THE ILLUSION OF IDENTITY (1)

By Gouranga P. Chattopadhyay

Introduction:

"A stiff breeze has sprung up with cloud covering the sky
Boatman, keep rowing the boat.
Heave, heave with all your might.

Do not search in the almanac for the appropriate date and time
Wondering with an unsettled mind, "Should I go or rather stay back".
Cross the sea of uncertainty anchored to your mind
Without anxiously looking outwards for support.

If Mahakal(2) gets engrossed in his cosmic dance
His unkempt hair tossing in the wind,
If creation tumbles in the storm that he raises
And waves crash upon waves,
Tune in to the rhythm casting hesitation aside
Singing the song of victory.

It's the sound of the chain rattling in the storm
And not the boat's frightened wail
This awesome bondage gets beyond tolerance
Which makes the boat roll so heavily.

Heave, heave with all your might."

(Free translation of Tagore, Bengali Year 1357.)

As most Indians know, it is hard to find an honest to goodness Bengali who has not internalised the poet, litterateur, educationist, composer of songs, artist and social thinker Rabindranath Tagore; also as a socio-analyst (Bain: 1997), I find delving into my memory to access Tagore's writings very useful. The present situation was no exception. Having decided to write this article, I found that my mind went blank every time I sat with my fingers poised over the computer keyboard.

It took me some time to realise that I was in the grip of a peculiar paradox. On the one hand I have come to accept, at least intellectually, that identity is an illusion. On the

2. The word *Mahakal* in the third stanza, like the word *Shiva,* is used as a metaphor for simultaneous acts of creation and destruction that takes place in the cosmos.

other hand in trying to articulate the thought I was experiencing acute identity crisis! After several futile attempts to get my thoughts together I sent an SOS email to Alastair Bain, whose prompt reply was to offer a prescription and a piece of advice. The former was to lubricate the brain with a powerful medicine, available off the shelf, preferred by Scotsmen, and the latter was to participate in a very Bengali group process known as *adda*, which I had described to him earlier.

While the medicine is easily available in the market, the advice could not be implemented forthwith. But the reference to something very Bengali sent my mind to Tagore and the song quoted above floated in. That helped.

Tagore wrote that song, as I understand it, after experiencing himself in multiple roles dealing with many uncertainties of life, some of which were felt as devastating and extremely anxiety provoking. The boat in this song is used as a metaphor for the process of being shackled to one's identity that prevents one from fulfilling one's potentiality. The third stanza clearly speaks about exploring one's inner world for mobilising internal resources rather than falling prey to destructive dependency. The last stanza is about discovering one's identity not as a bounded personal "object" but with the boundaryless cosmos.

As will be seen later, all these ideas in somewhat different form were present in my mind and once I could connect with those through the melody of one of Tagore's songs, I could begin to strum on the keyboard.

In this short essay I wish to explore the following hypothesis : *"Identity is an illusion that throws up the paradox of both helping the creation and development of insights into the interdependencies of self, work, family, community and nationality as well as in obstructing that very process."*

In three of my publications (Chattopadhyay: 1997, forthcoming 1998 & 1998a) I have tried to make the point that while the cosmos is indeed boundaryless, we experience all manner of boundaries because of our limited perceptual ability. It should, however, be also noted that the other side of the perceptual coin is that it is too strong. I shall discuss the latter idea later on. I have utilised diverse sources of discipline and knowledge in those publications to establish the above mentioned ideas. Those sources are, first, experiential learning based theories and concepts of group relations that establish the absence of any "natural" individual psychic and group boundaries. These notions are underpinned by many psychoanalytic theories developed on the basis of clinical experiences(1).

Secondly, there are the experiment based theories of quantum mechanics that also point towards a boundaryless cosmos in which elementary particles(2) keep moving endlessly and we "see" boundaries as we perceive patterns in the movement. (As I

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1. This process of underpinning has taken place largely due to the pioneering work of Wilfred Bion. For a comprehensive bibliography of Bion's work see Symington and Symington (1996).

2. These "elementary particles", according to that science, may not be particles, but waves, or perhaps particles and waves simultaneously, that cannot be said to exist, but only have the tendency to exist! For a layman's introduction to quantum mechanics see Zukav (1982).

understand it, this perception of patterns is somewhat like counting waves in the sea and considering the foaming breakers as individual units, each with its own identity!) We perceive the patterns rather than the movement because of our perceptual limitation. However, at the same time emotions get strongly associated with whatever we perceive. This leads to a passive acceptance of the limitation rather than generating the desire to develop the ability to go beyond the present limits. One evidence of this is the use of the term ESP or Extra Sensory Perception. If some people demonstrate that their perceptual capacity is beyond the accepted limits, that capacity is not admitted as perceptual or sensory capacity of a higher order, but as "extra-sensory". This is one of the reasons that make human perceptual ability both limited and too strong at the same time.

