in Kashmir as well as the larger world community.

It was felt that the rich spiritual heritage of Kashmir, with its history of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect and active collaboration between the great traditions – Sufism, Kashmiri Shaivism, Buddhism and other mystic streams that thrived there– could, if properly catalyzed, serve as an example and source of inspiration for much-needed new directions not only in the local but global community. This was perhaps the unspoken source of the energy felt palpably in this dialogue -- for the situation in

Kashmir, which is at present a source of great tension, in itself and for the world, also holds the seeds both of great past wisdom and of new opportunity.

The gathering was held at the Ramakrishna Mission Ashram in Srinagar on the first day, and the Sri Vivekananda Ashram in Achabal, a two-hour bus ride into the countryside, on the second. The Kashmiri setting was magical – it was easy to see how the rarefied beauty and high vibration of this area had given rise to such profound spiritual traditions – yet the ubiquitous presence of military served as a vivid reminder of the equally high tensions present today in this region. This stark juxtaposition set the tone, in a sense, for the dialogue: a mixture of urgency and passion, a depth of wisdom, fierce pride and restlessness in equal measure to heal the deep wounds that now tear apart this great land.

What emerged first in the dialogue was an exploration and clarification, both in the spiritual and social context, of Oneness as unity-in-diversity; and, as the dialogue proceeded, the possibilities for social transformation that express and embody it.

Interestingly, it was exactly at the points where the sparks flew in this dialogue that energy was ignited and light shed on possible new directions. Some of these included:

- The perception of differences – source of conflict or complementarity?
- The need to go deeper than mere talk, theoretical discourse or disputation
- The role of mystical or non-dual experience as a basis for social action (Is this the mystic's role? How to know when one has gone deep enough in one's inner experience to move on to truly transformative action in the world? And how can we, practically, walk our talk -- i.e., work together effectively for transformation?)

In this way, though this high-spirited gathering did not always stick strictly to the sequence outlined in the program, the course of the dialogue nonetheless moved through three distinct but logically progressive themes:

I. Realizing Unity-in-Diversity: Going Beyond the Perception of Difference as a Source of Conflict

Much needless suffering, conflict and violence permeate the human condition because of a fundamental misperception of our nature. This misperception – that we are separate, from each other, nature and the very Source that creates us -- causes us to fight endlessly over differences, whether they be cultural, religious, racial, gender or caste. Yet the teachings of all mystic traditions lead to the realization that everything in existence emanates from the same Divine Source; is in fact an equal manifestation of that One Ultimate Being. The goal of all mystic paths is to discover our own unity with that Divine Source, and thus with all of creation. Though the names given to this process and its destination may vary – Union with the Beloved (Sufi), realization of

non-duality or Oneness (yogic) – essentially they all refer to the same realization: the unity and equality of all in the sacred. This realization has an enormous potential to heal our world.

Early on the first morning, Professor Bettina Baumer elucidated the true meaning of non-duality – Paramadvaita (Supreme Non-Duality) -- in the Kashmiri Shaivite view. The terms “non-duality”, “Oneness” and even “unity” are often misunderstood, taken to mean sameness, uniformity, or even no form at all. In fact, as Prof. Baumer made clear, true non-duality or Oneness – far from reducing all forms to a bland sameness or nihilistic formlessness -- can rather be described as an all-embracing, inclusive fullness that rejects nothing and leaves nothing out, that embraces all forms and diversity as infinite expressions of one underlying unity.

Supreme non-duality neither excludes nor denies, but rather embraces and honours the levels of diversity and duality. The universal has no fear of relative, but rather sees it as its own array of expressions. Thus multiplicity and pluralism are embraced, but always in the light of the highest experience. This is all-inclusive non-duality. It also includes the practice of non-duality – Advaitachara -- not just theory. The practices of non-duality, as Prof. Baumer pointed out, lead to an experiential perception that goes beyond separation and division at all levels.

According to the great Kashmiri Shaivite Abhinavagupta, in the Malinivijaya Vatika, quoted by Professor Baumer, “most dangerous are those who emphasize unity at the cost of diversity”, or ultimate reality in denial of its relative expressions. The spiritual, psychological and social levels must be related, addressed as a unitive Whole. This is also the philosophical basis of the practices taught in the Vijnana Bhairava, “which start from duality and pierce through it to non-duality, till the social domain is also included and transformed.” (One of the highlights of the dialogue was the meditation Prof. Baumer would be leading us in on the second day, drawn from precisely these practices in the Vijnana Bhairava.)

