

Inter-Religious Dialogue
A Heathen Perspective from India

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Hinduism, as people who study it suggest, is a religion that recognizes many gods. Buddhism and Jainism, according to the contemporary consensus, are religions that deny God or gods. Christianity, according to its self-representation, is a religion that is God's own gift to humanity. If we keep the above three things in mind, the questions I have to address become difficult to answer in any simple or straightforward way. Let me recollect what these questions are.

1. How does the religious tradition being considered understand humankind's specific 'religious' end?

2. In view of this specific religious end, how does the religious tradition being considered account for human existence. (I.e., what is the meaning of human existence?)

3. How is this religious end related to the human experience of suffering and pain? That is to say, how does the religious tradition being considered approach the problem of human suffering and what does that tradition propose as the most adequate response to, or understanding of, the problem of pain and suffering?

4. From the perspective of the religious tradition being considered, are you of the opinion that the concern to alleviate human suffering provides a good basis for inter-religious dialogue? What might be the nature of such a dialogue?

I

There are at least two ways of understanding and answering these questions. One way is to understand these questions by appealing to our deeply held intuitions and answer these questions by taking them at their face value. What does that mean? By way of an answer, consider a contrast of the following sort. Let us suppose that a Christian (from its early days) and a Pagan follower of Aristotle (from the same period as the Christian) met each other and had a dialogue about the specific end (or *telos*) of human existence. While the Aristotelian would have said that people seek to find *Eudaimonia* (or happiness), our Christian would enquire whether that would constitute a proper end for human beings. Continuing, the Christian might have also added that true happiness cannot be realized on earth unless in a union with God and that such bliss is the true end of

humankind. If they were interested in a dialogue, how could they proceed further? Consider an apparently cogent argument of the following sort: surely, whether we side with the Christian and say that true happiness, unaided by God, is not realizable or whether we say with the Aristotelian that *Eudaimonia* is what human beings seek and can achieve on earth, there is a common denominator between them. Their difference of opinion concerns the nature of bliss and *Eudiamonia* respectively. Irrespective of who is right on this question, minimally, they are agreed that pain and human suffering is something 'undesirable' and both parties seek to alleviate pain and suffering. Could they not work together on this issue and continue their conversation about bliss and *Eudaimonia* on that basis? This is an eminently reasonable question but, I will be arguing, this question is merely *one way of being reasonable*. This reasonable way loads the dice in favour of the Christian; however, to appreciate this, we need to make a detour. I will begin on this detour shortly, but, for now, this is what I mean when I suggest that we take the questions at their face value. This is one way of appreciating the reasonableness of the questions that constitute the focus of my talk.

There is also another way, the way that the Indian traditions advocate. Because I will be talking about how the Indian traditions respond to these issues in the course of this talk, let me just notice the difference between the two ways to begin with. The difference between these two ways has to do with how facts about human beings that we observe and experience are explained. The facts are: our limitless desires, our 'greed', our needs and our wants. For the sake of convenience, call the one 'a western, Christian approach' and the other, 'an Indian, heathen' one. In order to complete the task in the time I have, I will drastically simplify my presentation. I cannot do what intellectuals love doing: add nuances, subtleties, and qualifications. I will paint a crude contrast in order to agree and disagree. I hope you will forgive me for this.

II

One psychological theory we can use to understand the facts about our limitless desires, our 'greed', our needs and our wants is a variant of what is called humanistic psychol-

ogy. Abraham Maslow formulated it first in 1943 and it has been refined in many different ways since then. (It has also been challenged but I do not want to talk about that.) The basic thesis is something like this: human beings have different kinds of needs. From the purely biological needs to what are called spiritual needs. The original suggestion was that these different kinds of needs form some kind of a hierarchy: a pyramid, so to speak. Our needs for food, water, clothing, shelter form the base of the pyramid. Once these physiological needs are satisfied, other next-in-line needs emerge: these are safety needs like the need for security, whether it is security of employment or security of revenues and resources. After these are satisfied, there emerges what are called the social needs: they involve emotionally-based relationships in general, such as friendship, sexual intimacy, and/or having a family. The subsequent set of needs is psychological: humans have a need to be respected, to self-respect and to respect others. All these needs are seen as "deficiency needs": once met and satisfied, these needs get neutralized; they cease to motivate us any further. Then there is the need at the apex of the pyramid which continually motivates us and cannot be neutralized: the need for self-actualization. As Maslow put it: "Self Actualization is the intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately, of what the organism is." Or "a musician must make music, the artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization". In this approach, to be happy is to have all our needs met.

