

Applying Bio-method for Integrating Practical Mysticism into Philosophical Counseling

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Abstract

A congregational definition of mysticism given by mystics from different walks of life, over the centuries, is that it is a process of making Man's life not just sublime but divine. Though the realization at such an extent is ineffable, saints and mystic philosophers, in their highest state of consciousness, cascaded such experiences into their writings. The current author has attempted to scrutinize the writings of selected modern mystics like Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, and Professor R. D. Ranade, which exhibit how such a superlative doctrine can be enacted into everyday lives. These modern thinkers experienced existential disconcertment, cataclysmic incidents like wars and pandemics, incurable diseases, and dilemmas of mind, but assessed them as the incentives of spiritual life and laid out optimistic ways to live in an accomplished manner. Mysticism is also a 'philosophy of optimism' that reminds all workaday people like us what we hold in our capacities irrespective of our circumstances. What others do influence our thoughts and inspire us to act. Therefore, the Bio-method, which includes narration, discussion, and contemplation of biographical literature like life events, diaries, letters, and reminiscences written by and of such mystics will help those who seek peace, stability, happiness, and a balanced relationship with themselves. This method will be best advisable in dealing with spirituality, religion, existence, identity, morality, and mental disturbances.

Keywords: *Practical Mysticism, Existential predicaments, Optimism, Biographical Literature*

Introduction

Since the focus of this conference is Philosophical Counseling through Indian Philosophy, talking about India and not talking about spirituality will not be a fair idea. The land produced numerous spiritual giants, who acknowledged, experienced, and transformed into 'that' which represents 'Tattva' in 'Tattvajñāna' and 'Darshan' in 'Darshan Shastra,' and some spiritual-super-giants who went a step ahead and rationalized this realization as Mysticism. These writings are not poetic fancies or play of words but an expression of 'that attitude of mind which involves a direct, immediate, first-hand, intuitive apprehension of God', which defines Mysticism according to Prof. R. D. Ranade. Here we will consider these leaders of

spirituality, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, and Prof. R. D. Ranade, for the present work.

Ramakrishna who was initially known as an ordinary priest at the Dakshineswar Temple in Kolkata, from his early days, showed extraordinary devotion, and his deepest desire to realize his true nature made him an illuminated face of spirituality in India. The guileless personality without any word for self-praise spread the knowledge of the spirit he gained from divine experiences and the people with different educational, professional and cultural background became Ramakrishna's ardent followers. A brilliant student of Philosophy who questioned every possible scholar of Philosophy and Religion he met on the existence of God, encountered Ramakrishna Paramhansa one day and transformed completely.

Later, this philosopher-mystic and leader Swami Vivekananda (always called himself as Ramakrishna's slave), preached what he learned from his teacher, and reintroduced the principles of Vedanta and Yoga, devotion, surrender, and faith in God, in a practical way to the modern world of the East and the West. Their contemporary, Ramchandra Dattatray Ranade, a boy from a remote place in South India, with a scientific attitude from his childhood days began with a hypothesis, experimented and then verified his philosophy of Rational Mysticism to quench the thirst of intellectuals and critics. Devoutly called as Gurudev by his followers, Prof. Ranade led the University of Allahabad as the department head of Philosophy and later as the Vice-Chancellor. His writings are the manifestations of his spiritual activism that shows his urge for raising the thinking humanity, into the divine kingdom of Ends.¹

These modern saints wandered intoxicatedly in the realm of divinity, the source of all the knowledge, and expounded that in a simple language to the mundane people like us who have often asked questions like, 'Why me?' Such inquiries and intriguing discussions on different attributes of man's life are not new to the Hindu culture with a rich tradition of *Guru-shishya*. Today, the process of philosophical counseling shows a mirror to the seeker to perceive himself fully. A *Guru* performs the same function for his disciple. Therefore, we will look up to these global teachers, *Jagatgurus* like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Gurudev Ranade, and try to understand ourselves better at the present instance.

In 1896, Swami Vivekananda delivered two lectures in New York. Therein what he conveyed is still relevant even after 125 years. "Today man requires one more adjustment on the spiritual

plane...today when a man is likely to forget his divine nature, through his growing dependence on the matter, and is likely to be reduced to a money-making machine (working from home these days) an adjustment is necessary; the voice has spoken and the power is coming to drive away the clouds of gathering materialism."²

We all live in such an advanced world today, in terms of technology, sciences, social media platforms, and suchlike. The self-help book sales and subscriptions to the channels and pages related to spirituality on social media are increasing after the outbreak of covid. A loss of dear ones, unemployment, family conflicts due to Lockdown, unexpected heartbreaks, dissatisfying results after long and hard works, societal problems, mental rambling, and an unfulfilled search for peace have become more real problems than any other physical illnesses, rather they are reciprocal at times. Then we are caught up in confusion, regrets, depression, discouragements, and helplessness. Prof. Ranade argued that such feelings prompt a man to think of the cause that brings such disconcertment and his limitations to control. And if such a person is already willingly seeking spiritual ideal these conditions become the incentives that move him rightly in the direction of God.