Professor Baumer’s lucid explanation offered us, from the outset, a concise but comprehensive vision for the reconciliation of differences, both from the perspective of ultimate reality, and healing our society, which was to continue to develop over the course of the dialogue.

The true experience of non-dual or mystical realization, far from being world-denying or other-worldly, catapults one to the most embracing and fullest of perceptions. Spirit is seen and revered in all forms. This perception, accessed at the core of all mystical and non-dual traditions, can thus become an ideal basis for a rich, creative, diverse but at the same time just, equitable and compassionate global society. Understood in its fullest sense, the non-dual, or mystical, unitive perspective, far from being other-worldly, can actually be the most potent basis for social transformation.

It is a recognition of the One that animates and appears as all things, even as it takes different forms and is given different names. To appreciate this is to go to the root of reality, and does not imply a sacrifice of our love or respect for any or all of its forms but, conversely, an expansion of our wonder at the boundless diversity of its creative expressions.

Maroof Shah, one of the Sufi speakers, pointed out the exemplary tradition of Kashmir in this respect, “centred on the unity of transcendent principles informing the diverse religious traditions but not excluding the unique specificity and genius of all contributing paths.”

Swamini Pramananda, speaking from the Vedantic tradition, used the apt expression ‘unity-in-diversity’ to convey the full import of this perspective. She said that as we progress in our spiritual development we come to see the Divine as both the unmanifest and in manifest form. The problem is not the difference in forms, cultural or religious – the problem is in thinking the difference in forms is a problem. Swami Mangalananda, of the Sri Anandamayi Ma lineage, likewise exuberantly conveyed the perception of difference as cause for celebration rather than conflict. Instead of being a cause for dispute, either violent or verbal, the wide diversity of forms in human religious and social culture can rather be seen as a cause for awe and wonder, at the myriad expressions of the infinite power of the One who created us all.

Naseem Rafiabadi, from the Sufi tradition, said that we should accept our differences and not over-simplify or reduce everything to a monolithic unity. As Dena Merriam explained “Unity doesn’t mean everyone becomes the same. Religions should not become competitive with each other. They are different routes to the same reality. We can shift to a common understanding of the human condition without losing our identity. The Divine is One, that expresses itself in many ways; we should love all these different expressions. How can we love the Beloved without loving all its expressions? Once we appreciate this, then the paradigm of separation will be over”.

What is important, then, is that we not waste time taking our differences as a problem, but that we see the unified Essence, the One Divine Source which they spring from, and which they also point back to. The perception of this underlying unity can then become the springboard for the concerted action needed so urgently today for world peace and transformation.

For this is the point of all religions, to point back to the deepest Source of our unity with the Divine, each other and all of creation, from which alone true peace, harmony and transformation can spring. It is not a matter of reducing all forms to one homogeneous one, either spiritual or religious, or our social forms to conformity, but rather discovering the common truths – the ultimate reality – that all the diverse forms derive from, and then acting upon these truths in the name of global harmony.

As one delegate, Jyoti, so strikingly put it, calling an effective halt to a debate threatening to grow heated: “We are different -- we are not separate!” Spiritual forms and structures are certainly needed, as are social and cultural ones, and they will always, by necessity, take relative expressions. The aim is not to eliminate the differences, but place them in a wider context in which the connections between them are seen, and the ultimate root of unity from which these connections emanate.

Sraddhalu Ranade, a scholar and scientist from the Sri Aurobindo tradition, summed this up succinctly: “Humanity needs to discover the underlying unity which is already there. That which unites us transcends the differences in forms. Differences seen as contradictory are then seen as complementary.”

New social visions can then evolve which not only embrace the existing religious forms in our global society, but do so precisely by pointing to a deeper underlying unity. The diversity of spiritual forms would be all the more deeply respected and cherished, as the essential truths that are the Source and goal of all religions are identified and highlighted, and made the very basis of our greater society and its social systems.

This includes a shift in perspective, both a deepening and widening of the context in which we see our respective forms, and the particular gifts and beauty each offers in synergy, not conflict, with all others and the Whole. Out of this shift in perspective, new frameworks for society can emerge, that have the capacity not only to tolerate but to positively embrace differences and diversity, in the light of this overarching vision of interconnection and unity.

