



ON THE INDIAN NOTION OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Reflections based on experience



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Introduction

This short note is intended as a brief introduction to explicating the concept of ‘Enlightenment’ as Indians use it. It is not based on a literature study nor is it the result of an empirical inquiry. It is simply the attempt of one person to get hold of the concept based on ‘personal’ experience. After writing the note, the realization dawned that a book needs to be written on this subject and that a short note is no substitute for such an effort. Such will also happen in the future. For now, this note should do, functioning as a signpost for what a future task holds.

In this note, many interconnected themes are spoken about without drawing an explicit relationship between them. The relations are either implicit or become obvious on reflection. While this is a handicap, it also allows the note to remain reasonably short. The basic question, in simple but, hopefully, accessible terms is this: what is ‘enlightenment’ as Indians use the term?

On the nature of ‘experience’

In every society, infants are socialized as cultured beings. ‘Socialization’ refers to the process of using resources present in the society. These resources are material, institutional, social, and psychological and so on. (Schools, peer groups, families, friends, stories, songs, incentives, punishments, etc.) That is, this process refers to the ‘what’: which resources are present in a society that can culturize the individual? Culturization (or ‘acculturation’) refers to the ‘how’: how are these resources used to teach to socialize or learn to be socialized? Two kinds of events are crucial to these two processes: (a) a set of fundamental events that generate attitudes and orientations in human beings towards the world, both natural and social, and (b) another set of events that are the results of transforming what one undergoes or lives through in the world.

The first set remains more or less stable throughout one’s journey through the world. Or, put differently, the more some set of orientations and attitudes remain stable through the course of life, the more is that set of orientations fundamental. Some or another “deep experience” (a ‘life-changing’ experience, as it is called) is required to change orientations or attitudes. The daily events in life are not enough to cause that change.

The second set is the daily experience. This emerges from transforming what we encounter or live through. Thus, transformation is crucial to having experience. What we learn is of great importance to this process of transformation: we use what we have learnt to transform what we go through in life. If we live through events that are not transformed into experiences, they live on in memory as traumas and scars. Curing most of these traumas (or scars) is to help an individual transform a ‘raw’ encounter or a ‘non-transformed’ event into an experience.

Even though more needs to be said, this is enough to define ‘experience’. Experience is a transformed encounter or event in life. At any given moment, encounters or events are transformed by using the resources of socialization and for the purposes of getting along with (or ‘live’ with) the former set of events and encounters. This is how I currently understand “Anubhava” or the Indian notion of experience.

Abstractly speaking, such transformed encounters or events (i.e. experiences) exhibit two properties: (a) either they are simply cumulative, having little or no impact on other accumulated experiences, in which case they simply live on in memory or (b) they are transformative in nature. If experiences themselves further transform orientations or attitudes that undergird the way we are present in the world, they are “deep experiences” or are called ‘life-changing’ experiences. If they are not that, they modify only remembered experiences by modifying the memory of such experiences.

Now, we can say that orientations and attitudes (or the way we are present in the world) can be transformed by two things: deep experiences and some traumas. What enables either of the two to change the way we are present in the world?

Traumas and deep encounters

The answer to this question has to be sought in the way a human infant is socialized. Before we have experiences (probably during the first two years of our lives), we are learning to transform 'raw' events and encounters into experiences. As we begin to grow, we also learn to transform: first, partially and, subsequently, more fully. The process of culturization is to learn how to transform an event or an encounter into an experience. The process of socialization enables generating this capacity in infants. In that case, in a purely definitional sense, one can define the birth of a child as a 'traumatic' event in the baby's life and describe the process of socialization as a traumatic process. It has been also so seen. At this moment, there is little point in discussing this option.

What we see in the above, however, is more significant for the life of an adult. As said before, events and occurrences that are either untransformed or raw become traumas. However, in the course of the life of an adult, it is almost impossible to talk about completely 'raw' or completely 'untransformed' experiences. There is always, at least, a partial 'transformation'. The nature of this partial transformation distinguishes between a trauma (in adult life) and a life-changing experience (again, in an adult life).

If an event or an encounter is merely labelled or categorized (thus, partially transformed), it becomes a trauma. However, if an event or encounter is understood or made sense of (thus, also partially transformed), then it becomes a deep experience. It is important to note these do not really 'transform' an encounter or an event; they leave such an event undisturbed. Most of our experiences change what we encounter; they change the event into something or another. These changes might or might not occur in the actual world but they do occur in the psychological world of an individual human being. (This idea too requires further elaboration and reflection, but I leave it here in its current form.)

