

 [Gita and existential therapy by Louise Sandararajan](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

Dear All,

Shashwat would like to have some feedback on her work, attached below

Hope you can help,  
Louise

 [Bhagwat Gita Existential psychotherapy](#)

 [Comment by Shashwat Shukla](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

Dear Prof Louise Sundararajan,

Its a great opportunity for me to communicate with you regarding a paper which I have written about Bhagwat Gita and Existential Psychotherapy which Emmy, Mam would have forwarded to you. I understand you have a deep interest in indigenous psychology. I look forward to hear your views about the areas which I have tried explore in my paper. I would like to collaborate with you in this area of convergence of Vedic/Ayurveda framework and existential psychotherapy. Thanking in anticipation regards,

Shashwat

 [Comment by Anand Paranjpe](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

Dear Dr Shukla:

Many thanks to Dr. Sundarrajan for sharing your paper with the list, and thereby to give us rare opportunities for sharing ideas with like minded psychologists.

I am very happy to go through your paper - so far only hurriedly.

It is my impression that existentialism is pretty close to Indian thought, while Skinner arguably stands at the opposite extreme. I am not a clinician, and am not familiar with existential psychotherapy. Nevertheless, I am a bit wary of drawing too close a parallel between the Gita and existentialist thought. One of the main reasons for caution in this regard is the centrality of the concept of identity in Existential thought where it is viewed primarily as the opposite of alienation. And alienation seems to most commonly imply being separated from one's society, whereas in the Gita as in the Advaita, the supreme development of identity (i.e., the principle of absolute self-sameness) involves the discovery of Atman (like James's Self) in the Fourth State of consciousness (turiya) where there is NO SEPARATION between the

self and the other; indeed no separation between Self and the World at large, thus manifesting the ultimate experience of unity and sameness. It seems to me that the ideals striven by Existentialism on the one hand and the Gita on the other are **RADICALLY DIFFERENT**. Hence the wariness in drawing too close a parallel, although being concerned about the self, consciousness, identity and similar issues warrant a **REASONABLE** basis for comparison within limits.

Here I am taking liberty to share with you one of my papers that describes counseling/psychotherapy as I have witnessed and understood in the shadow of the Gita, while sitting in the vicinity of my guru in satsang. Your critical comments are solicited.

--Anand Paranjpe  
Simon Fraser University, Canada

P.S.

Here is the citation for the attached paper:

Paranjpe, A.C. (2014). Healing and counselling in a traditional spiritual setting. In Cornelissen, R. M. M., Misra, G., & Varma, S. (Eds.). Foundations and Applications of Indian Psychology (2nd ed., Chapter 15). Delhi: Pearson Education.

 [Traditional Healing Paranjpe](#)

 [Comment by Shashwat Shukla](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

Dear Dr Anand Paranjpe,

Thanks for reading and sharing such wonderful insights about my paper. I understand your position which you take when you say that in Indian thought 'selfhood' is not the goal. However even here I don't see any contradiction between existential thought and Vedanta. As when you yourself say that "... in the Fourth State of consciousness (turiya) where there is **NO SEPARATION** between the self and the other; indeed no separation between Self and the World at large...". It implies that the self exists and if the self exists then self has to be perceived first in order to perceive the fact that self and the other are one.

In fact this is one of the Mahavakyas (Grand Pronouncements) of Upanishads "\*Tat Tvam Asi" \*Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7 or "Thou art that" which itself is linked to another Mahavakyas (Grand Pronouncements) i.e Aham Bramhaasmi or 'I am the supreme consciousness' Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Thus according to Vedantic thought as I see it when one asserts that 'I am the supreme consciousness' it has to be followed by somebody saying 'Thou art thou'. And therefore it is not the negation of selfhood, but an experience of selfhood which is a precondition to transcend self hood itself.

At another level existential psychotherapy asserts issues of existence,

(something which has been established in clinical work of Deruzen, Yalom, May, and Schneider) lie behind many psycho-pathological symptoms. One such issue is death anxiety. In my article I try to show that death anxiety as a theme is prevalent in Bhagwat Gita both explicitly and implicitly. This again brings existential psychotherapy and Bhagwat Gita (as an Indian psycho therapeutic tradition) on the same page .

Thus I argue that there are some fundamental areas of convergence between the two on the causative factors while there exist areas of divergence as to the stances they take to cope with these factors.

Thanks for sending your paper on the subject. I will definitely go through it and share my thoughts with you. It is wonderful to have an insightful discussion with you.

regards,

Shashwat



 [Comment by Anand Paranjpe](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

Dear Dr. Shukla:

First of all, let me confess to my ignorance of the work of Deruzen, Yalom, May, and Schneider. This ignorance adds to my being away from clinical psychology. How the therapeutic strategies of Existential practice are based on the principles of existentialism is a related issue that is further out of my league.