Practical Mysticism Mysticism and Ineffability

Mysticism is often considered as an ineffable and indescribable phenomenon. Prof. Ranade calls it the silent enjoyment of God. When the man reaches his highest capacity, there is an accompaniment of the highest kind of joy and words go in vain. Then how can such an indescribable phenomenon come with a title of Philosophy and further how can this be

¹Ranade, R. D., *Mysticism in Maharashtra*(Poona, 1933),pg. 494.

²Vivekananda, S., *My Master*(Kolkata: Advait Ashrama, 2019), pg. 5-6.

brought into the vocation of counseling?? Though the realization at such an extent is ineffable, saints and mystic philosophers, in their highest state of consciousness and intuition cascaded such experiences into their writings. And the universality in their mystical expressions makes this phenomenon a rationally valid philosophy. Therefore, let us proceed further with the words of Ranade, for a mystic 'his supreme business is to bring about peace and harmony in the society, the state, and the world at large.'³

The Bio-Method

*"Let us go in the wake of those who went ahead of us, for they have been wiser than us"*⁴

While reading the doctrines of detachment and staying unaffected in worldly affairs, the present author always wondered, how such a detached person would live in this world and implement the teachings of Bhagavadgita or Stoics, until read an incident that happened with Lok. Tilak. On his 60th Birthday, when his relatives gathered for the celebration, Tilak received a summons from the Bombay High Court. Everyone got disheartened with this news, but Tilak exclaimed, 'So the government too sent me a present!' Now, the author would like to leave this part open for interpretation.

The mystic philosophers considered for this work, talk abundantly about the devotion towards God, surrendering to their masters and spiritual experiences. The idea of mysticism that Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Ranade talked about focuses on man's innate nature. The concepts from their books may be a little hard to absorb for ordinary people. But what they wrote, lived,

conversed, experienced, practiced, and preached is nothing but their living philosophy, indeed practical mysticism. Biographical stories or *Charittrakatha*, letters, diaries are direct reflections of one's mind. The core philosophies can be grasped better by referring to such supporting materials. And who does not like listening to stories? In our opinion, what others did influence our thoughts and actions at times. Therefore, in the Counselor-Counselee conversation, the Bio-method, which includes narration, discussion, and contemplation of biographical literature like life events, diaries, letters, and reminiscences written by and of such mystics will help those who seek peace, stability, happiness, and a balanced relationship with themselves. Self-realization, spiritual experiences, meditation, dhyana occur at progressive stages and need a good bent of temperament, but this process starts with an awareness that imposes scrutiny of human conditions, mind, conduct, and identity.

For ordinary and worldly people like us, a little deviation is enough that encourages us to introspect. The stories of these spiritual personalities have answers for those who love the idea of God. There is more for those who wish to observe and understand the nature of their condition, suffering, and problems. In his work 'Real Worship' Vivekananda says that 'the miseries of the world cannot be cured by physical help only. Until man's nature changes, these physical needs will always arise...Let man have light, let them be pure and spiritually strong, and then alone will misery cease in the world, not before.'⁵Their stories are like a double-edged sword that inspires agnostics and aspirants both.

I owe my sincere thanks to Dr. Balaganapathi Devarkonda for suggesting the name 'Bio-Method'

³Ranade, R. D., *Philosophical and other essays* (Belgaum: ACPR, 2013), pg.120.

⁴Ranade, R. D., *Pathway to God in Marathi Literature* (Karnataka: SGRST, 2015), pg. 450.

⁵Vivekananda, S., *Real Worship* (Hyderabad: Vivekananda Institute of Human Excellence, 2002), pg.7.