Does that mean there are no trivial events or encounters? Is everything capable of becoming a deep experience or a trauma? One is compelled to say 'yes'. Whether or not something is trivial depends on ascription of a specific weight (cognitive, emotional, or whatever) to an event or encounter. Such an ascription depends on the world of the culturized individual. This is evidenced by the fact that meditating on such trivial things like walking, sitting, breathing and seeing changes one's attitude and orientation in the world. Same applies to traumas: eating becomes a trauma as Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia. Sleeping becomes a trauma in some psychic problems (nervous breakdowns or anxieties). Breathing becomes a trauma as hyper ventilation, and so on. In other words, there is some *prima facie* credibility to the idea that there are no trivial encounters or events.

If that is the case, then there can be no 'deep' events or encounters either. Yes. Any event or encounter in the world can become deep or trivial to some individual or another. Any encounter, in principle, can change the orientation of an individual. Whether that occurs or not depends on the individual and the resources available to him/her. That is, whether or not an encounter or an event induces a change in the way one is present in the world (in the adult life) depends upon the individual (the biology, the psychology, the capacities, etc), his/her society and culture, and the total resources available in that culture. It does not depend on the encounter or event.

At least one implication is interesting: there is no one encounter or event in the world that generates a fundamental or singular transformation in the orientation of a human being. Everything can do

that. Thus, there is no one single path to a fundamental change. The world allows for a change in orientation of every human being in ‘every which way’. No unique event or encounter has this ‘power’; everything in the universe has that power. The world is trauma or it is deep experience. This is a philosophical and cultural choice.

Even though every event or encounter can change how an individual is present in the world, it does not mean that there are no deep experiences. As human beings, we are limited beings: limited physically, chemically, biologically, culturally, socially and psychologically. That is to say, some common set of constraints operate on all human beings because of which one can speak about a few common deep experiences. Samskara’s, rites of passage, sacraments, etc. are some of the names given to such constraints: these function as signposts or frameworks using which some encounters in the world are transformed into deep experiences.

A preliminary characterization

The foregoing allows for a first, approximate definition of what ‘enlightenment’, used in an Indian sense, is: *the transformation of the way of being present in the world through a deep experience*. An experience is deep if an individual is able to transform it into one; otherwise, it is not. Thus, happiness also gets defined: *it is a way of being in the world*. The world allows for happiness, only if you can ‘find’ it, i.e. if you can find the ‘trigger’ that generates this (‘non-standard’) way of being in the world. Which way? The way which is also most appropriate for you. Who decides which way is the most appropriate? You do, because you are the only one who can know whether something is appropriate to you or not.

All of us can find happiness and everything in the world helps us find it, if only we try. Thus, there are as many ways to happiness as there are people in the world and every path, every incident, can lead one to enlightenment. It is only a matter of learning to find the right trigger for yourself. What is a right trigger for some person need not be the right trigger for another.

If everything in the world is able to lead human beings into enlightenment or make human beings happy, why is it so difficult to reach either? In the light of what has been said above, there is only one possible answer: if the world is not responsible and there is no one right trigger for all, the problem lies with the individual. *The human being seeking enlightenment or happiness is the obstacle for that individual to reach that goal*. This is true for all human beings. Therefore, finding out how to reach enlightenment or happiness takes us in the direction of understanding human beings. If such is what psychology is, *Adhyatma*, in the Indian meanings of the word, is *psychology in the best sense of the term*. It not only teaches us what human beings are but also helps us by functioning as a guide or a manual of sorts. Because Adhyatma is knowledge, it is teachable and learnable; because it is some sort of a guide as well, it is learnable and useful. Because it is about human beings, all of us can teach, learn and use it. To do these we have to overcome ‘ourselves’ because only we are the obstacles. In which way are we that?

The obstacles

First, we are biological beings. That is, we are inheritors of genetic material from our ancestors. This material influences the kind of beings we are, even though we do not know, as yet, what the relationship between ‘Nature’ and ‘Nurture’ is. It is safe to say, however, that our genes influence our psychologies more as ‘tendencies’ and less as ‘causal’ influences. All the Indian traditions I know emphasize this aspect in all of us: we are subject to ‘Karma’ of the past (*Praarabdha Karma*). That we have a (biological) past that influences our present is expressed in the idea of ‘rebirth’ (*punarjanma*).

In all these traditions, this linguistic idiom also has a moral function, which is absent in the partial story we have about biological inheritance today.

The above constraint generates the second: we are physiologically constituted in some specific ways. Such a constitution also partially defines our individual psychologies. That is the reason why many Indian traditions give special attention to the kind of food we imbibe (*Pathya*) and suggest many kinds of edibles that agree with our constitution. Some traditions go even further and speak about the kinds of environment (the structure of our abodes, the view from windows, and such like) that are suited to different psychologies based on the physiological constitutions of individuals.

