

Towards Bridging and Fostering Connections between Ideologies of Prominent Spiritual Awakening Institutions and Positive Psychological Practices

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Abstract

Of the many spiritual cults and sects that embrace a well-being enhancement philosophy, we choose the most prominent and active spiritual awakening institutions to elaborate the implicit connections between their operational philosophies and positive psychological practices. The underlying theoretical cum conjunctive analysis unveils the voids in the scientific documents and is a deliberate attempt to forge the connections between standard practices and preachings by taking instances from the philosophy and works of five movements oriented towards (namely the *Radha Soami Satsang Beas*, *Prajapati Bramha Kumaris*, *Art of Living*, *Sadhguru and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram*) spiritual awakening. The choice of these institutions is justified owing to an increasing congregational membership of their followers. Besides, we attempt to look at their philosophies from a critical realist lens to check as to how their ubiquity and pro-humanistic appeal is similar or different from the existing positive psychological practices. Overall, we intend to provide food for thought to researchers by drawing a comparative picture between ideologies of the spiritual awakening institutions and scientific terminologies documented in positive psychology literature.

The philosophy and ideological values embedded and entwined in the psyche of individuals vary across

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cultures and nations, yet the goals with which they are promulgated remain similar in most cases. The cultural dichotomy (Hofstede, 1980) adds flavor to the entire scenario wherein positive psychology movement is proceeding scientifically whereas the most prominent spiritual awakening movements are silently engrossed in professing their philosophical ideologies. There are vast numbers of such institutions which are showing widespread presence (both physically and virtually) and are involved in deploying mechanisms that are fruitful and beneficial to humankind.

The movement called 'positive psychology' (Seligman Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) which came into being as a science of human flourishing is one such revolution in the recent past with the primary goal of promoting factors that contributes to the development of valued subjective experiences at individual, group and institutional levels. Within the ambit of positive psychological resources a variety of topics such as hope and optimism (Snyder, 2000); faith and health (Sherman and Simonton, 2001); charity (Wind, 1938); self determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000), forgiveness (McCullough, Pargment and Thoreson, 2000a) gratitude (McCullough, Emmons and Tsang, 2001); subjective well-being (Diener, 1984); happiness (Seligman, 2002) among many others have been empirically validated in a variety of socio-cultural contexts. These and similar other concepts have been documented explicitly in the scientific literature, however, when it comes to referencing, the research done in this regard lack a definite Eastern connection.

The objective of this paper is to highlight the unexplored connecting links between the movements advancing spiritual awakenings and positive psychological practices. We intend to unleash the real potential of the existing well-being practices with legitimacy and plausibility in the eastern context by forging the connections between these

ideologies. To simplify our agenda, we divide this article into five major themes, each with the chosen schools of thought, having their own unique pro-humanistic appeal. We present arguments supported by facts in favor of the philosophical ideologies and practices of spiritual awakening institutions and their presumed consanguinity with existing positive psychological practices to inform this discourse. We deliberately choose five spiritual awakening institutions actively working in the field of enhancement of well-being and making human potential flourish. The five chosen spiritual awakening institutions deliberated in the paper are *Radha Soami Satsang Beas*, *Brahma Kumaris*, *Art of Living*, *Sadhguru* and *Sri Aurobindo Ashram*. Although we do not intend to restrict ourselves to these selected institutions, we present their ideologies because we find an intuitive appeal in their practices that correspond well with scientifically documented positive psychological concepts. The deliberations are detailed in the same sequence below.

Faith, Charity, Purpose and Meaning: The Case of Radha Soami Satsang Beas

Radha Soami Satsang Beas (RSSB) as one of the most prominent spiritual awakening institutions with a global presence in almost all the major countries of the world (with the exceptions of Russia and China) started as an offshoot to *Sikhism* in the year 1861 AD. The believers of this cult are known as 'Radha Soamis' and membership prerequisites include taking a vegetarian diet, abstinence from tobacco and alcohol, leading a clean and moral life, and meditating for at least two and half hours daily. The core philosophy of RSSB lies in the concept of centralization of God and a spiritual belief that there is special purpose and meaning to human existence (Sachdev, 2001). Being registered as "*Science of the Soul Center*" in western cultures it has more than 2 million members of which 15000 were from the United States of America (Wolfe, 2002).