Counselor as the Conveyer

In Philosophical Counseling, one distinctive feature is that the counselee, comes forward on his own to seek help and advice. People go for counseling to get rid of the turbulence that causes distress in their lives, in relationships, work, and life in general. There may be religious questions, fears, emotional conflicts, and other existential difficulties. The counselor analyses counselee's situation, from a third person's standpoint. Here, the counselor needs to help the counselee to execute the same attitude in dealing with his/her issues. If one can picture his circumstances carefully from a non-personal perspective, they may appear more manageable. We fail to do so because we directly connect to the characters in our stories, and, we define ourselves on these terms. It is a two-way process for the counselor and the counselee. The counselor bears a significant responsibility as a conveyer, especially while talking about such spiritual personalities. The counselor should attend to these thinkers persistently to be able to narrate their *Charitrikatha* and extract their teachings through these glimpses.

Vivekananda once wrote to one of his disciples, that, 'pass the cup that has satisfied your thirst.'⁶ Likewise, this work is a humble venture of the author to pass on these spiritual renderings by these two powerful personalities to the intelligent audience.

Illustrative References

On the 159th year of the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda on 12th January, talking about his master will certainly be a tribute offered to him. The author has selected some extracts from *Kathām*□*it*, (The Condensed Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna) the

collection of memories of Ramakrishna Paramhansa engaging with his disciples in candid conversations.

Why Problems of Life Occur

"It is so difficult to get rid of the sense of 'I' which puts a barrier in the way of Brahma-Jhana... You dream of a tiger. You tremble in every limb. Your heart throbs violently. You wake up to find that it was a mere dream. But all the same in your waking state, your heart goes on throbbing. That being the case, the sense of 'I' refusing to leave. What should be done? Why let it have one sole limiting adjunct (Upadhi). Let it stay on as the 'servant of the Lord.' But the 'I and mine' of the worldly men is ignorance leading away from God."⁷

"Work without attachment, however, is exceedingly difficult in this age. The fact is one must have true knowledge or love of God...hence it is our duty as imperfect men to find out, if possible, the shortest path that leads to God-Let us do the duty that is nearest to us. Let us bring down our work to a minimum by earnest prayer and Self-surrender."⁸

"Non-attachment is of many kinds, one kind of non-attachment springs from the acute pain, due to worldly misery. But the better kind arises from the consciousness that, all worldly blessings, though within one's reach are transitory and are not worth enjoying. Thus, having all, he has not anything,"⁹

A surgeon first anesthetizes the patient's body to numb its sensation and then makes the incision. Likewise, if we learn to numb our sensation of 'I', it might ease our pains too. Here Ramakrishna tells us that it is certainly not simple for a normal person to remove this 'I' because his mind is stuck there like a

⁶Vivekananda, S., *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*(Kolkata: Advait Ashrama,2019),pg.186.

⁷Gupta, M. N. *The Condensed Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 2002),pg.86.

⁸Ibid. pg. 174.

⁹Ibid. pg. 206.

magnet. Some people have problems with their family members, friends, and partners which sometimes lead to a toxic relationship. When they are constantly the subjects of the thoughts and emotions, the mental connection of that person with them is also strong. Ramakrishna points out this trait of mind to connect easily and advises us to connect it with God, a higher entity to escape from the prick and avoid weeping later. Taking the attention away from our circumstances is no easy deal, but surrender, faith, and devotion can support. He assures that yearnings and prayers coming from the helpless hearts are answered. Initially, these are the tools that help live unaffected or only 'little-affected'. *Ātmānāma Vivek* (discrimination) comes with this identification of virtues.

Non-attachment (*Vairagya*), patience (*Dheer*), discrimination (*Vivek*) are individual virtues that need to be cultivated with Spiritual virtues like introversion, the study of philosophy, and meditation on one's inner self as Ranade says.

The Highest Source of Strength

What are the ways to shift the mind? Saints tell us that listening along with contemplating will slowly improve your actions. Gurudev Ranade followed Shraavan, Manan, Chintan religiously wherever he stayed. He used to spend hours in meditation, apart from that, he used to engage in discussions of letters and notes of his spiritual teacher, songs of saints along with fellow devotees. – In one such seating at his house, he asked a *sadhaka* to sing a song of Saint Surdasa-*Suna re mann, nirbal ke balaram*. 'Unless we realize our absolute impotence before the majestic power of God, it may not be possible for God's grace to descend upon us. It is the grace of God which supersedes any other sources of strength

which man may fondly cling in his heart.'¹⁰The song narrates mythological and historical stories of the Liberation of Gajendra, Draupadi-Vastraharan. If we wish to talk of persistent faith in modern times, let us take a look at a recent one.