The Indian traditions do not speak in terms of 'needs' but in terms of desires. So, if a contrast is to be made, one requires a uniform vocabulary. Therefore, let me translate the language of needs into the language of desires.

Here is one such possible translation. Let us say that needs take the *form* of desires. These desires are geared towards objects that satisfy our needs. We can say that human beings have multiple desires and that these desires function as *motivations* for the human being. In order to satisfy their desires, human beings act. It is important to realise that the desires are not only indefinitely many but also *doubly qualified*. The first qualification is this: desire is oriented towards an object, because a desire is always a de-

sire for something. The second qualification is regarding the specificity of the object. For instance, you do not merely have a desire for sex; you also have a desire to have sex with some particular human being. You do not merely desire food, but you desire beef steak as food. You do not merely desire clothes but you desire Armani clothes, and so on.

Desires emerge from needs and such desires are doubly qualified. What about the emergence of new desires, or further qualifications to the existing ones? New objects can either create new desires in human beings for those objects or qualify the existing desires. That is to say, in any given period, human desires are formed socially and culturally. This is how we experience ourselves and fellow human beings today: as creatures with indefinitely many desires for indefinitely many things. New desires emerge as new products come into being and are marketed successfully. In this case, happiness would mean the satisfaction of all our desires. In this account, it makes no difference whether one argues that happiness arises from a 'prudent' satisfaction of desires (i.e., 'one ought to know which desires to satisfy and which things not to desire') or from a 'hedonistic' fulfilment. The claim is merely that happiness has to do with the satisfaction of human desires.

III

Let us now agree that most human beings, in all times and cultures, seek to be happy. The question is: if it is indeed the case that human beings seek to be happy, why are they not? There is also a simple answer to this question: many things prevent them from being happy. Which are these things?

This 'western' story about desires gives us the following answer. It answers the question by transforming happiness into a desire: human beings desire to be happy. Now, we began with the idea that human beings are happy if their desires are satisfied. However, as we proceed further, happiness itself becomes a desired object. Once human beings are seen to desire happiness the way they desire any other object, then questions can be asked about happiness: what kind of an object is happiness? Is it possible to specify its properties? Is it a psychological feeling, an attitude to life, a quantity of goods, the

quality of life...? When such questions are asked, our task becomes even more complex: satisfying our desires now includes satisfying the desire to be happy. Happiness becomes both an object of desire and it is also something that arises from satisfying our other desires.

Before we get lost in this chain of argument, notice the two things that have happened in the process of transforming happiness into a desire. Firstly, we can ask whether this desire to be happy is the proper end of human kind: we can even ask normative questions, 'Is it good to be happy?' Secondly, we can speak of different 'kinds' of happiness: happiness as a desire as against the happiness we seek by satisfying all our other desires. It is now totally unclear what relation, if any, exists between these two kinds of happiness. Hence, we can say, as we also often say, even if someone has satisfied all his desires, he has not yet found 'happiness' (or 'he is not truly happy').

Correspondingly, there are two aspects to finding happiness. The first is to seek happiness directly and the second is to seek it indirectly. However, because happiness is such an elusive object, and we do not anymore know what it is, a search for it can only frustrate us. That is to say, if we seek happiness directly we will end up becoming unhappy. What happens if we seek it indirectly? Because our desires are indefinitely many and they could never be satisfied fully or completely, we will never find happiness. Both aspects give us the same message: human beings *desire* happiness, but they can never satisfy this desire.