This cult or sect, whatever term one may use, is represented by highly respected *gurus* who are carrying forward the iconic legacy of this institution by displaying the strength and values that earmark the very foundations of positive psychology. Their teachings are known as "*sant mat*", an Indian phrase meaning the teachings of the saints. These masters teach a practical way of developing our spiritual nature so that the individual can achieve lasting peace and happiness. Their works have reflected hope, faith and charity since inception and the "*Radha Soamis*" are still continuing the selfless philanthropies so that the individual can value their existence and purpose of life (cf. Sand, 1993; Enright, 2004). This seems evident

by the presence and growth of numerous charitable hospitals, societal welfare centers including satsang and meditation centers across the world (Larsen, 2007).

All these selfless acts indicate that the "*Radha Soamis*" believe that they are serving others in ways which help them to find and add a purpose and meaning to life. This is how it can be seen as a case of positive social institution which is ontologically understudied but reflects sturdy juxtaposition to applied positive psychology.

On the contrary, the conception of purpose and meaning in life that had been studied extensively in the West leaves behind a long trail from an existentialistic viewpoint in the scientific literature, especially in the positive psychological discourse (cf. Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler, 2006; McKnight and Kashdan, 2009). Furthermore, the hermeneutic metatheorists identify such kind of social acts as morally imbued at the level of agency, which in turn, at least by implication, cover for positive emotions, positive traits and constitute positive social institutions (Christopher and Campbell, 2008). What can be considered unfortunate is the language of spirituality whereby words such as suffering, faith, charity, forbearance, finitude, sacrifice, grace and transformation are largely unfamiliar to psychologists (cf. Pargament and Mahoney, 2002). This ought to be the reason why the voids which it has been created during its evolution and ongoing perpetuation needs to be filled because there remains so much that can be gained by bridging the worldviews, methods, values and practices of spirituality to psychology, especially positive psychology. This kind of reconciliation would be highly meaningful. Therefore, we recommend that their practical ideologies must be compared for a better interpretation of science flourishing in the Eastern context.

Positive Thinking, Living Values and Overall Self-management: The "Brahma Kumaris"

The second case taken into consideration has turned itself into a full-fledged spiritual university with its own specialized courses and programs on positive thinking, stress management and management of oneself. The "*Brahma Kumaris*" as an organization was instituted in 1936 by its founder, and as far as its current status goes, it has centers almost in every major town in India and abroad. In fact, they are showing their strong prominence by attracting over 2.5 million individuals of different ethnicities to various study centers (<http://www.brahmakumaris.org.in/history.php>) of their institution. This sect practices meditation for purification of the mind and their ultimate aim is to cultivate a collective consciousness of peace and enabling dignity to each soul.

To achieve this, the sect recommends a specific lifestyle that comprises of having control over physical senses. Membership into adapting the *Bramha Kumaris* way of life comes by practicing complete celibacy, clothing in white (symbolizing purity), adapting 'Saathvic' vegetarianism (lacto vegetarian diet which excludes eggs, onions, garlic and spicy food) which has to be cooked by one of the members of the sect, abstaining from tobacco, alcohol and non-prescriptive drugs, meditating every day in the morning from 4:00 – 4:45am and attending regular class at 6:30 am (Bartholomeusz, 1994). The *Bramha Kumaris* practice 'Raja Yoga', a form of meditation that can be done by people who come from all backgrounds. It is done with open eyes which make the process simple, versatile and easy to practice. Meditation brings along spiritual empowerment which comprises of spiritual awareness. It brings about harmony in thoughts, replaces negative feelings with positive ones, and responds to situations instead of reacting to them, creating healthy and happy relationships. The beliefs of the sect revolve around the self, the supreme power, karma and cycle of time. The self is constituted by the external physical body and the soul.