At the age of 23, Ranade developed brain tuberculoma, which has hardly any cure even today. When the treatment he was getting from the best doctors showed no signs of improvement, he sought the company of his master and devotees, with his unshakable devotion and meditation on the name of God, he slowly started gaining better health. The current writer does not promote any unwise practices and occultism here. These are not tales of irrationality and miracles. The man who studied and taught philosophy in the most rational way laid out this life lesson. The sole intention is to present the importance of spiritual virtues, practice of meditation, sheer faith, the power of the atmosphere in the company of devotees and how they can be helpful for a person.

Peace of Mind

"How difficult the ideal of calm tranquillity under all circumstances is, can be appreciated only by those who have tried to bring themselves to this ideal. It is a great mental asset to have the power of meeting opposites with the same mental attitude. As generally happens, we do feel flattered by compliments and sorry at epithets.... It is always best in the interest of mental peace to think at any particular moment, of the opposite experience to that which one is enjoying. Another method is to meet both the opposite experiences with a stern attitude at the particular moments. sternness has the power of softening rough experiences and of nullifying the intoxicating ones, for it must be admitted that in both kinds of

¹⁰Ranade, R.D., *Pathway to God in Hindi Literature* (Karnataka: SGRST, 1997), pg. 218.

experiences, the nerves are undergoing a peculiar strain which is far from bringing on the joy of tranquillity."¹¹(Reflections -25th July 1912)

With the note Prof. Ranade tells us that the mind needs to be trained, by choice, to think upstream at instances of both joy and sorrow. Along with this note, there are a couple of similar incidents where Prof. Ranade describes how one can balance his mind between two extreme emotions. We are often told to think of positive and happy moments when we face negative and unhappy circumstances in life, for example, a death of a close one. But it vanishes afterward. Just as we think of joyous moments in painful ones, the same process follows inversely if a person wishes abiding calmness. We can relate this with the concept of Sthitaprajñya that Bhagavadgita and western thinkers also encouraged. Mind-controlling is not a one or two-day activity, but a part of everyday living that a seeker can eventually learn to employ.

Scope and Limitations of this Method

Scope

- The concept of exploring mystical theories is close to Biblical Counseling.
- The narration of Charitrikathas, diaries, letters, and minor works of the thinkers under consideration, work as supporting tools the counselor can select for comprehension, depending upon the client.
- This method is most advisable in spiritual and religious concerns, lifestyle changes, mental disorders and suicidal issues (at a minor level), existential questions about the meaning of life and death, and interpersonal conflicts.
- Introducing practical mysticism to those who willingly want to improve themselves is a kind of

existential coaching and hence is a process-oriented counseling.

Limitations

- If the client is reluctant to the idea of spirituality, this method it will be challenging for the counselor to engage him in the concept of mysticism. A good counselor should present such content according to the temperament of the listener to soothe the conversion. Hence, the bio-method, separately, can be coupled with other concepts in Philosophy which can suit such clients.
- Discussing practical mysticism through this type of counseling will not be suitable for children below the age of 10. Also, it would not be applicable for patients suffering from chronic psychosomatic disorders, brain disorders like delusions, schizophrenia, alcohol and drug abuse which need clinical treatments. But it can be conducted parallel to psychological counseling and psychotherapy.

Conclusion

The pandemic has tested us to reinforce our thresholds to ease the turbulence in our thoughts and minds, to think of its root cause and contemplate on higher values to outpace unpleasant circumstances. The mystics we spoke about reached the highest ascent of God-realization, which they were able to identify as Self-realization through their dynamic experience in life. During their earthly sojourn, from different places and languages, such personalities continued to teach devotion, faith, and unaffected love for God that sailed them through the whirlpools in life. They all certainly have a unitary message to deliver for the awakening of the meeks. In the form of counseling, we can talk about such mystics and their lives in a narrative way that will rightly guide both

¹¹Ranade, R. D., *Reflections I, II & III*(Kolhapur: Tanush, 2014),pg. III-5.

parties on their journey of self-discovery. We need to connect our situations with their teachings to find answers for ourselves. It is high time for all of us to ask what we are longing for and are we looking for happiness, love, satisfaction, peace, and truth in the wrong places. When we are on the verge of establishing a new way of studying philosophy for ourselves and others in India, we recollect the words of Prof. Ranade, 'What a glorious prospect lies before India! I see India flinging away superstition, sloth, and intellectual inertia. I see her taking up the scientific spirit and the energy of Europe. I see her assimilating the excellences of both the East and the West, and rising the scale of modern nations preserving all the while the integrity and pristine purity of her spiritual self!'¹²

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¹²Ranade, R. D.,*Philosophical and other essays* (Belgaum: ACPR, 2013), pg.184.