For this we must work together – for all parts of the Whole have their own and essential role in the collective shift to the perception of Wholeness. If we stick to defending to our territory, even our own tradition’s particular expression of Oneness or union– as opposed, ironically, to another’s – we are lost. We must go deeper to perceive the actual truths at the core of the traditions, and at the core of existence itself, and for this we need to go deeper than words, deeper than forms, deeper than prejudices and received beliefs, into actual experience, which is where all mystic paths lead.

II. The Need for Inner Experience

This reality of unity-in-diversity, subtle and profound as it is, must not only be understood but felt. Precisely because it goes beyond the dualistic oppositions of conventional conceptual thinking, it must be realized in experience, and not just as a concept. One point brought out repeatedly by the Sufi participants was the importance of feeling. As G.N Masoodi, Shoab Bhat, and others attested, Sufism gives great value

to feeling; and in fact mystic paths as a whole emphasize going deeper than discursive understanding alone, into actual feeling, authentic inner experience. Further, and of equal importance, particularly in the context of this dialogue, it is thus not only by truly understanding the principle of unity-in-diversity but realizing it at the feeling level, that we are then able to move on to the next step – bringing this understanding and felt experience into active, practical expression in our world. One without the other is insufficient and will go astray; but together, head and heart, joined in true knowledge and deeply felt compassion, can move mountains.

Understanding can provide a framework, an orientation or road-map for experience, but cannot substitute for it. We cannot disdain the intellectual level, because we need it not only to comprehend the possibility of deeper experience, but to make sense of it when it happens and, as much as possible, articulate it in order to make it more accessible to others. We cannot, however, expect from it what is beyond its appropriate role. It provides a necessary entryway -- but then one must enter.

There was much discussion about the place of philosophy, and its different meanings in the East and West. Prof. Baumer made it clear that, from the Eastern point of view, the starting point of philosophy is the experience of the yogi, and it is from that experience that philosophy evolves. Even the word “dialogue” literally means not, as we assume, a debate between two sides, but “passing through the words” to reach that essence, through sharing of experience, not just concepts.

Ultimately, we need to go deeper than differences, and we need to go deeper than words or mere knowledge into actual feeling, experience, because it is there that true unity that is perceived. This recognition came up repeatedly during the dialogue – that we need to go deeper than intellectual argumentation of differences, or even a superficial intellectual knowledge of unity, into the actual, felt experience of unity, and the kind of compassionate action – at both subtle and active levels – that this inner experience then naturally gives rise to. The corollary of this, which emerged with growing insistence throughout the dialogue, is that mysticism must come into the world, that now is no longer the time for mystics to withdraw from society.

An astute observation in this regard was made by Professor Baumer. She pointed out how crucial practice and experience are in avoiding misinterpretations, oversimplifications or dangerous distortions of even the most profound non-dual or mystical teachings. The importance of genuine experience is thus not only for our own sake, but for the sake of society. As explained, in the context of non-duality “a mere philosophical or theological statement would not do, unless it is put into practice. This is why our topic today is so apt and so necessary in our world of divisions and separations at all levels, and most sadly in the religious scene. Fundamentalisms of those who proclaim unity at the cost of diversity – and even at the level of the Divine—are most dangerous.” Thus the realization of true unity-in diversity must take

place at a felt level, in genuine inner experience, effecting an authentic transformation in the individual, if it is not to be distorted or misused. Only if it is authentic at the individual level, can an authentic transformation then be transferred to the collective level.

In this light, an important question was raised by Shoab Bhat, one of the university students from the Sufi tradition. How can one know when one has gone deep enough in one's own inner experience to begin to bring it out into the world? In other words, when does one's personal process of involution turn itself inside out, and flow into evolution, of oneself and one's society? Sraddhalu Ranade sensitively addressed this question. "Even as we pursue our inner path, there is a need to express it outwardly. Follow the Divine will within you; there will be a bridging of inner and outer. Even if there is a mixture of motives, or you are not clear of the way, keep invoking a greater alignment. Sometimes you need to withdraw to consolidate, other times you will be called out. Stay in conscious alignment."

