

# Vedic Psychology for the Ills of Human Civilization

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The clash of civilizations begins with the clash of the contents of the individual mind. If we want to do something about the course of civilizations, it is imperative that we do something about the deep-seated clash of attractions, aversions, and fears, which lurk in the individual and collective unconscious. Modern psychology explores the mind and personality to improve upon who we *are*. The psychology of the ancient sages explores the mind and personality to discover who we are *not*, but have mistakenly come to believe we *are*. Only the psychologies of meditation and contemplation lead to experience beyond the inner mental clash. Such clear minds can truly guide civilizations beyond our outer wars, which are so much like our inner wars. Those wise in Vedic Psychology can serve to not merely lecture or preach, but to practice themselves and train others in the introspective methods of self-awareness leading to perfect peace, which knows nothing of any clash whatsoever.

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## No solution

When I was first thinking about this symposium on The Clash of World Civilizations, I said that there is not a single idea I have that would alter the course of our current destructive path in the world. Ideas may come to mind, but not a single idea seemed to have any chance of actually being implemented by either the world leaders or humanity in general, at least not in any way sufficient to cause a critical mass of change. Over and over, mind cycled through ideas, only to come to this same conclusion, that no idea coming through this mind, through this person has any chance of averting the clash we seem to be on the leading edge of experiencing.

Yet, how do I hold this apparent negative, pessimistic, maybe even fatalistic attitude with the fact that this personality and person is very positive, optimistic, and most often quite expressive of happiness, playfulness, and joy? How is this possible to hold these two seemingly opposite poles, and, in balance be filled with and express the more joyous side? The answer is simple; it comes from the inner practices of contemplation and meditation, and some degree of grace and insight from those practices. It is such timeless practices of the ancient sages, which are key for all of us.

## **Our planet is a schoolhouse**

Some have called our planet a schoolhouse, to which you come, and then you go. You start as a freshman, and you may become a senior, and then graduate. If it is true that our world is a schoolhouse, then we are destined to see a steady stream of incoming freshmen and outgoing seniors. The clash of civilizations will continue, as will the nature of the freshmen.

Fortunately, some of the graduates come back to guide the freshmen, the sophomores, the juniors, and even the seniors. Those guides know from their own experience that there is always, at all times and places, true inner balance and peace. From that higher ground, some will learn to find inner peace, beyond any clash, and will continue to strive for cessation of the clash of civilizations, knowing full well that the battles continue, but hopefully at a minimum, so that the school doors may stay open for the next class. We have things to do, which must be done.

These classes of the schoolhouse called Earth are all within the gross plane of reality, Vaishvanara, as described in the Mandukya Upanishad. Let us remember the planes underneath, the subtle of Taijasa, the causal of Prajna, as well as the fourth, Turiya, ever permeating, ever pure, ever unchanging, beyond any clash whatsoever. From that stance, from that awareness and memory, let us serve all and exclude none, and let us consider the clash of civilizations in that context.

## **Pilot story**

Recently I was speaking with an aspirant about the principle of self and not-self. I asked him, "Have you ever flown an airplane, yourself? Not just flown *in* it, but flown it yourself?" "No," he answered. "So you are not a pilot?" "No," he answered. I said to him, "Imagine that you went to the airport and took flying lessons, and that before long you soloed the airplane, that the airplane was flying, but your instructor was on the ground, and you were the only person in the plane. Then, would you be able to say you are a pilot, even though only a beginner?" He said, "Well, yes, I guess I would then say I am a pilot."

Then, I asked him, "Please tell me, were you, at your core, or deepest level the same person *before* you became a pilot as you were *after* you became a pilot?" He got a bewildered look, and we had to talk about this at some length. Finally, he concluded that he was the same person before and after becoming a pilot. "How is it, then, that you

could claim that you *are* a pilot, rather than saying only that you were *flying* the plane? How is it that you would do this action called *flying*, yet turn it into an identity called *pilot*?”

### **Nounifying verbs – avidya**

This process of flying an airplane and then saying that who I am is a pilot, is what I call *nounifying* a verb. The word “fly” is a verb, and the word “pilot” is a noun. We learn how to practice the action called “flying” and we take on an identity called “pilot.” It is a false identity. “Who I am” is entirely independent of any airplane. We do this same thing in most of the facets of life. This is a process of avidya or ignorance, of confusing the not-self and the self.