The soul is located in the forehead of the body occupying a small point coming from the "Supreme Soul", i.e., God (infinite light, peace and silence). The *Bramha Kumaris* believe that the soul enters the body to experience life and give expression to the personality. God is seen as unconditional, eternal and perfect, an embodiment of all virtues, power and values. God's purpose is to spiritually re-awaken humanity, eliminate sorrow, evil and negativity (Ramsay, 2009). Karma is the belief that every action done by the soul will return accordingly and that the destiny of the soul's next body depends on how it acts and behaves in this life. It is believed that through meditation, the "karmic account" can be purified to lead a better life.

Contrasting the various religious practices, abstaining from celibacy in the sect of *Bramha Kumaris* has often been questioned. The ultimate aim of 'Raja Yoga' is to create healthy and happy individuals. It was found that the practice of 'Raja Yoga' does contribute to higher happiness and self-satisfaction (Ramesh, Sathian, Sinu and Kiranmai, 2013). The concept of meditation is justified as 'mindfulness' in positive psychology. Meditation is a traditional self-regulatory approach that reduces arousal states and anxiety conditions (Krisanaprakornkit, Sriraj, Piyavhatkul and Laopaiboon, 2006). It is a type of mind-body complementary medicine. It provides a sense of peace, calmness and balance that aids emotional well-being and good health (Telles and Desiraju, 1993). Similar practices with different labels and minute differences call for an integrative approach to bring these theoretical perspectives under one umbrella to gain a holistic

understanding of spiritual practices and the positive psychology movement.

The Art of Living

The Art of Living is a community that came into being in 1981 founded by *Sri Sri Ravi Shankar*, a philanthropist and spiritual leader. The art of living way of life offers educational and self-development modules which helps diminish stress and foster profound inner peace, happiness and well-being. It has been taught to over 6 million people across 152 countries (Zope and Zope, 2013). The Art of Living foundation is a non-governmental, non-profit organization with the largest volunteer base spread across 156 countries (India Today, 2015).

In collaboration with The International Association for Human Values (IAHV), the Art of Living Foundation has implemented several humanitarian projects and services like disaster relief, conflict resolution, empowerment of women, sustainable rural development, environmental sustainability and education for all. The international office is located in Bengaluru.

Through his life, *Sri Sri Ravi Shankar* has reached out to millions of people with a vision of stress and violence free world. At the age of 4, he recited the Hindu mythology book, Bhagavad Gita and at the age of 22, he entered a period of ten-day silence in Shimoga, Karnataka, India. This gave birth to the powerful practice termed as 'Sudarshan Kriya'. The literal meaning of the word 'Sudarshan' is proper vision and 'Kriya' means an act to purify the body. 'Sudarshan Kriya' is an exclusive breathing technique that resides in cyclical breathing patterns ranging from slow and calm to rapid and stimulating. In this form, the individual takes control of one's breath thereby positively affecting the immune system, nerves and decreasing psychological problems. It involves four stages and it is recommended to be done under the supervision of an expert to have effective results. The four steps are *Ujjayi* (Victorious Breath), *Bhastrika* (Bellows Breath), *Om chanting* and *Kriya* (Purifying Breath). *Ujjayi* is breathing consciously, feeling the breath by touching the throat. Inhaling and exhaling in a relaxed manner (2-4 breaths per minute) to calm oneself down and keep one alert. *Bhastrika* involves rapid breathing, as much as 30 breaths per minute. Breathing is short and quick. It stimulates the body and calmness follow. The sound of *Om* (ॐ) is chanted thrice. It connects the individual to the origin of the universe and purpose of life. The chanting creates a state of bliss but the process needs to be done with silence around. The last is *Kriya*, an advanced form of breathing, which is carried out in slow, medium and fast cycles. These breaths are cyclical and rhythmic. Practicing this enhances overall health and

well-being, organs functions, brain function, creativity, increases energy levels, confidence and patience and also strengthens immune system, reduces cholesterol levels, helps deal with challenging situations in a better manner, decreases anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, eases out tensions facilitating joy, harmony and love. It also makes an individual aware of one's surroundings.