Thirdly, there are the ancient Sanskrit treatises known as the *Upanishads,* and the *Mandukya Upanishad* (Nikhilananda : 1987) in particular, that were composed many millennia ago on the basis of concepts built on experiential learning. Many of those treatises clearly state the idea of a boundaryless cosmos in which human beings are caught up in the illusion (*maya*) of boundaries. Lastly, there is the *Tantra* philosophy, which is also largely based on experiential learning, that laid the foundation for the methodology known as *Yoga*. Notwithstanding the common notion that *yoga* basically helps in developing healthy body and mind (which are byproducts of practising some forms of *yoga*), actually the underlying objective of both Patanjali's eightfold *yoga* system (Satyananda : 1989), only parts of which most *yoga* teachers follow, and the much earlier system known as *Rajyoga* (*kundaliniyoga, kryiayoga, layayoga* etc.) referred to in the *Bhagavat Geeta* by Sri Krishna (Chattopadhyay : 1997), is to experience the state of boundarylessness. This experience takes place when the energy flow perceived as the body and the mind gets so regulated that one realises the nature of cosmic boundarylessness and one's identity with it. Like any other experiential learning and one's access to the consequent insights (which, for eg, takes place in group relations working conferences), this phenomena also cannot be expressed in a language that is easily understood by those who have not had the experience.

If the cosmos is indeed boundaryless and all perceived boundaries are the product of human limited (and too strong at the same time) perceptual ability, one's identity with all its connotation of a bounded entity has also to be illusion.

Identity - A Concept or an Experience ? :

Before dealing with the foregoing idea at some length I shall spend some time here to examine one of the well known treatments of identity by a psychoanalyst in order to highlight some aspects of the nature of this illusion. It is Erikson's (1968) theory of identity formation. He writes in the Preface of that much cited work on identity the

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following : ".... I hasten to declare that I will not offer a definitive explanation of it (identity) in this book. The more one writes about this subject, the more the word becomes a term for something as unfathomable as it is all-pervasive. One can only explore it by establishing its indispensability in various contexts."(P.9). Later in the same book, in the chapter entitled "The Epigenetic Cycle", Erikson seeks to establish that from birth to the end of adolescence individuals move towards forming one's identity through dealing with their transactions with the environment, largely unconsciously. He envisages eight stages in a person's life, adolescence being the fourth stage.

At every stage individuals go through the unconscious struggle between positive and negative processes or assumptions about one's relatedness with the environment and the internal "objects". Each stage has its impact on the following, if not on all the future stages. Even after one's identity is formed, the process continues till one dies. As a result though Erikson mentions that "identity" is formed at the end of adolescence, his treatment of the psychic process clearly shows that for all practical purposes identity for individuals is a lifelong process of trying to establish, albeit largely unconsciously, a sense of continuity and integrity in order to cope with the uncertainties and vicissitudes of life. Erikson maintains that the extent to which the individual succeeds in establishing this unconscious sense of continuity and integrity that one is left with enough energy to be creative and feel the joy of being alive. From this "definition" identity seems to be the process that I have mentioned earlier, a process that in illusion is sought to be experienced as a product with a firm boundary around it that needs to be adjusted at the margins from time to time (1). If one's experience at any time points the finger towards hollowness of the product, that experience is usually termed as an identity crisis.

Perhaps no one will ever be able to give a general definition of identity because it is a process in which one engages in largely beyond one's consciousness. It is the process of defining oneself vis-a-vis what one experiences as one's environment, however narrow or far flung it may be. This definition, however, is not of something that unequivocally belongs to the individual. This definition, on the other hand, is of most things that the environment offers to or thrusts on the individual, who takes in those things partly consciously (like one's name) and largely unconsciously (for eg the feelings and some assumptions associated with one's name that are acted out from time to time). One or more of these definitions seem to come to the fore at particular points of time depending on one's experience at that time; one's actions then follow from that or those definitions. Thus, at a particular point of time one could be acting from one's conscious definition of a successful and qualified professional while at the very next moment one may swing to the definition of oneself as a minority community member and an underdog if the first definition based on certain past experiences derived from one's interactions with the environment are not confirmed, or indeed not valued, by the environment in another context.

I shall endeavour to illustrate the basis of the hypothesis stated towards the beginning of this article by (a) recording vignettes from three different small study groups in

which I participated as consultant during 1997 and (b) by recounting some other experiences.

In the first study group, at a particular point in time I drew attention of the group to the process of avoidance of examining how the members were dealing with the differences in the group.

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(1) This may well be treated as an example of the rival notions of 'the flux of things' and permanence of things discussed by Whitehead (1978, P. 208-215) while dealing with the concept of 'process'.

There were quite a few differences among the members. While seven members were part time students who pursued different professions for earning their living, one member was a full time academic with the responsibility of managing the academic programme in which the group of seven had registered. Secondly, the jobs of some of the students were secure while others were unsure about continuing in the same job. Their religious affiliations varied from Judaism to different Christian denominations. Their age group too varied. However, no sooner had I made the comment than a member said that it did not matter to them if I were a black man just as it did not matter to her the fact that she was the only Jew in the group. She added that my statement was experienced by her as one that was full of pain. The group's assumption, as reflected in her statement, seemed to be that (a) the only differences present in the group were in terms of religion and skin colour, ie. that I was black while all the members were white, and (b) that the religious difference was not associated with feelings while as a black person I felt great pain because whites considered blacks as inferior. After this although one member tried to work with this issue by pointing out that the group sought to push the burden of differences on to me as the consultant, they veered away to other issues. My second intervention in the form of a hypothesis was that the pain felt in the group regarding the differences present among the members in terms of their respective identities was projected on me and was buried under "safer" issues. Thus, in assuming that anyone whose primary identity (in the mind of the members) was that of a black person must necessarily feel a lot of pain because blacks are inferior to whites, the members came together as whites to defend against their individual differences that created problems around establishing interdependency among themselves for pursuing the academic programme. The evidence of at least some of those problems were known to all of them because related issues had been voiced quite often in another forum where there was little scope of working with those.