### **Brahma satyam jagan mithya**

To explain the way in which the term “Vedic psychology” is being used, we’ll use one sentence to represent the whole of the process. This is not presented here as a lesson to those of you who are Vedic scholars, but rather, to clarify the spirit of where we might utilize Vedic psychology more broadly in a cross-cultural way, bridging the civilizations in the stance of clash. The mahavakya (great contemplation) “brahma satyam jagan mithya” means, “Brahman alone is real, and everything else is unreal, or only relatively real.” This mahavakya contains the seeds of two aspects of practices, which are implicit in the whole of the teachings. One is that of affirming the true nature of reality, and the other deals with the merely apparent reality.

Most often, it seems, we might involve our contemplations on the first part, the “brahma satyam” part, where we might discuss, debate, or deeply contemplate the nature of the absolute reality. We might give points and counterpoints in a logical style of refutation of our opponent, or we might compare and contrast different passages or verses from the various texts. In any case, this half of the mahavakya focuses on going directly into the true nature of reality. As this applies to ourselves as individuals, in exploring our psychology, it leads us towards the direct experience that is contained in the mahavakya, “aham brahmasmi,” which means, “I am brahman,” experiencing that “who I am” at the deepest level is that absolute reality.

However, the other half of the mahavakya, “jagan mithya” emphasizes the other end of the spectrum, which is that the world is unreal, or only relatively real. We may speak of metaphors such as gold being more real than ornaments, which are relatively unreal, or of clay being more real than pots, which naturally break and return to being only clay, which they were all along.

By emphasizing this end of practicing the mahavakya, we do not necessarily have to agree with one another about the definition of the true nature of our being. We do not have to reconcile the word brahman with the many words for God, absolute, or true nature. We get to focus instead on the *incorrect* part of our situation, the false identities that obscure our true nature, whatever that might be, and however one might describe it

in the context of his or her own religion, culture, or civilization. Here, it is the process of being relatively unreal, which is important, and holds the key to freedom from our many destructive self-concepts.

## Real self and false self of psychology

In psychology, there is often the seeking of a core personality, which is supposedly who the “I” really is, at the deepest level. Karen Horney has referred to this as the “real self,” Heinz Kohut, as the “nuclear self,” and Donald Woods Winnicott, as the “true self.” Some psychologists may have moved past the notion of a single “real self,” instead seeing the personality structure as a composite of personae. Still, this is shallow compared to the psychology of the Vedic sages. While some of the modern psychologies have stepped into the domain of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies, there seems to remain a persistent presumption that the personality is our identity. Even the self-actualization of Abraham Maslow, considered by some to be the father of humanistic psychology, presumes an individual personality identity, which falls short of Vedic psychology. What these psychologies have in common is the belief that this core personality, or a composite of many sub-personalities, is our actual identity. In Vedic psychology, all of these aspects or levels of personality are seen as false identities.

It is not that we need more belief in spiritual practices or even God, however useful that may be. What we need to learn is to unlearn the false identities, which are the obstacles we have created as individuals, cultures, and as civilizations. It is these obstacles of false identity that form the fabric which veils the subtler truth, as well as clouds the natural stance of mind that honors, respects, and loves others from within our most beautiful diversity of peoples.

## Taking on false identities

Many behaviors are now called addictions and these are now considered to be diseases. It is now popular to “recover” from those addictive behaviors by stating that “I am” that addiction. One is encouraged to say, “I *am* an addict” to this or that behavior. Two things happen here. First, we turn behavior into a disease, and second, we affirm that “who I am” is that disease. This is very, very wrong. We are not diseases.

This is precisely what we do with children and adolescents. We ask them, “What do you want to *be* when you grow up?” How is it that we ask them what they want to *be*? How can they *become* anything other than what they already *are*? Why do we not ask them, “What do you want to *do*?” Better still, why do we not ask them something like, “What are the wants, wishes, desires, or goals in your mind that you would like to choose to do, and which would you like to let go of? Which are useful, and which are not useful?”

Actions turn into identities, all of which are false identities. Instead of being of service to others, focusing on the actions, we come to be of service to the false identities. We become slaves to those false identities. We say “I am a man or woman, I am a daughter, son, father, mother, sister or brother, I am from this or that country, I am the doer of this

or that action, I am good or bad, I am happy or sad, I am a seeker, I am spiritual, I am a lover of God."

We speak of "my home, my family, my friends, my enemies, my job, my stuff, my strengths, my weaknesses, my thoughts, my emotions, my problems, my joy, my karma, my past, my future, my spiritual path, even of my God."