The third constraint is the socialization process. Both the how (the culturization) and what of socialization (the social positions of individuals) become themes of reflection here. Moral education, ritual experience, the accessible lore, etc. are also crucial in the process of discovering the event or encounter which functions as a trigger.

In some senses, each of these conditions (or constraints) is antecedent to the formation of individual psychologies. This does not mean, however, that the individual has no ‘say’ in the matter. Even with respect to ‘Karma’, one can get along with it in different ways depending on the psychology of the individual. However, the general point is this: one’s psychology is partially defined by these antecedent constraints and they influence (in multiple ways) one’s search for happiness or enlightenment. In this sense, these constraints function as ‘obstacles’ to enlightenment. One can also put it differently: these are the conditions under which an individual has to seek enlightenment and it can be sought only by those individuals (which include the deva’s, as the Indian traditions put it) who are subject to constraints. Human beings are subject to one set of constraints, whereas the Deva’s (Indra is the best example from the traditions here) are subject to other sets of constraints. *Only constrained beings can seek enlightenment.*

There is a delicious ambiguity present in this formulation of the preconditions for enlightenment. Animals and birds, say, are also subject to some of these constraints. Does that mean they could also be enlightened? On the one hand, because they do not *appear* to meet the constraint of the socialization process, one feels like saying ‘no’. On the other hand, we have no definite knowledge about other natural creatures: is there animal cognition or not? Do animals think and feel? Do they communicate or not? Are they socialized or not? These are questions for research, as we all know, that do not allow for unambiguous answers. The Indian traditions also acknowledge the absence of knowledge in these matters. That is why we have many stories of enlightened beings (the Buddha is the most well-known example) being born as birds and animals. The enlightened Buddha, for example, is born as an enlightened bird or tiger. In that case, it is an enlightened bird or animal, is it not? From that, it follows that other natural creatures can also be enlightened, the way human beings can.

Be that as it may, we can now take the next step. *In what way is the psychology of human beings an obstacle to seeking and finding enlightenment?*

Three Distinctions

Most of us are born as full *biological organisms* that have inherited qualities and capacities of various kinds. These develop and evolve as we grow both biologically and culturally. Thoughts, emotions, feelings, skills, etc. that are present as tendencies are given form and shape through the individual histories of such organisms. This organism is complete: it also has sentience and consciousness. ‘Sentience’ refers to our abilities to think and feel, whereas ‘consciousness’ picks out the ability to focus on objects, whatever they are. Sentience has thoughts and feelings as its focus, and body has

objects of the world as its focus. Consciousness is the ability to focus on both kinds of objects. I do not have a ‘theory’ of consciousness; I merely see it as an evolutionary product. All of us are complete organisms, in this sense, and most of our interactions are with other complete organisms.

Now comes a second distinction, which is very crucial to understanding the entire text. This distinction is actually a *hypothesis*: because of the complex nature of this organism, it manifests an emergent property. *That emergent property is ‘self-consciousness’*. It has to be emphasized that this is strictly an emergent property of any system that is as complex as a full biological organism. (I do not know at this moment how complex a system must be in order to manifest this emergent property. I simply hypothesize that human beings exhibit this emergent property.) As an emergent property of a sufficiently complex system, this property is not *physical or energetic in nature*, i.e., it is not a natural property of any of the components of the organism. It is merely manifested without being ‘there’ in the physical space. Because it is neither material nor energetic in its nature, *it has no causal influence on the world*. All it is, is indicated in the word itself: it is merely ‘self-awareness’ that a sufficiently complex organism manifests by virtue of its systemic complexity. It is, in the strictest sense of the word, the ‘I’ (not to be confused with ‘ego’). That is, human beings have the emergent property of ‘self-awareness’ or the ‘I’. Sentience can think about the ‘I’ and consciousness can focus on the ‘I’. That is to say, human beings have access to ‘self-consciousness’ or ‘self-awareness’. (It is unclear to me how this access is established or what conduits enable this process. All I know is that the system has continuous (but partial) access to its emergent property.) Let me call this partial access that the system has to the ‘I’ as the *‘I-ness’ of the organism*. Thus, the ‘I-ness’ of the organism consists of the following fact: the organism ‘feels’ or ‘senses’ or has ‘access’ to ‘self-awareness’ continuously, if partially. It is extremely important to realize what I am not saying and what I am saying: *the organism does not have self-consciousness or self-awareness; it has access to self-consciousness or self-awareness. The organism is neither self-conscious nor is it aware of itself as an organism; it can ‘feel’ or ‘sense’ or ‘think’ this emergent property, namely, self-awareness uninterruptedl*y.