There may even be a requirement in our spiritual evolution – many passages in and out, our deepest centre and the outer collective, in a dialectical spiral of growing integration and perspective, until the two are finally perceived, and acted upon, as One.

This means that at a certain stage our individual evolution merges into the context of the greater collective evolution, and we see how our individual development and the development of society mutually inform each other, in a synergy of reciprocal influence. This reciprocal influence, which is always taking place, can be either unconscious or conscious. There is a point of maturation, however, where this synergy between our own evolution and the collective evolution of humanity becomes obvious, as does the call to our conscious, active participation in it.

This represents a threshold, a quantum leap in our evolution, beyond individual self-perception and self-interest into a consciousness of the Whole, which then accelerates exponentially not only our own evolution but society's, in a whole-systems paradigm shift that galvanizes change at all levels. We seek out like-minded others to work with in this process, and further, reach across boundaries to join with other cultures and traditions, to effect transformation from our common Source of unity and towards our common goals for humanity and the planet.

III. Involution to Evolution: The Convergence of Individual and Societal Transformation

Right now our social structures are glaringly out of alignment with this deepest spiritual knowledge and experience of interconnection and unity. Those of us who are able to perceive and experience these deeper truths must begin to reflect upon ways to create social structures that not only embody that underlying unity, but through new

forms, facilitate this understanding and experience in others. In this way a positive, upward spiral of individual and social evolution can be set in motion, turning around the downward spiral humanity is now caught in.

G.N. Masoodi affirmed the presence of this evolutionary perspective, both individual and collective, within the Sufi teachings. “A Sufi renews his ‘station’ in Unicity (the unified field of consciousness) continuously and stopping anywhere would mean he has decided to proceed no further on the path. With every advance in Unicity the field of consciousness of a Sufi enlarges with a corresponding emancipation of his self, a change in his world view and perception of God. Such continuous advancement is also an acid test for the genuineness of his mystic experience.” He further attested to the evolutionary aspect of Sufism in its historical, social forms. “It is only by rising to a fresh vision of his origin and future that man will eventually triumph over a society motivated by an inhuman competition and conflict in religious and political values. Mystics in the past have updated their knowledge of mystic experiences in the light of advances in general collective knowledge, as well as new circumstances. Modern mystics cannot apply mystic experience for the general good of all unless it is given a form that suits modern knowledge and the new social context.”

Shradhalu Ranade shed further light on this evolutionary perspective from the yogic standpoint. Our spiritual development leads, not to a static transcendence, but an evolution that advances precisely by embracing and manifesting new forms. “To know Him in his transcendence is a darkness, even greater than the darkness of limitation. Know him as Himself – translucent, universal and individual. The individual is not extinguished, but now consciously participates in the bliss of God in His manifestation in the world. To align our individual consciousness to the totality allows us to participate in His unfolding in the world as he grows within us.”

We are all the creations of the same Creative Intelligence; but in some this Intelligence has become self-reflective – making us both creations and conscious co-creators -- and not yet in others. It is even more incumbent upon those who are already consciously aligned with that Creative Intelligence to recognize its inherent existence and facilitate its unfolding in others who have not yet realized it within themselves. All are equally the Divine, but unequal in the depths to which they know it; and this gives those who see this equality a special responsibility to help unfold it in others.

The meaning of “social transformation” was not immediately evident to some in the group, and called for clarification. In the introduction to the second day’s session, GPIW founder Dena Merriam explained that social transformation, as distinct from social service or charity, entails a shift in consciousness, at both the personal and societal levels, and the re-alignment of social structures in keeping with that shift. This shift in consciousness must take place at both the individual and collective levels, with

vanguard individuals seeding the collective shift, and ultimately lead to a perceived convergence of individual and collective evolution itself.

This means wedding the deeper, inner experience of union revealed by the mystic paths with its tangible expression in the world of form, and specifically the forms of our society: a sacred activism engaged in translating the true unity revealed at the invisible dimension of reality into the visible, manifest forms of society. Those who are bent on defending the exoteric aspects of their religion and partisan interests are not in a position to do this; but those who have perceived, and, even more so, experienced, the deeper esoteric truth of unity underlying the diverse religious forms, are in a position to do this. And those who are ready must respond to the call, because it is truth itself that is calling – universal, eternal truth and not partisan, relative ones – to make its voice heard, and embodied, given new, inclusive, embracing, healing forms in our world.