My concern is based on the fundamental principles of Existentialism and the Bhagavad-Gita as I understand them.

In this context it seems to me that we may have some misunderstanding about the terms used. Surely both Existentialism and the Gita are concerned with the self, but if I understand it correctly, the term self is broad, encompassing both the mundane ego that helps us with trasactions (vyavahaara) with the world on the one hand, and the Atman of the Mahavakyas (Great sentences of the Upanishads) on the other. When I said that "selfhood" is a common concern for both the Gita and the Existentialists, it means the ego, and not the Atman which is beyond the ego and its concerns.

I agree with you that fear of death is a common concern, but I suspect there is a difference. In my view, it is Sartre who puts the FEAR of "Nothingness" as opposed to Being, which is typical of Sartre, mostly shared by at least some other existentialists. As to the Indian tradition, reincarnation (punarjanma) was always taken for granted. As Naciketas explains to Yama (the god of death)

in the Katha Upanishad, his concern was not dying and being re-born, but it was about how can one escape the cycle (and its miseries in living). It is not death (mrtyu) that is the focus of inquiry, but that which is beyond birth and death: "immortality" (amrtatvam) of sorts. I say "of sorts" because it is not to be confused with eternity in heaven or hell assigned on the Day of Judgment. Naciketas is clear on that, for according to the law of karma, length of stay in either heaven or hell must be commensurate with the amount respectively of good and bad deeds.

To put it in a different way, the concern in much of Indian thought, at least in the Advaita and Samkhya-Yoga is on Being (sat) and not Becoming. That is on what one was, is and forever will be; something that transcends the ephemeral worldly existence where one does not stop wanting to BECOME something different, hopefully something better than what one thinks he or she is at the moment. But Heidegger has no use for the term Being in this sense; he insists that the term Being also indicates something processual, not static and unchanging (as kaivalyam or moksha are supposed to be).

Then again there is a big difference between the ideas that Existentialists and the Gita strive for. For Heidegger, if I read and remember him right, authenticity is the ideal, and this ideal means to be true to oneself, not to be bothered by what someone ELSE thinks or expects. This idea, it seems to me, harks back on Kant who placed autonomy over heteronomy (following the dictates/values of others): the same idea that percolates into Piaget's view of moral development. In the Gita, as you would surely know well, the ideal is that of the sthitaprajna: one whose intellect is stable. In other words a person who is grounded in the unchanging Self (Atma-stha) is not bothered about the changes in life that are allowed follow their natural course. For such a person has found what is it in her/him that was, is and will be; so, there is "nowhere to go" as it were. Such a person need not imagine some glorious future self and strive to BECOME that sometime in the future (earlier the better!).

It is my impression that Husserl (a phenomenologist for sure, but Existentialist - I don't know!) comes closest to POSTULATING a Self that is beyond KNOWING and also DOING. His argument for such postulation is, apparently, the recognition that one can always repudiate not only one's previously held thoughts and convictions, but also past actions. That makes his view of the Pure Ego go one step beyond Kant, since the latter tied the transcendental knower with an agent. The message of the Gita is clear on this issue: the Atman is beyond cognition, affect and volition: totally transcendent. That is why the Gita proposes jnana, bhakti and

karma maargas to overcome cognition, emotion and volition that normally take charge of the ego.

Now, finally, the similarity between the Gita and Existentialism is basically that both are finding ways to redress suffering. But the question is how they understand the nature and causes of suffering. Allied with this issue is the task of the clinician who is also involved in the redress of suffering of her/his clients.

The various schools of modern psychology hold differing views of the nature and causes of suffering; Freud says it quite differently from Kelly and Rogers and so on. The clinician must face quite commonly the problem of persons somewhat BELOW normal levels of functioning, and often those who suffer from serious forms of pathology. That, I am afraid, is not the focus of the Bhagavad-Gita. If one needs to formulate strategies of counseling based on the Gita, one could. But then such formulation would imply exploring relatively new territory, but not quite novel, since the traditional healers (like my guru, whom I described in the article sent before) counseling methods based squarely in the principles of the Advaita and Yoga have already been developed and continue to be in practice till this day. But then there is big cultural gap between those traditional techniques and the tool kit of contemporary psychotherapists.

In the hope that it would help in further dialogue, I will soon send a copy of one of my old papers that compares Husserl with Yoga.