Through a critical rationalist lens and from a positive psychology perspective, the effectiveness of this technique over a prolonged period needs to be tested. Attaining the proposed state of vision through the activities of *The Art of Living* are also achievable through theories of humanistic school of psychology founded by Carl Rogers. This is done by giving unconditional positive regard and focusing on building human strengths (Rogers, 1966). Meditation to achieve the goals of art of living has also been documented by positive psychology. This comprises of contemplation and asking, leading to mindfulness and opening-up, which eventually increases focus, concentration and brings awareness (cf. Shapiro, Schwartz and Santerre, 2002).

The Contemporary Teachings of Sadhguru

Jaggi Vasudev, also known as *Sadhguru*, is a popular face in contemporary spiritual awakening movement. He hails from the southern state of Karnataka in India. He is currently known by his organization "*Isha Foundation*" with branches all over the country along with overseas centers. His foundation mainly imparts specialized yoga training to the disciples. There are frequent congregations where *Sadhguru* often delivers spiritual teachings to the audience. *Isha foundation* has also got the prestigious consultative status from United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO). Their training center provides method for attaining physical, mental and spiritual well-being by cultivating the deeper experience of life and reaching to the ultimate potential (<http://www.ishayoga.org/en/about-isha>). The main teachings of this group are delivered through practices of Yoga.

A widely popular spiritual leader who has popularized the concept of *Adiyogi* (the Shiva) is the prominent figure for discussion among intellectuals and masses. *Sadhguru* is known for his contemporary thoughts which are blended with the spiritual essence and have many things to offer to the society. His teachings especially focus on the functionality which is well grounded in our ancient culture. Although it might be difficult to understand the two concepts (viz. *functionality* and *ancient culture*), we tend to ignore and leave them as old concepts and no more functional in the present era. Nevertheless, *Sadhguru's* concepts which he presents in his book *Inner Engineering*

have proved that many solutions of the problems are well rooted in the very heart of spirituality and tranquility. His overall school of thought revolves around many concepts which are essential for human functioning. For example, the concept of forgiveness (cf. McCullough, Pargment and Thoreson, 2000) has been detailed by *Sadhguru* in an influential manner. *Sadhguru* points out that in order to give away the bitterness one must give away the negative feeling and hence it is necessary to forgive. A similar exercise can be seen in positive psychology literature where the aim is to enhance functionality by boosting up positivity of self. The positive psychology preaches practicing forgiveness through writing letters known as "forgiveness letters" and journaling. The emphasis here is facilitating the positive emotions and it has already been proved by broaden and build theory (Frederickson, 2001) that positive emotions broaden our focus resulting in overcoming poor problem solving ability. Forgiveness as virtue can help the person to deal with the negative emotions yet retaining the positivity. Hence, it is considered to be one of the most important practices in Indian spiritual ideology.

There are various yoga practices which often resemble the essence of positive psychology that is to facilitate healthy, joyous and true living. However, the paths *Sadhguru* envisages to achieve a good living and the way through which positive psychologists have defined meaningful life and authentic happiness seem to be somewhat different. This gap between the modern day psychological techniques and the spiritual teachings might leave the readers in a bewildered condition as to what to follow and how deep the following should be. This gap must be addressed by positive psychologists and practitioners through a scientific and justifiable dialogue. We presume that such justification and rapprochement would be essential to bridge the gaps so as to move forward in a scientifically robust manner.

Blending Spirituality, Poetry and Philosophy: Sri Aurobindo

A mystic spiritual leader, great thinker and philosopher who defined the spirituality well ahead of his time was *Aurobindo* also known as *Sri Aurobindo* or *Rishi Aurobindo*. He was one of the most influential leaders during pre-independence Indian society. Currently his disciples are spread all over the world. *Sri Aurobindo* partnered with Mirra Alfissa known as the Mother, in his spiritual journey and they together founded the

"*Aurobindo Ashram*" in 1926 at Pondicherry, India. Since then the ashram has been a source for spiritual practices. Most of *Aurobindo's* major works were published between 1914 and 1920 in a journal named *Arya*. His major works

include interpretation of ancient Indian scriptures, practices and metaphysical description of yoga. As per Banerji (2013) Sri Aurobindo can be seen as one of the founders of contemporary Indian philosophy and psychology.