At a certain point, the growing evolution of our own inner perception demands and necessitates the complement and synergy of outer perspective and action for its own continuance. The ability to accommodate and embrace complexity, the coincidence of opposites -- which can otherwise tear apart peoples, cultures and our own psyche -- is itself a hallmark of the higher stage consciousness being demanded in our evolution today. At the practical level this is being reinforced, in no uncertain terms, as an ultimatum from nature itself today: our choice is either to evolve – in other words, stretch ourselves to accommodate and reconcile seeming differences and divisions, breaking the barriers of mere mental perception and achieving a higher vision of unity – or to go extinct. We are being forcibly propelled to a higher level in our evolution.

One thing all agreed upon was that no true mystic divorces himself or herself from the social reality, but acts upon it, in subtler – by dint of their higher frequency – and often more manifest ways. There may be times of physical withdrawal, but even then a force is being generated which has its effect on the larger collective domain. Today in particular the need to translate deeper mystical realization into action at the collective level is critical to the world's very survival -- an urgency which perhaps drove the passion so tangibly felt in this dialogue, to move beyond a debate over differences and on to united action.

The conjunction between deep inner spiritual realization and social transformation is not a new one. The great traditions that grew on Kashmiri soil – Sufism, Kashmiri Shaivism and Buddhism – all challenged the social and religious conventions of their times, and in many cases, reformed or transformed them. Today we must bring this conjunction of inner spirit and outer culture to a whole new level, going to the deepest interspiritual truths and applying them in the widest global context. For this, the model and inspiration of the great mystics stand as shining examples that can help light our way.

It was agreed that religious traditions, even mystical ones, necessarily arise within a cultural context, and, in their historical development, carry the particular expression of that context forward. Yet elsewhere it was noted that mystics, in particular, often challenge and rebel against the conventional cultural forms, rites and structures, either leaving them behind totally for a deeper, more universal experience of ultimate reality, or go on to reform them, stripping away superficialities, hierarchies and corruption, and bringing in new social forms reflective of that deeper spiritual reality – love, interconnection, and equality in the Divine.

Professor Meem Zaffar attested to the fact that the Kashmiri rishis of the past did indeed do this – reforming and revolutionizing the social systems in their domain, creating social structures in alignment with deeper reality that advanced both the social well-being and spiritual evolution of the peoples. There is much for us to learn here. “We need a new kind of yogis,” Prof. Zaffar insisted, “who will work in the political and social context. The rishis in the past created whole social systems based on spiritual principles, even coming into conflict with the ruling powers. Deep spiritual training was given in preparation for social leadership. This tradition has, in fact, existed since pre-Buddhist times. Nirvana is not accepted as the ultimate value, but liberation of all sentient beings. We understand this in Kashmiri culture; Lal Ded was a great social reformer, and the rishis consolidated that principle.”

Professor Zaffar went on to extol the shining example of Lal Ded, the great mystic and poet from the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition who uncompromisingly challenged all that was false and corrupt in the social order, including caste and gender divisions, championing the equality of all within the Divine. He captivated the gathering with his eloquent and ardent portrayal of this one-woman revolution for equality, truth and love, who eschewed all cultural and religious hierarchies and pretensions in favor of a vision that saw the Divine in everyone and everything. Professor Neerja Mattoo, literary scholar of the Kashmiri mystic traditions, went on to treat us to an enchanting reading of Lal Ded’s poems, pointing out her revolutionary use not only of the colloquial language but metaphors consistently drawn from the life and work of the common people, attesting to the equality of her vision.

Prof. Baumer likewise affirmed the centrality of the vision of equality not only in the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition, but even at the etymological root of the term “samadhi” itself. The Kashmiri Shaivite understanding of “samadhi” is a feeling of equality with all beings. Mixing one’s mind equally in all beings: this is considered the highest form of samadhi, far beyond the samadhi of formless absorption.

She led us in a powerful meditation from the Vijnana Bhairava that brought together the levels of deep inner non-dual realization with its direct implications for the equality, interconnection and Oneness of all, at the social as well as ecological levels.