Now, throw in the story of that religion which has dominated the western culture: we can never find 'true' happiness on earth by chasing either happiness or by trying to satisfy the desires for material things. So, if we want 'true' happiness, we need to do two things: seek God and constrain our desires. But if you want to follow humanistic psychology and do not want to speak of God, you say the following: human beings cannot be 'truly happy' until they satisfy their 'spiritual' desires and live in a sober and ascetic fashion by curtailing their desires for material objects.

This story has deep roots in our commonsense understanding of human beings. This is also the basis of many theories in philosophical anthropology. This story guides

our thinking about human beings, society and economics. I want to suggest that this story is *not a scientific story* about human beings but merely a culture-specific product. This is how people in the western culture are brought up to understand and experience themselves. This is merely one perspective on human beings that one culture has thrown up. There exist other cultures in the world and they tell different stories about human beings and their desires. I want to tell you one strand from that story, as it is told in the Indian culture. However, let me warn you that this story is not easy to understand: it will not only be flatly counter-intuitive but it will also strain the limits of your language-use, whether that language is Dutch or English.

IV

Let me invite you to think along with me. Let us continue to agree that all human beings seek happiness, whatever 'happiness' means. Let us not assume that happiness is a desire or even its opposite. Let us not even assume that happiness arises from satisfying our desires for objects or whatever else. In that case, it might appear as though the sentence 'all human beings seek to be happy' becomes completely senseless. Not quite, because these traditions try and clarify this elusive notion by making some meta-claims about the nature of 'happiness'. Let us now imagine a culture making the following meta-claim: *each human being can be happy*. If all human beings *can* be happy, then there are some consequences attached to this claim.

- (1) *There is no special or specific condition attached to being happy*. One could be a man, a woman or a child; one could be rich or poor; one could be intelligent or stupid; one could be young or old... None of these qualifications matter: anyone and everyone can be happy. The only possible condition is that one is a human being and even here, it is left vague as to what it means to be a human being.
- (2) The second implication is the answer to the question, 'when can someone become happy?' The answer is obvious: *any time, anywhere and in any manner*.

- (3) The third consequence is this: if every human being can be happy, that means *there cannot be a conflict between the happiness of one person and the happiness of the other.*
- (4) The fourth consequence is even more interesting: because each one of us is occupied in different ways in the world, each one of us has a different psychology than the other, *no occupation or no individual psychology can prevent us from being happy.* That is to say, 'being happy' is something that is either so general that it is applicable to all human beings or something so plastic that it can adapt itself into every situation and every person.
- (5) Because of all these considerations, the next consequence is also necessary: every path and every way we travel in the course of our journey through life can lead us to this goal. That is, it is not possible to speak of only one way of being happy. *There are indefinitely many ways of being happy.*
- (6) What does it mean to say that there are indefinitely many ways to be happy? Now comes a startling consequence: you can take happiness as a goal and find it in your life; or you can chase after material goods and still find happiness. (I am limiting myself here to just these two possibilities in order to draw the contrast.) That is, *you can chase after happiness either directly or indirectly.* From this, it follows: not only people can be happy but also *there is no such thing as 'true' as against 'false' happiness.* There is only one thing we all seek and that is to be happy.

If all these consequences are derivable from the meta-claim about happiness, the question arises: why are people unhappy then? Surely, if it is that simple and so obvious, why is the majority of humankind unhappy? The Indian traditions provide a double answer to this question, both of which are deceptively simple.

Here is the first answer: One reason why people are unhappy is because they do not 'really' seek happiness. To be happy, all you need is seek it; "seek, and ye shall find". Seek what though? If we do not know what happiness is, how can we seek it? That is to

say, if we are ignorant of what we seek, how can we recognize it (assuming we find it) or seek it?

“Indeed so”, say the Indian traditions. We cannot seek something until we know what we seek. However, instead of telling us what we ‘ought’ to be seeking, the Indian traditions do something remarkable: they draw attention to our ignorance and ask us to reflect upon its nature. That is, they say, we cannot find happiness *because* of our *ignorance*.