Thus, we have two distinctions: the ‘I’, which picks out the emergent property of a sufficiently complex system, which is ‘self-awareness’; then there is the ‘I-ness’, which picks out the partial access of that system to the ‘I’. This access merely identifies the fact that the organism feels or senses or thinks this ‘I’ by focusing on it, i.e., through consciousness. This is a continuous process or a continuous link. Thus sentience can always partially access the emergent property of the system, namely, ‘self-consciousness’ through consciousness (i.e., using the ability to focus). Put differently: human beings continuously access ‘self-consciousness’ through consciousness. It is this situation that is both the ground for human ‘misery’ and the route to happiness or enlightenment.

Every human adult has a history or a biography, which consists of things done, felt and thought in the course of its existence and as they are remembered. What one has undergone and what one remembers of it are woven on a structure that human emotions provide. Actually, it must be put this way: what one consciously remembers and what one retains in a different form (skills, tastes, feelings, etc. are retained differently in our memories) are woven together with what one has undergone in the past into a structure of a special sort. *I call this structure the ‘I-hood’ of the organisms that we are*.

There are two dimensions (or levels or layers) to this ‘I-hood’. The first is what we could call a natural layer. The basic biological emotions (like empathy, anger, sorrow, etc.) play an important role in creating (or weaving together) a structure using the past of the organism. Insights into this layer or dimension provide us with a deeper understanding of the psychological makeup of human beings.

However, that is not all. There is a second layer or dimension which is crucial for the emergence of this ‘I-hood’: the confusion or misidentification of the ‘I’ *with the first layer* of the ‘I-hood’. As we grow up, we also participate in the process of the crystallization of the ‘I-hood’ by identifying the natural layer of the ‘I-hood’ with the ‘I’. That is, *sentience thinks that ‘self-consciousness’ is the awareness of itself*. Put differently: sentience thinks, in the words of western philosophy, that human beings have self-consciousness, which is the reflexive awareness of consciousness. According to Indian traditions (in my understanding) human beings manifest the emergent property of self-consciousness, whereas western thinking says that human beings are self-conscious entities because they ‘have’ (or possess) self-consciousness as a ‘natural’ property of consciousness itself. The ability of the consciousness to think about itself (or have itself as an object of reflection) is self-consciousness and this ability is the property of self-consciousness, according to western thinking. (This is what even those who are not willing to buy the idea of consciousness as a natural property of human organisms also think.) As I see it, Indian thought says that sentience can indeed think about self-consciousness but that that is because it has a partial access to the emergent property of the organism. This property, as said before, is not the property of consciousness. Instead, it is the emergent property of the entire organism. Consequently, as the Indian traditions put it, because sentience focusses on self-consciousness using consciousness, it thinks that it is self-conscious. In other words, *it is false that we are self-conscious, even though we all have partial access to self-consciousness*. Or that it is a delusion to identify the ‘I-hood’ with the ‘I’.

Why does this delusion come into existence? In one sense, the answer is obvious: that is because we are not aware that the ‘I’ is an emergent property. That is to say, we have a false belief. We need to note though that there is something ‘natural’ about the emergence of this delusion. In all cultures, across all times, this delusion comes into being. (It is ‘natural’ in this sense.) Why?

It is my hypothesis that both consciousness and ‘self-consciousness’ share the property of being ‘conscious’. That is to say, consciousness should not be seen as a mere ability to focus; it is ‘something’ more than that alone. It is unclear at this moment what both consciousness and self-consciousness share, but they do share some or another property in common, namely that of being ‘conscious’. It is because of this that the sentience thinks that self-consciousness is nothing but the fact that consciousness can have itself as an object of reflection. Be it as that may, we need to realize that these two layers of the ‘I-hood’, together, constitute the ‘I-hood’ of the organism.

In more common psychological parlance: I think that the first layer, which I have called the ‘natural layer’ of the ‘I-hood’, can be called the *personality* of the organism. To develop this personality of the organism, it needs the ‘other’. That is, other personalities have also to be present in the world for building this up successfully. Thus, the first layer of the ‘I-hood’ consists of both the ‘you’ and the personality of the organism. Thus, the core-meaning of the Indian ‘*Ahamkara*’ refers to this layer of the ‘I-hood’ where both ‘self’ and the ‘other’ are present.

The second layer could be called the ‘ego’ of the organism. This ego is a delusion and is false. The mixture of personality with the ego, which together constitute the ‘I-hood’ of the organism is the ‘selfhood’ or the ‘personhood’ of the organism. The philosophical questions about the ‘identity of the self’, or the nature of selfhood’ or ‘personhood’ refer mostly to the ‘I-hood’.

Thus, we have three distinctions to work with: the ‘I’ (the emergent property of the organism), which I call ‘self-consciousness’ or ‘self-awareness’. The second is the ‘I-ness’ which refers to the partial access that sentience has to self-consciousness. (I think we can also put it as the partial access that consciousness has to self-consciousness, if we define consciousness as something that includes

sentience and possesses the ability to focus.) The third is the ‘I-hood’ which consists of a natural layer (or dimension) and an illusory layer of identifying the first layer with the ‘I’.