Her meditation gave us a striking, felt experience of this equality – one that exists not only among peoples, but with all of nature and even seemingly inanimate objects – all pervaded by the same One luminous and Divine Essence. In this she also gave us a taste of how such texts, leading into a level of profound non-dual realization, can be used as a basis for the much-needed conjunction of spirituality and social transformation we were attempting to generate in this gathering, and which holds such potential for healing in our world. This will, no doubt, continue to unfold in the future.

When we trace our identity down deep enough, we converge in the Source of the Totality. This is the revelation to which all mystic paths lead. We take our existence from the Origin, and continue to flow in its stream, even as we remain inseparable from its eternal unmoving center.

From the point of view of what has come to be called evolutionary spirituality, or conscious co-creation, we take this to its furthest expression, its fullest implications. We come to identify with the Whole, both across space and time, transcending and yet including them. In this we embrace the Totality not only as the Eternal Now, and in its present aspect, but its evolving aspects as well, stretching into the future. Tapping into the fathomless depths of the mystery that is our origin, we spiral at the same time out into the unfolding Unknown. And in this way we become a willing, conscious, co-creative, active participant in the shaping of the future of humanity and the planet, the evolving expressions of the Eternal unfolding.

Conclusion:

The discussion was both deeply philosophical and highly passionate, a potent combination that set off reverberations which will continue, no doubt, to be felt by all who were present. What was evident was a sense of fervency, particularly in the youth, and hunger for onward development at all levels.

As we have seen, it was exactly at the point where the sparks flew that the greatest light and insight were ignited, opening the way for a perception of new possibilities. We saw how the coincidence of opposites, the convergence of differing viewpoints, a dialectical spiral of expanding consciousness that includes and transcends through the alternate juxtaposition and synthesis of divergent perceptions, at the same time deepens and widens our context and perspective. And these, the dynamics that churned in the microcosm of this dialogue, can in turn shed light on the way we will need to proceed as a global society, that our very differences become grist for the mill of our evolving enlightenment and our emergent unity.

There is an evolution that takes place as different traditions, respecting each other's differences, come together to dive deep into their common essence. There is a further evolution when they then work together to bring this deepest essence of unity into

expression and action in our world. When different traditions come together to compare and contrast differences and discover commonalities, a churning takes place by which they hone the deepest essential truths; they tap down into the deepest Source, the ultimate reality at the root of all the wisdom traditions and of Creation itself. A basis of unity is established which then becomes a platform for action for unity in the world – a unity not of conformity but a great breadth of vision which embraces all forms as expressions of an infinite creative Source.

This evolution-in-involution – a deep inner realization of unity then giving rise to action for unity in the world -- can be consciously catalyzed through such interspiritual gatherings as the Sufi-Yogi Dialogues, but can also take place in new, innovative ways, arising spontaneously in individuals, as a personal awakening, or through newly emerging collective shifts in consciousness. In each of these cases, an alchemy takes place which can transmute the stalemate of conflict into the light and fire of co-creative unity. All of these ways, when genuine, need to be honoured, contributing each in their way to a growing momentum for enlightened change.

The reality of unity-in-diversity is revealed through the process of evolution-in-involution, whereby the deepest universal root of all the diverse forms of Creation is discovered, and becomes the locus from which one then perceives and acts in the world. It is like seeing the world from its hub, the universal Source of reality, rather than a relative point of view on the periphery; and then acting in the world from that universal, all-embracing perspective.

As Swami Mangalananda so jubilantly conveyed it “if the universe is a great circle, this is like seeing its beauty from its very centre, and not just one limited point on the rim... Our journey is to move towards the centre of life. Those on the periphery are trapped in the externals and fight; others who move deeper see the same essence expressing itself in all paths.”

We saw how the true non-dual or mystical perspective does not disdain multiplicity or ever seek to suppress it, but rather embraces Spirit in all of its manifestations. Spirit is not apart from, but expresses itself in the world, in all its myriad forms. Such an all-encompassing non-dual view, with its enormous capacity to both transcend and unify divisions, also holds an enormous potential – if so applied – to heal and transform our world. But it must be understood in its fullest sense, and ultimately experienced. Unity does not mean uniformity; Oneness does not mean sameness; non-duality does not mean nothingness, but an all-embracing vision that gives sacred space to everything. We saw how important are practice and experience in realizing and embodying this; how religious fundamentalisms (unity at the cost of diversity) can so easily thrive when the true non-dual experience of unity-in-diversity has not been realized in practice.