Let us reflect a bit on what is remarkable about this. If, indeed, all of us can be happy and can be that in different ways, and there is no ‘true’ happiness as against multiple illusions about it, then no theory can tell us what all of us ‘ought’ to be seeking. If a believer, an atheist and an agnostic (for example) can all be happy, then either happiness has nothing to do with belief in God or happiness means different things to different people. The Indian traditions do not prescribe a specific ‘normative end’ to all human beings; they merely notice factually, as Aristotle did, that we all seek happiness as an end. In this process, they focus on the impediments to achieving what we think that end is. The Indian traditions tell us that what prevents us from achieving that end, which we call happiness, has to do with our ignorance. That is, what prevents each one of us from being happy (even though we believe that each one of us ‘defines’ happiness differently) is *our ignorance* about what happiness is. Therefore, they say, think about ignorance and understand how it prevents you from being happy. So let us do it. What is ignorance?

To begin with, ignorance is an absence: the absence of information (or knowledge) about what happiness is. This answer is intuitively familiar to us. I will very soon come back to it. For now, let us look at another notion of ignorance that the Indian traditions talk about. They construe *ignorance as a positive force of some sort that actively prevents knowledge*. To get some grips on this idea, let us notice that for something to ‘do’ something in the world, it has to be present. That is, something must exist in the world if it has to have an impact on other objects in the world. So, as a mere absence (whether it is information or knowledge that is absent), ignorance cannot actively pre-

vent knowledge. In fact, in the sense of 'absence', ignorance is a precondition for knowledge. Nor does ignorance mean believing in 'wrong or false' ideas in this case. How, then, to make sense of the idea of ignorance as a positive force?

Let us look at statements of the following sort: "Knowledge removes ignorance"; "knowledge cures ignorance"; "ignorance prevents one from seeing the truth"; "forgiving people for their ignorance" ("Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing") and so on. How can knowledge 'remove' or 'cure' or 'be prevented by' something if that something *is not present*? This does not suggest that ignorance is a Heideggerian 'Nothing' or '*Das Nichts*'; it merely means that, even in the western culture, an active notion of ignorance is present. This has simply not been adequately reflected upon. The Indian traditions have thought about this notion of ignorance as an active force that prevents knowledge. This ignorance is not "about" any particular object; it is merely ignorance as a force. I cannot develop this idea further in this talk. But keep in mind that the notion is not all that alien even in the western culture. This then is one reason why people are unhappy: we do not find happiness because *ignorance prevents us* from discovering what happiness is. One reason why people are unhappy is due to the presence of ignorance as a positive force.

In addition to this, we are also ignorant "about". That is, we cannot be happy until we realize (or gain knowledge) *about* the nature of our desires, wants, limitless greed and such like and *about* the kind of beings we are. Let us begin by noting what they say about desires.

Human beings do not have multiple desires for specific objects, say these traditions. What we have is Desire: in the singular, unqualified, and objectless. Consequently, to say, as we do, that we have 'many desires', or that 'we have a desire for something' would be false and misleading. (That is to say, how we speak about 'desires' in Dutch or English is also wrong.) However, Desire has the property of attaching itself to any and every object. When I desire Armani clothes or a beef steak, I do not have desires for these particular objects. What I do have is just one 'Desire' that attaches itself now to Armani clothes and then to beef steak. Our desire for multiple objects does not show

that we have many desires but it is merely one and the same Desire attaching itself to different objects. The limitlessness of our desires does not have anything to do with the limitless number and variety of objects in the world but with the fact that Desire has no intrinsic goal or object. That is why Desire cannot be satisfied: *nothing can satisfy it*. To make this notion of Desire perspicuous, let me use an economic metaphor. The Desire that the Indian traditions talk about is like Money. Money is singular, there are no plural monies. Money can become savings, financial capital, Industrial capital, mercantile capital, money-lending capital, or merely something we exchange for some commodity or another. Money can take the form of various currencies, shares, gold or any other commodity. Money can buy anything because it is indifferent to what it is exchanged against. According to the Indian traditions, Desire is like Money: it is limitless; it has no intrinsic object as its goal; it can be accumulated in any form or quantity.