Before we go further in the process of understanding the ‘I-hood’ better, we need to know a few more things about the nature of ‘I’ or the emergent property of the organism.

‘Facts’ about the Nature of ‘Self-Consciousness’

I have already alluded to the first: the link or access is continuous, even if it is partial. That is so, in the sense that there is some kind of access to the ‘I’. Sentience accesses the ‘I’ through consciousness i.e., by using its ability to focus. However, whether sentience knows that it is accessing the ‘I’ and that what is being accessed is its ‘I-ness’ is an issue that is different from the fact that there is a continuity of access. The system continuously accesses its emergent property.

The second fact is best formulated as a question: if every system has access to its emergent property, then is the number of this emergent property equal to the number of systems present at any given moment of time? That is to say, how many emergent properties are there? Roughly speaking, (it will very soon become clear why it is ‘rough’) *there can only be one emergent property*. Why? The answer is simple. Because, the emergent property is neither matter nor energy, *there is no way to physically individuate that property..* Thus, it is physically impossible to individuate self-consciousness. It is also *logically impossible* to distinguish ‘one’ self-awareness from ‘another’ for the simple reason the property of self-awareness is only that property and nothing more. As a consequence, it is linguistically and logically impossible to provide identity conditions for this emergent property without becoming tautological. Thus, we have to answer: *there is only one self-awareness*.

Even this answer will not do. Consider now the following: as complex systems, human beings have an emergent property. Such sub-systems are part of a bigger system, say, Cosmos. (We can split that up into even smaller systems: our planet, the solar system, our galaxy and so on.) No system can be less complex than its sub-system. From this it follows that these bigger systems should at least also exhibit the emergent property of ‘self-consciousness’ or something even ‘bigger’ or ‘other’ than that. However, these emergent properties cannot be individuated, either physically or logically. Yet, it makes linguistic sense to speak of ‘galactic’ self-consciousness or ‘cosmic’ self-awareness. Question: does this linguistic distinction make logical sense? No, it does not. So, logically, we are compelled to say that it is impossible to make a sensible distinction in our case between the emergent property of a sub-system and an emergent property of the system. But it does make linguistic (and thus ontological) sense. What can we do then? We can say: there is ‘self-awareness’ or ‘self-consciousness’ without being able to say much more than that; we cannot even say there is only ‘one’ self-consciousness. If we say there is ‘one’, may be, there are two, or three, or four, or as many as we like (depending upon the sub-systems we consider). They are sensible and nonsensical at the same time. Thus, all we can say is that there is ‘self-awareness’, period. This is the third fact.

Now comes the fourth fact. So far, in this case, I have laid the emphasis on logic, but not on linguistics or ontology or even epistemology. Let me begin with linguistics. Since it makes linguistic and physical sense to speak of different higher level sub-systems, an ontological question opens up. Should we consider the emergent property of higher level sub-systems as different from or the same ontological property? This opens up an epistemological question: how can we know that? That is, what establishes the access of a sub-system to the emergent property of a higher level system? We need to show that this access is possible: there is no systemic demand that it be so. After all, my toe does not have access to the emergent property of the organism, namely, self-awareness. Once this question emerges, there is the next obvious question: is there ‘one emergent property’ or many more? Are they ontologically different because they belong to different physical realms or is it the

same property common across the different sub-systems and the system itself? Should a galaxy be considered a different ontological realm or merely a different level within the Universe, which is one ontological domain? Again, answers to these questions depend on the options one takes and the presuppositions one makes.

We can see here that many ways can be tread: from simply saying that there is ‘self-consciousness’ (and stopping there) to going in many other directions. In and of themselves, they are all defensible options. (This will become clearer to us as soon as we use Indian words to denote ‘self-awareness’ or ‘self-consciousness’ and so on. See further.)

Returning to the third distinction

Because the sentience has continuous access to the ‘I’, it confuses the ‘I-ness’ with the ‘I-hood’. It believes its ‘I-hood’ to be its ‘I-ness’, which it is not. The ‘I-hood’ is the structure of the past, which includes the delusion, as woven by emotions of the organism. This ‘selfhood’, this crystallized ‘I-hood’, starts generating further sets of emotions. Better put: it begins to draw upon the biological emotions present in all of us (anger, humor, sorrow, etc.) and starts reforming (or reshaping) them into more ‘fine-grained’ emotions: greed, wrath, jealousy, hate, etc. These emotions, in their turn, strengthen the ‘I-hood’ by strengthening the woven structure further. This ‘I-hood’ exists; in that sense, one can make true or false claims about it. However, we delude ourselves in thinking that this ‘I-hood’ is the ‘I-ness’, or confuse the ‘I-hood’ with the access to the ‘I’ which is an emergent property of complex systems like human beings. We all have access to the ‘I’; otherwise, we would not have the notion or experience of being an ‘I’. But all of us also succumb to the delusion that the ‘I-hood’ is the ‘I’. Confusing the ‘I-ness’ with the ‘I-hood’ is the delusion we all suffer from.