With so many prominent concepts and experiences that were propounded by Sri Aurobindo, including *Passive Brahman*, *Active Brahman*, the concept of *integral yoga*; any individual can visualize the spectrum of trans-personal psychology from philosophy to spirituality in his works. As per Aurobindo, "Man, at present, lives mostly in his surface mind, life, and body". There is an inner being within all of us which pushes him to a constant pursuit of a greater beauty, harmony, power and knowledge. For him the best way to awake the inner being is by making oneself aware about the truth and nature. Thus, the concern of Aurobindo was to make the individual aware of the consciousness that lies within the person. This teaching carries relevance in today's era particularly in positive psychological domain where the emphasis is often on the subjective and objective alignment of self-goal. Needless to say, this can only be done when people are aware of their own selves. Aurobindo defined that there exist two beings in us, the ordinary exterior mind and the inner mind. The inner self when opens up becomes our true eternal self (cf. Moivic, 2004). It seems, as per this spiritual awakening that the aim of the yoga is to know and bridge the gap between objective and subjective reality to achieve the greater realm of consciousness. By consciousness, Aurobindo meant an entity beyond reality and a stage called *Sadchitananda*, where there exists the *Brahman*, the Transcendent divine. Though the descriptions of consciousness might seem to be heavy for contemporary readers and it might even be more skeptical to scientifically oriented readers, the present day positive psychological paradigm has something to offer similar to this concept.

Positive psychology essentially talks about happy and meaningful life where there is continuity of growth with respect to one's potential strength and self-actualizing tendencies. The ways to achieve this self actualizing state is not indeed different nor has it been intended to draw sameness in the concepts of positive psychology with Aurobindo's. However, it is indeed interesting to see that superficial appeal seem to be similar with the overall essence of positive psychology. In fact, the pathways of positive psychological experiences can even lead to the stage where there might be some conscious orientation to one's life. Aurobindo has defined that the inner being is in constant quench for greater beauty, harmony and knowledge. This expression should be understood as actualizing tendencies by prominent scholars as it

constitutes a root conceptualization for humanistic and positive thinkers.

Fostering the Connections: Concluding Remarks

Bearing in mind the traditional spiritual practices rooting in India and contemporary positive psychological practices coming from the West, it is imperative to bridge the connection between the two. The main objectives of these schools are to bring good health, happiness, peace, harmony and well-being to human beings. Looking closely, practices on both continuums involve yoga, meditation, self-awareness and self-love. However, the main challenge while linking the traditional roots of spiritual awakenings to contemporary positive psychological practices is the lack of scientific validation to the age old spiritual practices and relevant documentation. Another problem seems to be the vastness of the teachings in Indian spirituality which are at times difficult to comprehend and collate, thereby making it difficult to capture the vast vista of such value laden philosophical thoughts and ideologies.

The difference actually lies in the fundamental questions of Indian spirituality and other contemporary paradigms. Indicating towards this contextual variation, Salagame points out that each of the concepts has developed in two different contexts which are not comparable (cf. Salagame, 2014). However, it seems that if the contextual clarity can be brought at the first place, there will be chances to comprehend the concepts in a holistic way. The cultural variation plays an important role to understand these paradigms.

Another problem while equating the spiritual and contemporary psychological concepts is that Indian spiritual themes have not been tested against strict scientific paradigms and hence they lack scientific objectivity. As mentioned by Rao (2014): "There is abundant theory behind the practices, but little empirical data to scientifically connect the theory with practices". The similarity between the spiritual movements and the central theme of positive psychological practices is quite striking; however more research is needed to explore this relationship within varied cultural contexts. Researchers are now trying to connect the transpersonal experiences and other spiritual phenomena with widely popular psychological aspects, yet there is a long way to go.

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