Chasing after satisfaction of desires, as we experience our strivings, is intrinsically and inherently frustrating. Such an endeavor is also a direct cause of unhappiness because Desire is unsatisfiable: nothing can satisfy it. However, true to their nature, the Indian traditions do not suggest that no one, ever, finds happiness in accumulating money: it is also a possible route. One could accumulate Desire and chase after satisfying it and claim that S/he is happy in doing so. While possible, to most of us however, such a route might not be the best choice.

In the western thinking, the nature of the world is used as a *pragmatic* argument to suggest that we have to put restraints on our desires. Our desires are infinite but the resources of the world are finite. However, this argument convinces only those who want to be convinced; it cannot convince the skeptic, who might be an optimist ('science and technology will solve the problem') or an ignoramus. Further, this argument makes the 'Other' – whether the other is Nature or other human beings – into the enemy: the 'Other' is the source for the unsatisfiability of human desires. Consequently the 'Other' is always the threat that the 'self' confronts in its attempts to fulfill its desires.

In the Indian traditions, by contrast, neither the 'self' nor the 'other' has anything to do with the limitless nature of our desires or our inability to satisfy them. It is in

the nature of Desire that it is unsatisfiable. Consequently, going-about with Desire is crucial to being happy. That is to say, one can learn to be happy and this *learning involves acquiring the ability to deal with Desire*. Asceticism is of no help as a societal solution, even if some individuals could be happy by living ascetically. The road to being happy involves people learning this truth about Desire, at an individual level, among other things. That is to say, *Self-knowledge is crucial to the process of being happy*. But what is self-knowledge?

V

I live in a culture (the western culture) whose members not only pride themselves in their self-knowledge but also believe such knowledge is an index of the maturity, independence and stability of a person. What they mean by self-knowledge is actually self-representation, which is more often than not at odds with the kind of creatures they are. It is a mixture of odds and ends: ideas, pictures, values, fantasies, ideals, etc which they slug all through their lives. The less this picture is subjected to shocks by the events that occur in their lives, the more comfortable they feel. Looked at it this way, a person is said to have a stable and mature "identity" (this is another word they use in psychology for this assortment) if this representation is not shaken by what happens in that individual's existence. Creation of an identity or the emergence of an identity refers to that process or event where the person in question begins to relate to this picture consciously and explicitly.

Is this also self-knowledge? This amalgam does contain elements of insights by the person about him/herself. But these are not thought-through; they are not the deliberate results of exploration and reflection into oneself. Mostly, they are the insights the organism has acquired about itself during the course of its journey through life. Grafted onto this are other odds and ends: the strategies one used as a child, the remembered feelings one has had at different phases in life, a way of holding oneself while alone, different ways (both successful and failed) of going about with people, the vague images of heroes one admired but has since forgotten... In the full sense of the

word, it is an assortment of junk that one is somehow held together. This junk is accumulated in the course of one's life.

What holds this junk together even as an amalgam? *Emotions*. They cement these odds and ends together and ignorance does the rest: one presupposes that this junk is a coherent picture of some sort or another. One does not know whether this amalgamated junk that we call self-knowledge or self-representation is a coherent picture; most of us might even suspect that it is not, which is perhaps why we are so afraid of attacks against it. That is also why we get so attached to it. However, the emotions invested in this amalgamated junk and ignorance makes us think that this is what we are. This is one of the reasons why we are so sensitive to remarks by others about us. They nastily remind us that the emperor is naked. The others exhibit this truth, albeit in perverse ways (by insulting us, by poking fun at our self-image, etc), about this junk: namely, that it is junk. The fact that we get emotional (whether positively or negatively) about this amalgamated junk is the surest indication that emotions hold this junk together. If the emotions did not hold these odds and ends together, two things would have happened: there would be no picture to talk about or hang on to, and the remarks of the others would induce no emotions in us. But the emotions that hold this junk together also blunt the remarks that others make about it. They redirect such remarks (as weapons) against the amalgamated junk that the others hang on to: the other is prejudiced, ignorant, jealous, stupid... Thus, the ideal and mature person that the western psychology talks about has two properties: such a person must know which remarks from others should be recognized as true (even though painful) and which to redirect. You do not learn these two abilities in order to become a mature person; these abilities are the consequences of your maturity.