Enlightenment consists of this realization, if and only if, this leads to the death of the ‘I-hood’. The ‘I-hood’ has to die, if happiness is to be achieved. This, as we know, is what the Indian traditions have been proclaiming for millennia. When the ‘I-hood’ dies, what also disappear are the emotions generated by this ‘I-hood’. Our biological emotions do not disappear, because they cannot. But with the death of the ‘I-hood’, the emotions it generated and those that strengthened it die almost automatically. That is why it is said that the enlightened person has no hate, jealousy, greed etc.

Does that mean that the first layer of the ‘I-hood’, the ‘natural’ structure that exists prior to the emergence of the delusion, also dies? My answer is in the affirmative. Emotions exist, memories also exist, but the structure disappears. Otherwise, children, who have not yet built their ‘ego’ would all be enlightened beings, which they are not. The enlightened being returns to ‘childhood’ in the sense that his ego has died. But that does not mean that he ‘regresses’ into the state of childhood. He goes beyond that because he would have also lost his ‘personality’. He enters a state of being that ‘transcends’ childhood while, in some senses, becoming ‘childlike’. It is not a natural state of being but a learned state of being.

Perhaps, a metaphor can be used to make the foregoing perspicuous. Imagine a spider web: this would be the structure that our emotions weave. This would be the ‘I-hood’, in the full sense of the word. However, for it to be a spider web, the presence of two elements is crucial: the elements of the web (‘the strands’) and, of course, the spider. The elements of the web constitute our remembered past and the learnt patterns of behavior, emotions and so on. The spider is the sentience under a delusion about consciousness. (Or it is the deceived consciousness, if consciousness includes sentience as well, that thinks that it is self-aware.) This spider weaves the web using what it possesses: emotions and memories. The organism is the ‘fly’ caught in the web of the spider. This entire phenomenon, looked as one entity, is ‘*samsara*’. For the web to lose its strength, the spider has to leave the web. That is, the spider has to die.

With the death of the spider, the web does not disappear. It continues to exist, accumulating both dead flies and dust. This stands to reason: enlightenment does not mean a miraculous rebirth; one has to burn away the web as well. That is to say, one has to ‘unlearn’ too, even after enlightenment, though that is relatively easy. One has to unlearn many behavioural and emotional patterns that remain as residues.

Translation into Indian languages and traditions

It must be clear that what I have done, in many senses of the word, is provide an outline of a story about human beings and their psychology. Let me now propose a translation of some of the words into well-known Sanskrit words present in our daily language use. I would like to emphasize that this translation is not based on any kind of reading of the old Sanskrit texts. This is simply my proposal.

‘Sentience’ is ‘*Buddhi*’. ‘Consciousness’ is ‘*Chitta*’. ‘Self-consciousness’ or ‘Self-awareness’ is ‘*Atman*’. The emergent property of the ‘higher’ complex system (above human beings, that is) is ‘*Brahman*’. The first layer of ‘I-hood’ is the core meaning of ‘*Ahamakara*’. The crystallized ‘I-hood’ is ‘*Ahamkara*’ too but in its property as delusion, which is ‘*Maya*’. That is, ‘*Maya*’ is the ‘I-hood’ in its status or manifestation as a delusion.

Now, a crucial question arises: *Can this description capture the variety in Indian traditions?* My answer is a *qualified ‘yes’*. The qualification is simply this: I have not yet studied the Indian ‘*darshanas*’ with the care they deserve. I shall do so in the future. However, the current task is to find out whether such an effort is worth it. Here are some *prima facie* considerations in support of the claim that this description is an adequate identification of the questions that are common across the Indian traditions.

1. Much work is not needed to suggest that this description can lead us to the *Advaitic* questions without much ado. In fact, one could even justifiably suggest that this description draws upon the *advaitic* concerns. That issue is of no concern at this stage.
2. The fourth fact about self-consciousness shows us how one could arrive at the *dvaitic* concerns. One has to ask linguistic, ontological and epistemological questions about the nature of the emergent property, ‘*Atman*’, in order to reach *dvaita*. These questions are reasonable, justified and defensible.
3. More to the point is this: can it generate Buddhist and Jain concerns, which deny ‘*Brahman*’ and/or ‘*Atman*’? The surprising answer is ‘yes’, it can. There are three arguments to show how this portrayal can also generate Buddhist and Jain concerns.