In yet another study group consisting of several men and women who were exploring issues arising out of there being lay Catholics and Catholic priests in the membership, when I pointed out that they were ignoring the issues arising out of the consultant (myself) being a "heathen" and a black person, I was firmly told that I could not be considered as a Black since in Australia only the Aborigines were black! In other words the membership was stating that they could not experience me as a dependable consultant if they had to acknowledge my skin colour because there were problems associated with the identity of white Australians in relation to people known as blacks. This led to some explorations which resulted in, among other insights, one

about how the identities of "laity" and "priest" come in the way of getting in touch with some of the experiences of the personhood of those role holders.

Both the vignettes quoted above point towards identity and its associated feelings coming in the way of working through issues that interfere with acknowledging interdependency between various facets of one's life. The second vignette further demonstrates how the interdependencies could be explored once people are able to see through the illusion of a particular aspect of the process of identity and identification.

In a more recent study group a member and I were referred to as belonging to races that were different from that of the other members. What I pointed out then was that since "race" has the connotation of inherited genetic traits, and therefore unchangeable, unconsciously what the group was stating was that differences based on identity could not be managed because it was not possible to transcend one's notion of identity. The group was fantasising as behavioural traits people's nationality and skin colour. This intervention seemed to immediately release energy for several group members who found the courage to explore some of the group issues that were so far being left alone as too explosive to handle.

The next example comes from one of my consulting projects. This was with a company that manufactures and markets transformers.

Manufacturing transformers is usually a matter of one off process and this company was no exception. It had three discrete groups known as sections in which all employees from supervisors upwards were qualified engineers. The marketing section competed for tenders. Once a tender was won, they drew up the contract. This contract not only stipulated the technical details and the price, it also included a penalty clause. This clause stipulated the date on which the product would be ready for trial run in the presence of the customer's representative and, in case of delays, how much each extra day will cost the company as penalty. The penalty is heavy as transformers are costly products and the customer usually advances a considerable amount of money. The marketing section therefore has to be careful about the costs while bidding for the tender as well as while negotiating the penalty clause. At the same time they can hardly afford to reject any customer because one sale less than projected for the year can put the company in the red. This makes the marketing operation a high anxiety process.

Once the contract is sealed, the design section gets busy. The pressure on them is not only of time but also of preparing a design that both meets with the customer demand as also guarantees perfection because even a minor design fault could end up in huge after sales service and repair cost.

By the time the design reaches the shopfloor, the pressure on the production section to complete the job on time, paying meticulous attention to the blue print, is extremely high. This is compounded by the anxiety of the top management who virtually breathe down their neck.

By the time the design section passes on their blue print to the shopfloor, the marketing section mostly end up drawing the next transformer contract.

The throughput process, starting from bidding for a tender to a successful trial run of the finished product, thus keeps all the employees under pressure of time and a demand for perfection. This had resulted in virtual loss of one of the identity boundaries of all the three sections. This was the identity of working for the company as an institution. That identity seemed to be experienced only by the top management while the employees in each of the three sections identified themselves only with the process that they were directly engaging with. This further led to each section holding a kind of sub-identity for themselves and the other two sections. The result was that while they engaged with the primary task of each section, the very important ancillary task of inter-section collaboration got "corrupted" (Chapman : 1996) through their experience of hatred for the year round pressure. The hatred was projected on the other two sections. Thus, the marketing section identified themselves as saviours but for whom there would be no transformers to design and produce; the design section identified themselves as the brain behind the throughput process and the production section identified themselves as the real doers. Simultaneously, in the minds of the other two sections the marketing section was some kind of an extension of the customers; this almost put them outside the boundary of the company as an institution in the mind. The design section was considered by the other two sections as perfectionists who lived in an ivory tower and only cared for producing "masterpieces" rather than designs for transformers that would work. This image put the design section, in fantasy, somewhere floating above the institutional boundary. The production section was fantasised as the blue-eyed boys of top management since the latter could be actually seen visiting the shopfloor quite frequently (which they did out of their anxiety).

The consulting project had two primary tasks. One was to surface the sub-identities of both kinds with their associated feelings - the sub-identity of one's own section and those of the other two. The second primary task was to examine the nature of "evidence" on which those sub-identities were based.

At the end of the project when the three sections began to work on their interdependencies, the top management too could deal with their anxiety as the institutional identity came to the fore for most employees.

The three vignettes and the example of the consulting project, I hope, illustrate the point that identity as a process is internalising one's external environment through various filters of feelings and emotions. This is done partly consciously and partly unconsciously. While this provides one with a baseline to operate from, it also makes it difficult to leave the base to explore one's experiences assumed as painful and anxiety provoking that destroy interdependencies in various degrees. Miller (1993, unpublished) very ably shows these dynamics of identity at the macro-level related to the impact of globalisation of the politico-economic processes. The examples given

above further illustrate how exploration of one's negative experiences in group settings release energy for people to establish meaningful interdependencies for engaging with tasks by transcending the identities.

Identity as a glue in the mind (?!) :

So far I have dealt with issues of identity arising in intra-group and inter-group interactions. Each individual, however, is member of multiple groups, yet in order to have a sense of continuity with one's past and of integrity, one feels the pressure to highlight for oneself some selected aspects of one's identity at given points of time depending on what one is experiencing at the time.