The question of the relationship between mystical paths and their social or cultural context was a theme that came up repeatedly, framed in a variety of ways, during the Dialogue. Can a mystical path be separated from its cultural context, and should it be? Do the differences in cultural context and expression need to be source of conflict, or can they be perceived as complementary, and mutually enriching? And the question implicit in the very existence of this gathering -- Does the global cultural context today, which weaves together the interests of previously-isolated factions in the face of overarching global crises, demand a new response and relationship between spirituality and the larger social context, a more pro-active, transformative and unifying one?

Is there, under the pressure of today's all-enveloping crises, a "meta-cultural" context emerging, that embraces diverse cultures, and at the same time lifts us to a higher vision and action in the common interests of all?

It was recognized that what may be emerging today, beyond the age-old friction between religions, is not so much a new world religion, but a wider spiritual context of understanding and experience that reconciles the apparent conflicts between the differing external expressions of ultimate reality. This wider context emerges as a new universal vision that transcends and includes, that embraces the differences as complementary expressions of a wholistic unity. From the perspective of this wider unifying framework, we can not only accommodate but celebrate the diversity of forms through which the Source of Creation, by whatever name we give it, expresses its miraculous and infinite creativity.

As Chandra, of the Sri Aurobindo tradition, commented "We don't need a new world religion, and I don't believe it is a new religion that is emerging, but some common ways of thinking, of seeing, some shared core understandings, that can help us towards the global unity we are needing."

The ability to accommodate multiple perspectives, and even locate one's own preferred perspective within that larger perspective – becomes a kind of meta-perspective that can also be said to constitute a radical paradigm shift, a quantum leap in the capacity of consciousness. It is perhaps this which is beginning to happen today, at both the individual and ultimately the collective level.

To go deeply to the universal roots of reality, in conjunction with other traditions, and then work together to reflect them in our global society, is not a defection from or diminution of the traditions, but rather an expansion upon them. This, significantly, as we have seen, involves first a deepening into the core universal Essence, from which an expansion into outer manifestation then can naturally spring. In this we can set our minds at ease; we are not being unfaithful to our respective traditions, but deepening their import and the scope of their influence.

The deeper the realization of interconnection and Oneness at the root, the more inclusive, embracing, egalitarian and compassionate the social and planetary perspective. The same dynamic operates at both the personal and collective levels, ultimately weaving them together: first a deepening into the core universal Essence, from which an expansion into outer, collective manifestation then can naturally spring. From a higher perspective, the Divine is not only guiding, but expressing its own Self through us –and the whole of creation -- throughout this entire dynamic

It is essential to explore the ways in which the manifold forms of human religious and cultural expression derive from a substratum of deeper, universal truths, which thus can be used to bring about global harmony – not only between the different traditions and cultures, but between man and woman, humanity and the natural world, and even the animate and inanimate expressions of that one unifying Consciousness in which we all share our existence.

Talk, it was agreed, ultimately serves best as a point of departure: a jumping-off point for both deeper experience at the mystical level, and practical action – walking the talk – at the societal level. We need to communicate in order to point to, and share, deeper levels of inner experience, and, at the outer level, to formulate common visions and goals and co-ordinate plans of action. The Sufi-Yogi Dialogues have served, and continue to serve, in both these capacities. But follow-up in both these directions -- a continued inner deepening, and coordinated outer action, on local as well as global scales – are needed.

Both directions, inner and outer, are necessary -- a simultaneous deepening of the inner realization of unity, and an outer expansion of our perspective and scope of collaborative action. One without the other is inadequate. This is the challenge of our times. If we can sum up the gist of this, the fifth of the Sufi-Yogi Dialogues, it would be an appreciation of all that these dialogues have paved the way for in both of these directions, and a recognition of the need to continue on with this process, contributing in our way to new patterns of thinking – and experience – emerging today in the global collective consciousness.

“What will we remember from this gathering?” asked Prof. Zaffar “A deeper dimension of unity, a commonality held us, pointed to one single purpose. That was most important. That will stay with us for years to come.”

Beneath the level of verbal exchange that goes on in these dialogues, there is another exchange that happens – a churning, rich, mysterious and fertile. Each of us comes away with new and unpredictable seeds germinating in our consciousness. One day we will see the garden of their unfolding.