If the above is true, what stands in the way of achieving self-knowledge or knowledge about the kind of organisms we are? The amalgamated junk that we call 'psychological identity'. Having such an identity is not indispensable to being a person; instead, it stands in the way of becoming one. What prevents self-knowledge is the picture we have of ourselves as individuals. Or, better put, the emotions we invest in hold-

ing our self-representation together prevents us from understanding ourselves for the kind of creatures we really are.

Absence of information or lack of knowledge both about ourselves and the nature of Desire prevent us from seeking happiness. In other words, we wrongly believe that our self-representations constitute self-knowledge and this (implicit) belief allows us to invest emotions in holding the amalgamated junk together as though it is a coherent picture. This attitude (or the emotional investment) actively prevents us from being happy. Ignorance, conceived as a positive force, also refers to this attachment to the amalgamated junk. Equally, absence of information or lack of knowledge about Desire makes us believe that we have multiple desires. We blame ourselves for our inability to satisfy these desires or seek its 'cause' in the greed inherent to the human nature. The Indian traditions shift the focus to the nature of Desire and suggest that our inability to satisfy it has nothing to do with 'human nature' but with the very nature of Desire. As long as we do not have this knowledge, 'desires' enslave us and actively prevent us from seeking happiness. This too is a positive force. In short, absence of information or lack of knowledge also transforms it into a positive force.

In our search for happiness, Indian traditions claim to teach us to be happy; they claim they are teaching systems. If one can learn to be happy, it can only be because *happiness can be learnt*. Here, happiness is not seen as a desire or a need of human beings, but as something that can be learnt. It is some kind of knowledge. Among other things, the Indian traditions help us go-about or deal with Desire by developing an ability in us to do that. This ability is developed in the course of teaching us about ourselves.

If happiness is some kind of knowledge and a happy person is a knowledgeable person, what kind of knowledge is it? The Indian traditions call it as *experiential knowledge*. We can get an intuitive handle on this notion of knowledge by asking ourselves the following question: who knows whether some person is happy or not? Quite obviously, the person in question. S/he knows whether or not s/he is happy if and only if s/he experiences happiness. In this sense, happiness is experiential in nature and it is experiential knowledge because it can be taught and learnt. To be happy, you need to get rid

of ignorance as well: ignorance both as absence of information and ignorance as a positive force that prevents you from being happy. This ignorance is both about the nature of Desire and the nature of oneself as a human being. When looked at this way, this knowledge appears related to the intuitive notion of 'wisdom', which we have. Indeed so. The Indian traditions link the notion of wisdom (*sophia*) to happiness (*eudaimonia*). Both are practical and experiential in nature. The end of human beings is to be happy, not because it is the 'proper' end but because that is what we all seek.

VI

Now, I can tackle the questions that this lecture is supposed to tackle. The Indian traditions are mere signposts and guides in our search for happiness. There is no one way to seek and find happiness anymore than there is a single 'true' happiness as against multiple illusions about happiness. The only person qualified to judge whether or not one is happy is the person in question, and her/his judgment will be a result of her/his experience.

The Indian traditions do not either ask questions about the meaning of human existence or try and answer them because, to these traditions, they are ill-formed questions. Any answer or even no answer would do because, according to them, existence issues do not allow meaning questions. (I cannot elaborate on this point further in the course of this lecture.)

That brings me to the last two questions. The questions, that is, of human suffering and pain and whether this issue provides an adequate basis for an inter-religious dialogue. The answers have so far been implicitly provided, let me answer them explicitly now.

To tackle the issue of pain and suffering, consider some examples like the following: an Olympic swimmer has an accident because of which a promising career gets broken in the middle; a Casanova, who made a career of chasing after women, discovers his waning attraction; a beautiful woman, who prided herself on her beauty, begins to grow old; a rich man loses his money because of a stock-market crash; a young mother

discovers that her infant baby has incurable cancer; a young couple breaks-up; a loved one dies; and so on and so forth. In each of these cases, the resultant pain and suffering is obvious. How does one respond to these situations? The obvious answer is that one tries to comfort them and provide them with some kind of solace. Yes, of course, *but how does one do any of these?*