For example, one of the important aspects of one's identity is one's name. Unless one explores how one has unconsciously interpreted one's name and the feelings that have become associated with the interpretation, one is unlikely to have much clue about the impact of those on oneself in terms of one's relatedness to one's self as well as with others in various configurations. Eric Berne (1973) had long ago pointed out, on the basis of his clinical work, that a large number of people either try, unconsciously, to live up to the cultural or literal meaning of their names or rebel against the meaning. One of his examples, I recall, is that of Lord Brain, which has resulted in several generations of neurologists and neurosurgeons. Following his logic, I offer rather frivolously, the hypothesis that Frank Slaughter, the well known author of novels about surgeons and crisis in operation theatres had unconsciously decided to live up to his meaning of his name after giving up the career of a surgeon. His novels frankly talk about some of the "slaughters" that take place in the name of surgery! Then, as Alastair Bain recently pointed out to me (personal communication), it had to be a man called Seed who announced that he was ready to clone human beings.

In my own case, my first name was chosen by my grandmothers on both sides, after the name of a 15th Century Bengali saint who founded the *Vaishnava* religion. This religion extols universal love, based on the saint's interpretation of the teachings of Sri Krishna, who is believed to have been an incarnation of the deity *Vishnu*. My guess is that the old ladies chose this name for me in their attempt to do something about my father's influence as an out and out Newtonian rationalist who openly confessed of his contempt towards adherence to religious rituals of any kind. Looking back at my life, I recall that from around my early teens I professed myself to be an atheist, perhaps to score one-up-manship over my father, who objected to being labelled as an atheist. However, I was also rebelling against what my name signifies in Bengal, if not in many other areas of India. Many years later I started describing myself as an agnostic when I concluded that atheism was as much of obscurantism as religion was. Even later I began to experience something that transcends almost every kind of boundary that human beings are familiar with. I call this "something" *spirituality* for want of any other word and currently I do believe (which is not to claim that I successfully practice that value all the time) that the only value in life is love, which is something about giving without any expectation of return. However, I also wonder how much of it is my experienced reality and how much of it is the result of my

coming full circle back quite unconsciously, based on my name as an important aspect of my identity. However, and that is the point of sharing one of the issues of my identity here, what the above indicates is a process of exploring the nature of "stuckness" of identity in order to go beyond it. I shall come back to this matter of exploration of one's identity towards the end of the article.

Identity is a "reality" for every one of us and therefore one ought to try to find answers to the problems that this reality creates for us as well as the opportunities that it offers. It is a reality as a concept or a general notion. For example, I applied for my visa renewal in Australia when the Swinburne University extended my contract because of my identity as an Indian citizen. However, I did not present this paper at the conference as an Indian, but as a member of the Australian Institute of Socio-Analysis (AISA). Before going to the conference I knew the date and time when I was expected to present this paper because the conference schedule identified me by my name. That is all. Each of these identities, appropriately handled, creates opportunities and avoids problems. *This makes "identity" a tool for engaging with normative tasks. But when value is attached to that tool beyond its relevance in terms of engaging with normative tasks problems start surfacing. Identity as an illusory phenomena and phenomenal task then seem to go hand in hand.*(1).

In the following pages I shall try to explore another aspect of my identity and place before you my experience of working through the problems caused by that aspect of my identity.

I decided to choose for this purpose the identity of a black person. The reason for this choice is twofold. At the time of preparing this article I had assumed that it would be presented before an audience composed entirely of non-blacks so that it would provide the audience with an opportunity to explore the issue of identity as white persons. Secondly, I think that this may be an important issue for AISA as an institution. I tried earlier to draw the attention of AISA members and associate members to this issue in my letter published in the *AISA News* (Summer 1997), the issue of there being only two non-white members of AISA and that both are non-Australians, while there are many non-whites who are Australians, but have no transactions with AISA. I have no idea of what impact that letter had, or if indeed it made any impact, because so far no one has even mentioned that letter to me.

Black man or black person was not an aspect of my identity till as late as the early 'seventies, although I knew that Indians are black in the eyes of the British. I grew up in British India hating the British Imperialists. My father, among other things, was a Gandhian freedom fighter who took pains to point out that it was alright to fight the oppressor and even to hate the oppressor, but that one should not confuse the imperialists with all the common people of U.K. I became a political worker as early as at the age of eleven. I knew that the British referred to the Indians as *kala admi*, which literally means "black people". However, this knowledge did not give me any feeling of inferiority because I experienced it as the expression of vanity on the part of a brutal conqueror. My response to it was referring to the British as "red monkey",

not only behind their backs but also at every possible opportunity shouting the words at passing white people in cars. (They never walked the streets, at least in Calcutta, but did their walking in their homes and in exclusive clubs.) This term, "red monkey", was in fact quite popular in Bengal, which was a hot bed of anti-British struggle.