The first requires adding the assumption that the world cannot contain objects (entities) that fail to answer conditions of identity and individuation.

The second is a variant of Ockham’s ‘razor’: do not multiply entities uselessly. One can explain ‘enlightenment’ by suggesting that ‘*sunyata*’ is at the core of the universe. One does not have to postulate ‘*Atman*’, which, as a concept, plays no role in an explanation that simply accepts that universe is in flux and that there is no permanence to be found here. One remains faithful to our knowledge without postulating weird entities that contravene our knowledge, if we can satisfactorily explain that enlightenment is the result of having the deepest understanding of flux.

The third is an empirical statement: the ‘*atman*’ is not anywhere in the body, or anywhere in the universe. Therefore, ‘*atman*’ does not exist. What ‘is’ there is also what exists. (See the last section in this regard.)

These three statements are sufficient to help us generate both Buddhist and Jain concerns from this description.

- This description is also ‘neutral’ with respect to all the traditions. These traditions ask questions and provide arguments in their defence that are perfectly reasonable. We have no way of decisively refuting or confirming any of the options. These are human speculations that do not allow (at this moment) a definitive answer.

In other words, this description carries a *prima facie* plausibility such that it becomes a candidate worthy of further investigation. No claim is being made that this description is true, but merely that it is a possible meta-framework with which to begin approaching a study of Indian traditions, i.e., as exemplifications of a culture that raises certain issues with respect to human beings and their happiness.

A Caveat

This note is an attempt to capture and understand an experience partially. As such it also appeals to memory of things read, remembered anecdotes and such other pasts. Thus, it works within a framework of ideas that are related to each other in some way or another. This framework faces the challenge of exhibiting its compatibility with the Indian traditions and culture. That challenge is met in the process of answering the following problem: *is it capable of making sense of the fundamental questions that lie at the source of the variety of Indian traditions?* To answer this problem, one has to appeal to some or another ‘story’, some or another ‘mini-theory’, as it were. Such a story is not *the story*; it is merely *one story* from among many other potential ones. It is, if you like, a meta-framework (inspired by one of the many object-level theories) that exhibits its compatibility with all the object-level theories that I know or vaguely remember. Neither accuracy nor exhaustiveness is sought. If this story passes the preliminary test, it can perhaps *grow to become a meta-framework that includes all the Indian darshanas*. However, none of these darshanas, textually speaking, is at the basis of this note: as said earlier, it is an attempt to capture and understand (both are partial) an experience using the resources present in one individual human being. It is no more than that.

Appendix: On the ‘true’ and the ‘false’

This description requires filling out with many answers to many other questions. One such is about ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’. These concepts are necessary to understand what is meant by the notion that the ‘I-hood’ is a false entity and, if it is false, how it could ‘die’. (Death requires that the entity lives and, if it lives, how can it be false?) Now is the time to take a necessary detour to understand the ‘I-hood’ even better. What is being said is this: *‘I-hood’ is a false entity and it is a delusion to think, believe, sense or feel otherwise*. However, I will keep the exposition simple and talk only about things which are strictly necessary for us now.

As we all know, Indian traditions work with two notions of truth: the ‘*laukika*’ truth and the ‘*paramarthika*’ (or *adhyatmic*) truth. The *laukika* truths are true claims about the entities that **exist** in the world. In some senses, this notion of truth dovetails with what is called the ‘philosophical conception’ of truth or, equally often, the ‘Aristotelean conception’ of truth. It also includes the ‘pragmatic conception’ of truth. (It is not clear to me whether the Indian culture also has a ‘syntactic conception’ of truth.) In other words, the semantic and pragmatic conceptions of truth are parts of the ‘*laukika*’ conception of truth. *This truth is always and only about existing entities* (which include objects, events, situations or whatever else) *in the world*.

However, what exists in the world? The answer to this cannot be provided by a philosophical fiat, but only by knowledge. Only knowledge tells us what is there in the world, and this knowledge is always limited, ‘perspectival’ and hypothetical because human knowledge has all these three properties. Knowledge is, in some senses, about empirical properties of the world, as we sometimes use the

term. Also, what constitutes knowledge is also a question of knowledge and even that is human. Our knowledge of the world evolves and so does our understanding of what human knowledge is. This human knowledge tells us that the world itself is subject to all kinds of changes. Our laukika truths thus evolve as well: what we believe to be true at some time might turn out to be false later. These truths, like the world about which they are true, are in flux, to use a well-known metaphor. In simple terms, the laukika truths are context dependent and conditional in nature. This is how we must understand our present day claims about such entities as ‘super strings’, ‘dark matter’ and such like. We hypothesize the existence of such entities currently; they might or might not exist, something we will know only as knowledge evolves.