Let us first note the contrast set for pain and suffering: it is *pleasure and enjoyment*. Keep this firmly in mind, because it is going to be important for the rest of the talk. The Indian traditions ask us to locate the origin of pain and suffering and let us do so, even if it looks a bit tedious at first glance. The sorrow of the swimmer has its roots in his physical excellence which he enjoyed when he was not impaired; the Casanova enjoyed his physical prowess and his capacity to attract women; the beautiful woman enjoyed and took pride in her youth and beauty; the rich man took great pleasure and derived enjoyment from his wealth; the young mother's joy was her baby; the young couple enjoyed their love for each other; the loved one gave pleasure and joy to those who loved her/him; and so on. In short, each of these was attached to something or another, and took a great deal of pleasure and enjoyment from that attachment.

Why do they suffer now? Because the object they were attached to, which was the source of their joy and comfort goes missing. In other words, *their pain and suffering of today is precisely because of their attachment, which was their source of joy yesterday*. So, a great deal of human pain and suffering that we see in the world has to do with our joy and pleasure. That is to say, one and the same object which provided us joy and pleasure, while present, is the source of pain and suffering, when absent. It is, furthermore, in the nature of these objects and our attachments (to them) that they are impermanent and transient. Nothing human is permanent; what is present today will be absent tomorrow. In this sense, our attachment to these objects is the cause of both pleasure and enjoyment, and pain and suffering. If you want to reduce the one, then you need to reduce the other at the same time. Pain and pleasure, joy and suffering are two faces of the same coin. You cannot separate them and they do not occur independently of each other. This is the human condition.

Consequently, you cannot reduce pain and suffering if you do not do something about pleasure and enjoyment at the same time. Because this is how we are, how to respond to pain and suffering? Maximally, we can *cultivate the ability to go-about with pain*. That is exactly what the Indian traditions advocate and the Indian culture does: help us deal with pain and suffering by accepting its presence as the inevitable obverse side of the human ability to take pleasure and enjoy.

(Of course, we also have the pain and suffering that has its roots in poverty and the resultant material deprivation, and diseases. To deal with this, we do not need any religion of any kind. As reasonable people, we can all agree that it is totally absurd that, in the twenty-first century world, there are people who die of starvation, and of diseases brought about by poverty. I will not speak about this any further in this talk, despite its enormous importance.)

Happiness, in this account of the nature of human beings, transcends the 'duality' of joy and pleasure, and pain and suffering. It is 'beyond' these two aspects because, unlike these, it is not a transient state of affairs. In fact, one could even put it in this way: *happiness requires the ability to go-about with transience and impermanence*. When human beings strive to be happy, surely, they are not striving to experience a momentary and transient state of affairs; they want something that is 'permanent' (with respect to the life-span of an organism, of course). In this respect too is the happiness that all human beings strive for is beyond the duality of pain and suffering on the one hand and joy and pleasure on the other. From this it follows that happiness, as the Indian traditions look at the issue, stands (relatively) independent of the issue of alleviating human suffering. One cannot alleviate human pain and suffering without sacrificing the ability to enjoy and take pleasure. The only thing one can do is to learn to go-about with both.

However, it is important to note that acquiring this ability does not reduce either the pain or the suffering. There is no reason why the Olympic swimmer had to lose his abilities in an accident anymore than there is a reason why the young mother lost her baby to cancer. Therefore, no alleviation of pain or suffering is possible. The only thing

that one can teach them is the ability to bear this pain. The stories of the Buddha and the Christ with respect to death provide a beautiful contrast in this matter.

All organisms, not merely human ones, try to avoid pain and suffering and seek joy and pleasure. From here on, one can pursue two paths: the one wants to reduce pain and suffering, and maximize joy and pleasure; the other advocates their 'transcendence'. The one believes that these two are relatively independent of each other. The other denies such independence and claims that they are two faces of the same coin.