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(1). The example of "time" may be useful to get a purchase on the idea that "identity" be best *understood* simultaneously as an illusion and as a tool for getting on with day to day living (see also Krishnamurti and Bohm : 1986 in this context). I shall introduce the example of "time" through a dream that Alastair Bain had some years ago and shared its content with some of us. In the dream he received the message that "All will be made clear on the 10th March". He recalled the dream later and realised that since he had left the United States by air on the 9th March and arrived in Australia on the following day, which was 11th March in Australia, March 10 never took place in his life in that particular year since he had crossed the "time zone" in a single day. This incident clearly points towards both "space" and "time" as illusions that have been "made" into "realities" through imposing boundaries in the mind by us, humans, to "manage" our experience. However, through this kind of management of experience by inventing tools like time and space, and then inventing technologies of different kinds of measurements, we end up defending ourselves from experiencing the ultimate reality, which is Bion's (1970) O, and the nature of illusion (*maya*) that we seek to deny. Yet, as the example of the dream and what followed shows, the nature of the illusion much of the time stares us in the face. Perhaps the problem also lies there. We are so bored with revelations that we ignore them! Alastair Bain's dream-voice did not mention the date of his journey from Australia to the United States during which he must have encountered the nature of the illusion by living through the same date during two successive days. A fortyeight hour long revelation is perhaps too boringly long to even dream about!

My first visit to U.K was in the early 'sixties. During that visit I spent most of my time in Wales. There not only did I not experience myself as a Blackman, but in fact I came in touch with some Welsh nationalists and there was an immediate mutual identification as anti-English people. Without being conscious of it, I had slipped into hating the English in general in order to feel comfortable with my identity as an anti-British-imperialist. My next visit to the United Kingdom in the early 'seventies was different. I was located in Manchester where very soon I discovered that, for eg, in public transports the seat beside me remained vacant till no other seats were available. My wife experienced slights in some shops. Our two older children, however, felt the discrimination more strongly. My identity as a black man became filled with hatred beyond my immediate awareness for all white people. The depth of my hatred shocked me when I participated in an encounter group in London. An English participant who had been to India, in fact to Calcutta as a visiting professor, told me there that I spat out the word "Whites" with as much venom as some of his acquaintances spat out the word "Blacks". I began to see that my identity as a black man had so profoundly troubled me that it became associated with a strong desire to show the "whites" in any and every situation that they deserved my contempt. The shock was such that I lost my voice for three days.

I followed up this experience, in rather quick succession, by participating in a Group Relations (Leicester) Conference and then going for personal analysis (as soon as I could afford it).

Gradually I began to understand a mutual process of destruction of existing and potential interdependency in my life, based on identity. My identity as a Chattopadhyay of a particular family meant for many of my fellow countrymen, which included colleagues at my workplace, some neighbours as also others who know the family, keeping some distance. My offer of friendship was at times perceived as trying to patronise and my difficulty in relating across certain boundaries was interpreted as being snooty. My identity as a Bengali came in the way of relating to both Bengalis and non-Bengalis in different situations. As a Bengali-Indian I had other kinds of problems during my visit to Dhaka (the capital of Bangladesh) in the role of an organisational consultant. First, by the time I disembarked from the Bangla Biman (Bangladesh airlines) aircraft, I had lost the sense of going to a different country as not only the cabin crew spoke in Bengali, all advertisements and notices in Dhaka airport were written in Bengali. As a result I forgot to declare Indian currency that I was carrying, which was a criminal offence. (Fortunately I realised my folly soon after and my explanation was accepted when I went back to the immigration desk to fill up the appropriate form.) Then, while in Dhaka, at least one Muslim school friend informed me that he would attend the old school pals get together being organised by a few others provided I accepted the fact that he was anti-Indian! What I made of all these experiences was that it was my responsibility to work out what cultural cues I was communicating in different contexts through acting out bits and pieces of my identity and how I was dealing with, as a recipient, projective identification. Further, on the basis of my understanding of my behaviour, I must try to alter the pattern appropriately.

It is, however, as I believe most people realise it too, one thing to recognise what is required and another to put it to practice when it comes to one's responses under pressure.

The answer to this problem for me began to emerge as I became interested in three apparently different things in the early 'eighties. One was my work on an ancient Sanskrit treatise, the *Bhagavat Geeta.* This treatise has been interpreted by many scholars, both Indian and European, as a religious text. But my view is that they have largely succeeded in enshrouding in clouds of obscurantism the lessons that could be learnt from this treatise in the contemporary world. In order to interpret this treatise as a guide to managing critical decisions I began to read some of the even older treatises known as the *Upanishads.* Simultaneously I developed an interest in quantum mechanics. I discovered that both came to the same conclusion, the former based on experiential learning and the latter based on laboratory experiments. The conclusion is that the cosmos is boundaryless and that all boundaries that we seem to experience are illusions created through the limited perceptual capacity of human beings. This threw a new light on Jung's (1953) statement : "The dream is like a hidden door in the innermost and most secret recess of the soul, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness may extend. For all ego-consciousness is isolated : it separates and discriminates, knows only particulars, and sees only what

can be related to the ego. Its essence is limitation, though it reaches to the furthest nebulae among the stars."

Based on the examples given so far and the discussion that has followed, "identity" may now be described as some kind of a fantasised fluid boundary around one's self that each of us perceive on the basis of our on going personal experience. The attempt, therefore, to find a coherent identity is one of trying to create an *illusion* for oneself. It is perhaps something like what Aidani (1995, P.7) expresses in one of his poems (*Something Just Uttered)*:

"Like a passer-by I sing the song
 in the city of fragmented questions
 for the search of the split self
 so that I could belong."