Is it any wonder that our children grow up to become falsely identified with their personal and professional activities to such an extent that they later, in adulthood say, in effect, that, "I am a disease!" Is it any wonder that we grow up to defend our false identities at the expense of others. This inner clash of competing false identities is loaded with not only identities, but also aversions, anger, hatred, and fear, which further feed the false identities.

We say a person *is* angry, as if the person and anger are one and the same, when the truth is that the person has become wrapped with layer upon layer of false identity. We say a person is depressed, for example, when the person has actually become falsely identified with unfulfilled desires stored in the latent bed of mind called chitta. So too, we say a person is a hero or a villain when he or she has become falsely identified with a community, institution, country, culture, or civilization, and behaves according to that false identity.

## **Antahkarana**

We need to experientially understand the elements of antahkarana, the inner instrument, particularly the four functions of mind: manas, chitta, ahamkara, and buddhi. We need to first see and train ourselves, and then others, that all of the actions, turned into identities reside in chitta. They are falsely colored as "me" by the coloring agent of ahamkara, the I-maker. Buddhi, which would otherwise have the capacity to see these errors of false identity, is clouded by the vast amount of false identities, attractions, aversions, and fears. Finally, manas carries out the thoughts, speech, and actions supporting those false identities through the five karmendriyas of elimination, procreation, motion, grasping, and speaking, through countless forms of external behavior. Then the cycle continues, as more consequences, data, is brought in through the jnanendriyas, the five cognitive senses, only to further reinforce the false identities.

To deal with these functions of mind, and to see clearly the process of mistakenly assimilating false identities, we do not have to believe in any particular god, nor do we have to take sides in debates over the ultimate nature of reality, such as whether it is of duality versus non-duality.

## **I am not my resume**

From 1994 to 2001 Rishikesh, India was home, where I lived along the Ganges. During that time I spent many months in the Himalayas, often in and around small villages. One thing that was necessary to learn was the difference between poverty and simplicity.

Surely there is poverty, but much of what may appear to be poverty is actually simplicity. In that simplicity there is a day-to-day life, which is very beautiful. There is motion, activity, day to day affairs, but for many, if not most of the people there seems to be little of the kind of false identity anxiety that is so prevalent in the city people, whether in America, India, Europe, or elsewhere. It is as if they have not been barraged with all the messages that who they are is defined by their actions.

One man from America, who traveled with me to Rishikesh and Gangotri, near the source of the Ganges, in recognizing the effect of his almost 60 years of conditioning through school, family, and professional training, while beginning to integrate these higher meditational and contemplative psychologies, repeatedly cried out his frustration and freedom by declaring, "I am not my resume!" Over and over, with intensity, with fire, and with tears in his eyes, he passionately cried out "I am not my resume!" It was not a statement of now changing his identity, but a statement from the realization that he never had been these identities in the first place. Because of many messages, maybe first from others, but then from his own mind, he had convinced himself that who he was, was these actions turned into identities, these verbs turned into nouns, with which "I" somehow became related. This was the error, decades long, that he recognized in his declaration of freedom.

### **How do we deal with the clash in the unconscious mind?**

How do we deal with the clash in the unconscious mind? We must find a balance between the many attractions, aversions, and an acceptable level of fear. Driven by the matrix of self-preservation of the false self, the precarious balance is out of sight, invisible, in the unexplored recesses of mind. The manifestations are called physical, mental, and emotional disease, while the inner clash is behind a cloak of denial and pretended peace. So too is our world behind a cloak of denial and pretended periodic peace. This game of denial and pretending seems the most likely form of the clash of civilizations being able to appear at peace. It is only a game of appearances, unless humanity is willing to look underneath this terrible taking on of false identities.

### **Importing language and practices**

Vedic psychology needs to be explored, systematized, and presented in our world not through some trademarked system, but as a universal process, somewhat akin to the way paradigm shift effects the whole. The wisdom needs to be not reserved for a few, but available as knowledge for the many.

*Personality, defenses, and ego* were words used only by a chosen few, the professionals, not so long ago. Now these words are common knowledge. So too need to be the words and principles of Vedic psychology. For example, we have imported the word *karma* from the Sanskrit, along with the principle, though often distorted or misunderstood. We need to import more words, and more knowledge, also making them common knowledge. An expanded understanding of the nature of karma, along with its interplay with the subtleties of mind, according to Vedic psychology, need to be assimilated as well.