If you take one path, which is also the path that Christianity stipulates, you can formulate the question: does the concern to alleviate pain and suffering form an adequate basis for an inter-religious dialogue? If you take the other path, the path that the Indian traditions stipulate, you formulate another answer: except searching for and finding happiness on earth, which all of us seek, there is no other remedy for pain and suffering. Consequently, this human search is the only adequate basis for an inter-religious dialogue. In the absence of such a positive end, merely trying to reduce pain and suffering is to impair the human capacities for joy and pleasure. That is, such an attempt would end up making us *less human*. What appears as a genuinely human concern, when you look at it from the western point of view, that is, our attempt to reduce pain and suffering of fellow-human beings, becomes its opposite when perceived from within the framework of the Indian traditions: *it becomes inhuman*. A 'genuinely' human concern for our fellow-human beings requires that we create conditions where each and every one of us can seek and find happiness on earth.

VII

At the beginning of this lecture, I made a Christian and an Aristotelian enter into a discussion and suggested that the cogent argument of the Christian was merely one way of being reasonable and that the question about reduction and pain and suffering loaded the dice in favor of the Christian. Let us now review the arguments in the light of what I have said so far.

Because there is a disagreement about the nature of happiness, one could look for a minimal common denominator between the pagan and the Christian. One could suggest that alleviation of human pain and suffering constitutes the minimal agreement between them. However, as we have seen, that is not the case, if you look at it from the point of view of the Indian traditions. They are saying something quite different.

Happiness as the 'end' or *telos* of humankind *cannot be conceived normatively*. Any normative conceptualization either ignores the factual diversity in what 'happiness' means to people (different people conceive 'happiness' differently) or claims that only some specific conception of happiness ('the union with God', say) is the true end and meaning of human life. The pagan traditions of India claim that this disagreement about happiness and the diversity of opinions about what happiness is, are typical of the *condition humaine*. It is neither necessary nor possible to seek consensus about this end: we merely notice divergences and differences, and take this diversity as our starting point. However, in their attempts to strive for what they consider happiness is, human beings are impeded by certain things. Our task, therefore, is to think about and help remove these impediments. Consequently, an inter-religious dialogue must begin with a discussion about the common impediments to our search for happiness. There will always be discussions and disagreements about what happiness is; but we can successfully identify those things that prevent us from being happy.

In framing the question this way, notice what the pagan has done. He sees the specification of the *telos* of humankind by Christianity as a *human result*. He suggests that it is not proper to ask questions about the 'true' or 'proper' end of humankind. To take the alleviation of pain and suffering as a starting point is to begin with the assumption that 'perfect' happiness is not realizable on earth. Not only that. He furthermore believes that one cannot alleviate pain and suffering without rendering us less than human. He claims that people disagree about what happiness is and that, therefore, our task consists of reflecting upon the impediments in such a human search.

An inter-religious dialogue framed in the above way loads the dice in favor of the pagan; framing it in terms of alleviation of pain and suffering loads the dice in favor

of the Christian. What should we then do? Well, why not begin both kinds of dialogue simultaneously and see which makes a faster progress? Why not, on that basis, continue one or both of the dialogues?

Conclusion

So, it appears to me, there are two broad ways of talking about happiness. One way is to retain the image of man as a creature with infinitely many desires and try and graft happiness on to this picture. Then, I do not see any way forward other than a restriction of these desires and the practice of asceticism. Then, you are coupling the western image of human beings with the religion that created the western culture, namely, Christianity. The second way is to change the image and thinking about human beings: in that case, we need not fight Desire or even restrict it but merely learn to go-about with it. These two ways make use of two different theories about human beings that explain the limitless nature of our desires.

One theory blames it on human nature. It tells us that this human nature will neither make us happy nor 'deliver us from evil'. We need Gurus, priests or experts, to tell us what 'true happiness is', and that we have to be ascetic and control our desires.

The other theory tells us that each of us can be happy, if only we learn about the nature of impediments that hinder our search. Truth or knowledge liberates, and this can be learnt and taught. The Buddha or Shankara, for instance, claim to teach us knowledge the way scientists teach us about Nature. This knowledge will also help develop the ability to go-about with Desire.

Two cultures. Two stories about human beings. Two ways of marrying religion with human happiness. I do not ask you to choose between them: but, please, think about both. I am painfully aware that this picture is crude but, I assure you, it is not false.