The corollary to this realisation seems to be to transcend one's identity and to do away with the illusory ego boundary, with the associated emotions, in order to recognise the reality of interdependency between all things in creation, as perceived.

This idea seems to have been expressed in the opening lines of another song by Tagore (Bengali Year 1357a), which goes something like the following :

"The cloud said, 'I am about to go' and the night said, 'I am going',
The ocean said, 'I have reached the shore hence I am no more'."

The next question would be, obviously, what is the path to developing the ability to deal with the illusion?

The straightforward answer is : I don't know. However, it may be useful to end this article by sharing some thoughts about the formulation of a tentative approach.

Bain, Zen and Bion - Dealing with the illusion:

The meaning of the word "bane", which rhymes with Bain, is 'cause of trouble and anxiety'. An earlier draft of this article was returned to me by Alastair Bain with two comments : "too strong" as an alternative to my idea of limited human perceptual ability and "container-contained/transformation", as also the gift of a book on Zen. This led me to try to relate Bion's ideas with the theme of this article and also to see what Zen has to do with it. The immediate result was both trouble and high anxiety. I realised that I was raging inside of myself in a helpless way and feeling physically sick. The anxiety was related to this helpless feeling which was full of ideas on the one hand and on the other hand a belief that I would never be able to articulate the ideas. The following emerged from living with that experience for three days.

If individual identity is indeed an illusion to which most of us very tenaciously hang on, the reason for that must be that it is a defence against getting in touch with the

underlying reality, that which Bion designates as O. While writing about Bion's thinking the Symingtons (1996) make the following very important points.

1. "There are three axes which interpenetrate in Bion's thinking. They are ultimate reality, the difference between sensuous and psychic reality, and the way an individual comes to knowledge." (P.175).

2. "Bion sees the mind as being extremely limited in its ability to comprehend reality."(P.182).

3. The ultimate reality is realisable through accessing one's psychic reality. The process of accessing, ie. staying long enough with the intolerable impact of the psychic reality to form thought that can be consciously recorded, has been elaborately discussed by Bion. However, the point to note here is that apart from the problem of dealing with something that is "intolerable", as Bion further points out, "Our minds are so dominated by sensory phenomena that it is difficult for us to apprehend the non-sensuous reality" (P.182). What comes in the way of accessing the psychic reality, ie. the non-sensuous reality, is that while the latter occurs through symbolic identity, memories and desires rooted in the sensual identity prevent the symbols from forming. This is also the process that makes human perception "too strong".

In dealing with these ideas of Bion the Symingtons point out that (a) Bion's notion of "without memory and desire" is "very closely allied to what Buddhists refer to as *Nirodha. Nirodha* means cessation of thirst for all that is transient." (P.169). This particular notion actually goes back in the Indian sub-continental history quite a few thousand years before Buddha to the *Upanishads*. Buddha never said that he was preaching a religion. He was preaching a way of life. In a sense there is a parallel between Buddha and Christ. While the latter was purifying Judaism and his interpretations were later embodied as Christianity as a new religion, Buddha's effort to reintroduce the *Upanishadic* learning through his own interpretation of non-duality that he had experientially learned was later interpreted as the beginning of a new religion called Buddhism. Both, the scholars who composed the *Upanishads* and Buddha himself, had been able to experience their identity with the indivisible ultimate reality, which was termed by the *Vedic* people as the *Atman* (and also as *Paramatman* and *Brahman*). It seems to me that Bion, who was also born in the Indian sub-continent, got in touch with this identity, which he represented with the symbol "O". In the *Upanishads* this symbol is *Aum* (Nikhilananda : 1987, P.x). This is clearly reflected in another statement of the Symingtons: "Bion's attitude was both scientific and humanitarian, and was, as John Donne wrote, 'involved in mankind'. Donne had an understanding that his self, his being, was not separate from that of others but is part of a common substrate. This perception of the self was expressed by the seers who wrote the Upanishads .... and was shared by Bion."(P.133). What needs to be added is that it is not a question of not being separate from other selves, but from every "thing", which is the "creation" as we perceive and beyond our perception. That is also supported by Bion's idea of "the work towards learning from experience and opening up the mind to the infinite thoughts waiting to be thought" (P.141). That

is, it is possible to convert the experience of psychic reality into understanding by articulating one's state of being in thought. This also resonates, for example, with Shankaracharya's (1) interpretation of the objective behind learning the ultimate reality, as given in his introduction to *Mandukya Upanishad:* "Is the knowledge something to be produced or is it ever-existent? In the former case, it would be like other effects, impermanent, and in the latter case, the means pursued would be futile. The reply is that though the Knowledge of *Atman* is eternally existent, yet it is obscured by ignorance in the *Jiva.* The aim of *Sadhana* (2) is to remove this obstruction. Thus *Sadhana* serves a useful purpose though it does not make the student attain anything new." (Nikhilananda:1987, P.4). Later (P.39-40) Shankaracharya argues that if creation (as perceived) be accepted as illusion (*Maya),* then "the seekers after truth .....are those who are interested in the magician and not in the magical feats." In other words, since personal identity is an illusion, the mind

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1. One cannot be sure about the period during which Shankaracharya (also spelt Sankara) lived his brief and highly dynamic life. Estimates of scholars vary from the 2nd century BC to the eighth century AD.