## Some things to do

In the final analysis, it seems quite unlikely that Vedic psychology or any other psychology will avert the clash of civilizations, except possibly the psychology of self-preservation temporarily holding back the floodgates of the more violent acting out of false identities. Yet, people who have come to the point of understanding this highest of psychologies feel compelled to serve, to share, that even a few may learn and pass the baton of clear perception. Those with knowledge of Vedic psychology will try to stay in the flow of dharma, resting in the stance beyond the clash, and serving others by attempting to bring change. In that spirit, several ideas are offered.

First is that the scholars and other professionals are in a unique position to bring the principles of Vedic psychology forward to others. They are the ones with the more detailed knowledge of this wisdom, and carry the respect of professional colleagues, government leaders, and the public at large. They are the ones who can speak with authority from within well-established institutions of higher learning. Such scholars might come from a variety of professional areas, including not only religious studies, but also sociology, education, psychology, and psychiatry. Those scholars who truly, experientially understand the process of antahkarana through their own, personal practices, can clearly see the consequences of blindly taking on false identities, and can find ways to share this with others, ways far better than we are able to say here today.

Second, we need to utilize technology to create the most clear audio-visual materials that can be produced. Some say that the Bhagavad Gita was written at a time when a greater simplicity was needed, in that the teachings of the Vedas were too complex for most people. If that principle of simplifying for the masses was good then, it is good now. Now, in these times of technology, we have the means to produce superb animated audio-visuals, such as are used for many forms of training, or as educational documentaries, including the kinds seen in classrooms and on higher quality television. In this way, the complexity of Vedic psychology can be communicated in very clear, professional, succinct ways. This technology, with carefully, wisely written scripts, can be tremendously useful, particularly when done through the auspices of the universities with which the scholars mentioned above are affiliated.

Third, if there are to be such high quality materials produced under the guidance of such scholars, then there needs to be a great deal of effort excerpting, describing, and systematizing what is really contained in Vedic psychology. In other words, the scholars or professionals cannot teach, and videos cannot be produced until the concepts have been systematized. This will require multi-disciplinary collaboration, with the common denominator being knowledge of the principles, which has come from not only intellectual study, but also personal effort to apply the principles in ones own inner exploration through contemplation and meditation.

Fourth, with the practical training methods developed and the scholars prepared to train, there needs to be a broad base for exposure. The widest exposure is through television,

including documentaries on Vedic psychology, and talk shows for these principles to be discussed. This might mean producing programming through universities, syndicating talk shows, creating a television network, or developing relationships with existing networks.

Finally, if any of these are to happen, there needs to be open lines of communication between scholars and others interested in the dissemination of practical Vedic psychology. This means forming some type of association to continue dialogue, create plans, and acquire the means to implement the ideas and programs. Such an association could be part of a larger group, like the World Association for Vedic Studies, or an independent association.

### **Swami Rama challenge**

Swami Rama, my teacher, wrote a book entitled *A Call to Humanity*, in which he wrote the following challenge:

We must not create a wall between our worldly and spiritual lives. People disorganized in their worldly life search for spiritual wisdom in seclusion; whereas, if organized properly, they can have all the means and resources that are of utmost importance for spiritual enlightenment. The purpose of human life is to make the best use of the resources that nature or God has given us. There are typically two kinds of people. Some are involved in the world and are busy in their self-centered activities. Others renounce their families and do not participate in worldly life at all. There are very few people who use discrimination, work hard for their self-fulfillment, and at the same time, contribute to the welfare of society. People belonging to these two categories have an incomplete world view, and therefore, strive for their limited goals.

In our modern age, where the standard of living has been facilitated by science and technology, we must learn to make the best use of our ample resources. A lifestyle that is suitable for both worldly fulfillment and spiritual enlightenment is the best. Those who strive to attain personal enlightenment and help others light their lamps are the true leaders of the human race. Blessed are those who are useful for themselves as well as others. They attain the highest goal of life here and now. Right in this mortal world, they become immortal and their wisdom guides humanity on the path of immortality.

Today's society is waiting for selfless, spiritually enlightened, well-balanced leaders to guide them in how to live happily here and hereafter. Such leaders or reformers will not come from outside our society. They have to be born, raised, and trained right in our own society. We are the ones to become our own guides, our own leaders, and we are the ones to enlighten our own lives. Get up, my friends, arise: attain knowledge, and dedicate your life to the service of your fellow beings.