Thanking you very much for initiating this wonderful (and rare) dialogue,

Sincerely,

--Anand

 [Comment by Anand Paranjpe](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

Dear Dr. Shukla:

Attached is a copy of an old publication of mine co-authored by one of my former students, R. Karl Hanson. As it compares Husserl's ideas with yoga, it may be of some interest to you.

I look forward to more of a wonderful dialogue.

--Anand

 [Paranjpe & Hanson](#)

 [Comment by Shashwat Shukla](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

Dear Dr Anand Paranjpe,

Thanks for your comprehensive reply. You start off with saying that you have not gone through the work of Deruzen, Yalom, May, and Schneider which would imply that your exposure to existential psychotherapy is limited. Now my article attempts to compare two psycho therapeutic traditions. In this case it is existential psychotherapy and Bhagwat Gita in the context of Ayurveda. This reference point is very critical in understanding the article. However at a deeper level I find that your interpretations of the various concepts such as ' Stithpragya' of Gita are not how I view them. I too have had the privilege of studying Ayurveda, Yoga etc extensively at places like Varanasi etc. And I have met traditional healers who espouse and interpret things the way I have described. Lastly in existential psychotherapy tradition in the article I try to understand things at an experiential level and not as intellectual debate. I deeply respect your points of view but I disagree with them. It was a privilege to have had a stimulating discussion with you. I shall go through the papers which have sent me and respond with my views.

regards,  
Shashwat

 [Comment by Anthony J. Marsella](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

I read the commentaries by Shashwat and Anand, and was enlightened by both.

The concerns for identity, unity, meaning, and connection emerge across time and place.

The attached paper on "Lifeism" reveals my interests and thoughts which involve similar, but not identical, concerns. Most of all, the separation and alienation of human beings as "master," rather than a creature of life, is a source of grievous problems.

Thank you, for posting these discussions. I seek no debate, just mutual concerns. Tony

<https://www.transcend.org/tms/2014/03/lifeism-beyond-humanity/>

Anthony J. Marsella, PhD., Professor Emeritus, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822

 [Comment by Hans Bakker](#) by Louise S. [2017, Aug 06]

Dear colleagues,

This discussion is very dear to my heart. (It is not just another purely abstract "intellectual" issue for me.) My book entitled \*Gandhi and the Gita\* is still available through university libraries and can still be purchased through amazon. The book is essentially M. K. Gandhi's translation of Bhagavad Gita. He translated it from Sanskrita to Gujarati, his native language. Then with a team of "Gandhians" it was further translated into British English of the type common in the 1930s. (That is a bit different from contemporary British English or

North American English, but he did not use "Anglo English" per se.) My edited book involves my essays on why Gandhi's translation into English is at least as good as other translations into English, a case that is difficult to make when people assume that American English circa 2017 is the only correct way to translate Gita. Moreover, Sanskrit scholars tend to dismiss Gandhi as a politician and not a scholar of any kind. So my arguments are based on a comparison of how Gandhi does his translations and how people whose first language is some form of English have done translations.

The edited book \*Gandhi and the Gita\* emerged out of my work on a single-authored book entitled: *Toward a Just Civilization*. The subtitle is: *A Gandhian Perspective on Human Rights and Development*. The two books were both published in 1993 by Canadian Scholars' Press in Toronto. (That publisher has become quite successful, but when I published with them they were just starting out.) I originally intended for "Gandhi's Translation of the Gita: Sanskrit and Satyagraha" to be part of \*Toward a Just Civilization\* But I wrote the Sarva Seva Sangh to ask permission to reprint Gandhi's English translation of Gita and they gave me permission. All profits from the \*Gandhi and the Gita\* book went to the Sarva Seva Sangh. It is a foundation established after Gandhi died.

The opening chapter of \*Toward a Just Civilization\* tells a bit about my meetings with Vinoba Bhave. I feel very honored to have been able to meet him and stay briefly at his ashram. Vinobaji was one of the Gandhians who helped with the translation into English. When I spoke with him his English was quite good. He himself did an independent translation of Gita into his own native language. I think it is called Marathi, the language of Maharashtra. So that adds to the quality and depth of the English translation as well.

My careful study of Gita (but only in English really) leads me to believe it is not a unified text with one unified philosophical or theological outlook. But I may be wrong. I only have a bit of Kindergarten (kindergarten) Sanskrit. My colleague O. P. Dwivadi claimed he had first grade of elementary school Sanskrit! He helped me a great deal.

ahimsa,

Hans = J. I. (Hans) Bakker = Johannes Iemke Bakker (where "Hans" is my nickname).

[www.jihansbakker.com](http://www.jihansbakker.com)

P.S.: My web page has one (or more?) of the chapters of \*Toward a Just Civilization,\* available for free, of course.