Consider now a different situation. Let us say that there is some kind of an access to ‘something’, whose nature we do not know yet. In and of itself, that need not create any problem because we can hypothesize some or another explanation for its existence. However, it does create a problem if our hypothesis *is logically compelled in a direction that is antithetical to what our knowledge tells us about the world*. If the hypothesis is perfectly logical and it explains in a consistent fashion that which we access, then this hypothesis can be considered true and not false. (In this sense, I think there is a syntactic conception of truth in the Indian tradition.) If there are many such hypotheses, then that does not show that only one of them is ‘true’ (even though each adherent to a hypothesis thinks that way) because we have no knowledge about its nature but only some ill-understood access to it. All of them could also be true, if they are merely different true descriptions at different levels of the accessed entity. Their differences, then, does not indicate that they are rival or competitor theories but they are merely different theories providing us with different levels of description. No matter how we decide the case later, how do we indicate that this peculiar situation? That is, how do we indicate that (a) the hypothesis is consistent; (b) the entity it postulates is accessible to human experience; (c) the hypothesis is logically compelled to ascribe ‘ontological’ properties (to that entity) which contravene everything we know about the world? How do we indicate the ‘truth status’ of such a claim about this entity and say that it is different from other hypotheses we have about the world? The Indian traditions call this the ‘paramarthika’ truth. This is not laukika at all, for yet another reason.

The entity that is hypothesized to exist is humanly accessible. In that case, it is not hypothetical. One can describe the experience of such an entity and device ways to access this entity. Thus it is not a hypothetical or a fictitious entity the way ‘ether’ or ‘phlogiston’ is. Yet, its characteristics (that one is logically compelled to postulate) contravene what we know about the world. Let me concretize this problem by speaking about some ‘facts’ about self-consciousness.

Consider now the fifth fact about self-consciousness. If there is self-consciousness, which we all access, when did it emerge or come into existence? It is impossible to localize its origin: one cannot say, “Ever since the origin of humankind” because (a) we do not know that we are the only organisms who are complex enough to manifest this emergent property and (b) nor can we claim that this property manifests only in a sub-system within the Cosmos. Perhaps, as said before, other bigger sub-systems, of the system that we are a part of, also manifest this property. There is one possible answer: we do not know. Or that it is always there.

Where? In some senses, it is in the Universe. Equally, if we consider the possibility of the emergent property of the Cosmos, it is not ‘in the universe’ i.e., it is not a property of one of its components. Or again, it is both in and not in the Universe: it is ‘in’ the universe because it is a property of one of its sub-systems (namely human beings) and it is not ‘in’ the Universe because the Cosmic emergent property cannot be ‘in’ the Universe. Perhaps, it is better to say that it is ‘nowhere’ because ‘self-

'awareness' does not have physical or energetic properties by virtue of which it could have a spatial location. Equally, one could also say that it is 'everywhere'.

Does this property increase or decrease depending upon the emergence or disappearance of one of its sub-systems (or even many)? Again, we do not know. Then again, one could also say 'no': it has no physical properties by virtue of which it either increases or decreases. Consequently, it does not change (i.e. undergo decay or development) because 'change' is a property of all things that exist in the universe. Therefore, 'self-consciousness' **does not exist**. *Since we have access to it and yet it does not exist, what is its 'ontic' status?* The Indian traditions introduce the notion of 'the real' here: **the 'real' does not exist; what 'exists' is not real**. Self-consciousness is 'real' and, therefore, it does not exist. Whatever exists undergoes change. Self-consciousness does not and cannot change, i.e. it is always manifest. Indian traditions, thus, also use the word *Paramarthika* 'truth' to *designate the real*. This truth is thus, at another level, distinct from *Laukika* truth that speaks about *existing objects*.

If we use the word 'truth' to refer to objects that are real, then we are forced to use the notion of 'false' to refer to objects that are 'unreal', if thought to be real. *Existing objects are unreal and, therefore, false, if thought to be real*. Or, what is *laukika* truth can be false as *paramarthika* truth. That is to say, confusing 'ontic' levels leads one to falsehood as well.

Thus there are two kinds of truth: the *paramrathika* and the *Laukika*. When used with respect to sentences, it suggests that the nature of the sentences are different with respect to their property of being truth-or-falsity-bearers (or as bearers of truth values). When used with respect to objects, the words pick out the real and the existent respectively. In short: *Indian traditions use 'truth' and 'falsity' both with respect to sentences and objects. In both, there are two kinds of truth: Paramarthika and Laukika*. The context invariably makes clear whether one talks about sentences or about objects.

The issues are more complex than what I have indicated above. But this will do for our purposes.