2. *Sadhana* is a Sanskrit word that has several meanings depending on the context. In a generic way it means applying oneself to the pursuit of some end without allowing self-indulgent desires to interfere and such a person is called a *Sadhak.* While many *sadhaks* in the past held the belief (and many still do in present day India) that *sadhana* requires asceticism of an order that damages the body, it has never been central as a belief. This is amply clear, for example, in the *Bhagavat Geeta,* chapters 5 to 8, in which Sri Krishna discusses various contemporary belief systems (Chattopadhyay : 1997, 227-311). In the recent years, for example, Paramahamsa Satyananda has created the order of *Karma Sannyasin* (Saraswati & Saraswati : 1984) in the Bihar School of Yoga based on the notion of *sadhana* for people that suits individuals from all walks of like while they continue to live in society fulfilling the demands of multiple roles. The nature of *sadhana* for each individual *karma sannyasin* is determined by the guru at the time of initiation, presumably based on the understanding of the guru regarding the capacity and potentiality of the person being initiated. While such *sadhana* involves self-discipline, asceticism is not called for.

Further, as Satyananda has also pointed out (1989, P.145), *tapas* has always been associated with *sadhana* and, unfortunately, that word has been translated as asceticism, austerity or penance. Literally it means "to burn, to create heat or to produce energy". *Tapas* thus becomes a kind of *sadhana* which cleans an extremely dirty mind full of *avidya* (ignorance). *Tapas* is also associated with some *yogic* practices that are said to create psychic or spiritual heat, but not something that inflicts pain.

already contains the ultimate reality, which is identity with "creation". Any search rather than making the effort to disentangle the reality held within would mean falling into the further illusion of duality - either of the self as the creator of knowledge or looking for a Creator who created.

Sadhana therefore gets here equated to "removing obstructions", ie. getting rid of all the defences that retain our efforts at the sensory level - the earlier notion of too strong perceptions - in order to be directly in touch with rather than intuiting the psychic reality, which is the ultimate reality, the O, the *Atman.*

Symingtons put this in a slightly different way. They speak of the ultimate reality as the "primeval chaos" within us (P.183) and "to register the primitive meaning, the vibrations from this ultimate reality, the equivalent of a robust screen is necessary." But the word "screen" unfortunately is associated with either a barrier or an object that can merely reflect something that exists outside of itself. The unenlightened mind

in fact acts as this kind of a screen. Bion had said that *one has to be* "O" in accessing the psychic, the ultimate reality : "I shall use the sign O to denote that which is the the ultimate reality represented by terms such as ultimate reality, absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself. O does not fall in the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally; it can be 'become', but it cannot be 'known'.....The analyst must focus his attention on O, the unknown and unknowable.....In so far as the analyst becomes O he is able to know the events that are *evolutions* of O." (Bion : 1970, P.26-27) (1). This resonates with the great message of the *Upanishads : Tat twam osi,* meaning "Thou art that" (see for eg Nikhilananda : 1987, 47-57). It may now be postulated that according to Bion's thinking this "screen" remains in place so long as the individual cannot detach oneself from memory and desire. To this end he also believed that "the desire for the cure of the patient was an obstacle to the analysis. Cure or healing is a by-product of the process of analysis."(P. 170-171).

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1. While Bion has used the word "sign" to describe O, it is usual to pronounce it as the alphabet O. However, I think that it is more appropriate to pronounce it as "zero", which in Sanskrit is *shunya*. The reason for this suggestion will be clear from the following quotation , which is part of the interpretation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* 48 : ".....energy is the root cause of the universe (but) Sat is subtler than energy, sat means existence. It has two aspects called ritam and satyam. Satyam is the relative aspect of creation and ritam is the absolute or cosmic aspect. The former is perceptible by the senses and understandable by the mind; in it there can be a change. It is interdependent, but ritam is not so; it is changeless. These are the two aspects of the entire universe. The world of planets and stars is satyam because it is relative, but the absolute, ritam, is beyond energy and change. Ritam is the ultimate truth beyond matter and energy....(When) the superconsciousness of the spiritual aspirant becomes full of ritam....(there) the senses do not work. It is like sound becoming silent when it attains the highest vibrations......Likewise, when the inner experience attains the highest vibrations, it appears to be void.
This particular state of void, shunya, is vibrating at very high rate and so it becomes still. It is not seen and so it is said to be cosmic - ritam." (Satyananda : 1989, Pp. 134-135.) When Bion (1970, P.117) mentions that "The thought O and the thinker exist independently", by implication O seems to be identical with *ritam*. However, this *ritam* or the *shunya* state (or O) is really not a void. The difficulty of understanding it through sense based knowledge has been aptly stated in the *Ishavasya Upanishad*, which describes it as (Satyananda : 1992) : "That is full, this is full. From full, the full is taken, the full has come. If you take out the full from the full, the full alone remains. *(Om poornamadah poornamidang poornat poornamudachyate / Poornasya poornamadaya poornamebabashishyate).* (Contd. on next page).

In *Yoga* it is held that the ultimate aim is to so regulate the energy flow in the human system that the brain begins to function with perhaps hundred percent of its capacity, rather than the current eight to twelve percent. Paramahamsa Satyananda describes one of the results of the state of enhanced energy flow as the experience of "the mind jumping out of itself". Through this statement he is pointing towards a kind of process in one's inner world that occurs when one is able to access the psychic reality, the O, and becomes one with it through understanding as well as through being able to hold that understanding in one's thought. That is beyond intuitively identifying with it.

Secondly, in *Yoga* it is also believed that one does not achieve any real result through its practise (presumably beyond feeling good, toning up some muscles, loosening some joints and curing some diseases) so long as one goes through *yoga sadhana* with the desire to achieve results. One has to be non-attached to possible outcomes. This was prescribed in the *Upanishads* as *sadhana* of *asparsa yoga* (for Gaurapada and Shankaracharya's commentaries on the subject see Nikhilananda: 1987, P. 216) and repeated in the *Bhagavat Geeta,* in particular in *shloka* 39 (Chattopadhyay: 1997,

P.111-115), this was Buddha's *nirodha,* the Christian mystic's "cloud of forgetting" (Johnston : 1973) and Bion's *Negative Capability.* All these sources state that this has to be a way of life, rather than an attitude that may be assumed from time to time. *Zen* (the word is believed to have been derived from the Sanskrit word *Dhyana,* which has been radically misrepresented in English with the word "meditation") also points in the direction of non-attachment and the realisation of one's identity with the cosmos, basically through the practice of *zazen* and emptying oneself of all preconceptions (or leaving them unsaturated long enough, as Bion would have it) and thoughts. This is the "perfect freedom" that leads to the expression of one's "true nature" that the Zen masters speak of (Suzuki:1996); this is achieved through the suspension of all sensory stimuli. In that state the Zen practitioner's "mind is called the big mind ....(which) experiences everything within itself" because "everything is included within your mind is the essence of your mind" (P.35). Otherwise one may have the passing, nay

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(Contd. from previous page) " It can be said again in this manner : 'This is one and that is one. From one the one has come, and if from one, you take out one, one alone remains.' The mathematical equation of this mantra would be: 'One minus one is equal to one.' How?.........Philosophically purna (*poorna*) means 'infinite', because nothing else but infinite can be full. Infinity is something of which the beginning and the end cannot be determined. It is ......partless, divisionless, fractionless.

"If you think about the cosmos, or this great universe, about which much has been spoken and yet much remains to be known, you will realise that there seems to be two states or forms of existence. One form of existence is that which is visible. It is called the manifest universe or the vyakta, it is the manifested form of universe, which is seen, known, recognised, and which can be discovered, in the far and near future. In addition to this universe...there seems to be, and should be, another part of the universe, which is called *avyakta,* or unmanifest....When you say infinite, you postulate something which has no beginning and no end. Therefore, it only means that this manifest universe is only an extension of that unmanifest essence or reality of Creation. Therefore, this mantra says that if this universe is an outcome of that manifest prakriti, then the unmanifest remains unaffected, unchanged and unaltered." (Pp.8-10).

One could now state that in psychoanalysis the analyst is paying attention to the manifest aspect of the personality, which is also the basis of forming one's identity. This is done in order to interpret that which has evolved from the unmanifest (O), the ultimate truth. By definition, then, the manifest is an illusion since the unmanifest is defined as the ultimate truth, which is identical with the "partless, divisionless, fractionless" unmanifest cosmic reality that remains "unaffected, unchanged and unaltered".

fleeting, glimpse of the reality, which cannot be articulated because the apparatus is otherwise full. It is something like Aidani's *Through* (1995, P.5) :

"Through the glass door
images were broken.
Really, they were.
It was late at night
when the stars wished to
move in.
But there wasn't any room left.
And I patiently could see an
ancient smile within the
fractions of a dimming light."

Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti (Rig Veda - 1:164:46) (1) **- "There is but one truth (though) many paths are mentioned" :**

So I conclude with the corollary to the hypothesis stated at the beginning of this article, that *the issues of identity concerning self, work, community and nationality need to be experientially explored with a view to transcend one's identity.* That is the path to deepen one's insight into the reality of interdependency. The *Upanishads* speak of this cosmic nature of interdependency metaphorically by stating that "everything is food for everything else" (Gambhirananda : 1989). The process of this kind of exploration, it is further suggested, is likely to be facilitated if one also becomes a *sadhak* ie. one who seriously pursues a way of life that allows one to eventually transcend all the defences that keep obstructing one from accessing one's psychic reality, which is the ultimate reality, the O, the *atman*, or the Buddha nature of being. This reality, however, is "intolerable" to the mind because the average person harbours a very great amount of anxiety about the "loss" of one's identity. As Alastair Bain (1998) suggests, being one with ultimate reality also means that then there is neither the container nor the contained and the "The problem is that if we achieve a state of being of boundarylessness, it is by nature indescribable, there is no container and contained." This statement actually resonates with the *Upanishadic* notion. There is no duality ie. no difference between oneself and O. That is the ultimate reality. In that situation where one realises one's identity with O, the question of a personal identity becomes irrelevant because one then experientially realises the illusion (*maya*) of boundaries. There is no container and therefore it is meaningless to talk about the contained. Equally, as Bain (1998, P.12) would have it, there is nothing to contain and therefore there is no container either. That is perhaps the climax of what Bion mentions as the symbiotic container-contained relationship, the ultimate transformation. The process of transcending a bounded identity of the self with its implication of the container and the contained is painful because it is the end of all illusions. In other words the pain is of total disillusionment of a kind that the mind may experience as cataclysmic. The decision, therefore, to engage with that process as a *sadhak* is to be one's own bane, albeit in a good cause!

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