

LOGOTHERAPY - A YOGA LEARNED IN HELL

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I was delighted to see, in the book review page of the June issue of 'Yoga and Health', that Dr Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning" had been reprinted.

In 1964 I had happened upon an earlier review. It was at the moment when I was seeking recovery after a traumatic spiritual crisis. I purchased the book and found that reading it and absorbing the lessons within was the major factor in restoring my health and finding a purpose in living life to the full. It has been an inspiration to me ever since.

In 1975, I wrote an article for 'Yoga and Health' paying tribute to Dr Frankl's work.

In 1997, Dr Frankl passed away (in the same week as Princess Diana), and I made it a point to go to Synagogue to say Kaddish (the memorial prayer) as a thank you to his memory for what his book did for me.

Now that his book has become available again, it seemed timely to offer a revised version of my earlier article as a tribute to his memory and in the hope that others who suffer a spiritual crisis may be tempted to read his remarkable testimony to the human spirit and its potential.

"There are men who learn their Yoga by peaceful contemplation in the majestic tranquillity of the Himalayas, and there are men who learn their Yoga through being picked up by the scruff of their neck and being dropped into Hell."

The Death Camps

In the years of the 'Holocaust' (1939 — 1945), Hell was no metaphysical concept — it was a concrete geographical reality spelt Auschwitz — Belsen — Treblinka — Dachau — the death camps of Nazi Germany.

During the 2nd World War Dr. Viktor Frankl was a slave labourer in one of the Nazi Concentration Camps, in constant danger of death in the gas chamber or from one of the epidemics of typhoid fever. By day he had to perform the heaviest of manual labour: digging, carting and moving dead bodies. But by night he developed the therapy that he had already started upon before the war, not only through choice, but also through sheer stark necessity.

For those who learnt their Yoga in Hell, whether it was the concentration camps of the Nazis, the Communists or one of the totalitarian regimes of more recent times, their education was thrust upon them by those who perpetrated these atrocities.

The Nazis had a deliberate policy of attempting to destroy a Man's identity by stripping him, not only of his possessions and clothing, not only of his hair and dignity, but also of his name. In return he was given the cast-off clothing of a man already a victim of the gas chamber and a number was tattooed on his arm.

All meaning gone

The moment of truth for the shattered 'number' who once upon a time, in a different life, in a different world, had been Dr. Viktor Frankl, was when the one remaining possession that he valued above all others, the manuscript that recorded all his life's work was stripped from him along with his clothes, and he was given the rags of another.

For a moment he felt that all meaning had been ripped from his life, that there was nothing left for him to do, and then thrusting his hands into the pockets of his new rags he found a piece of crumpled paper. Carefully and curiously unfolding it, he found that it was a page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book bearing the words of the fundamental Jewish prayer (or declaration of faith) known as the 'Shema' with its challenge – "Hear O! Israel, YHVY your God is One" (which means "Harken to this O! you who wrestle with God and Man and in that wrestling find both God and yourselves, He who was, is and always will be is your God and is a Unity") and its invitation to a creative relationship with Divinity – "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might".

If the Prisoner was not to lose his humanity and his spirit, the attack had to be resisted by Creative Meditation on the fundamental nature of one's identity and the analysis of those freedoms that still remained to be exploited in one's predicament.

Dr. Frankl had previously experienced the truth of Carl Jung's idea of 'Synchronicity', the theory that coincidences are not arbitrary but are meaningful. However they only become personally meaningful when the person to whom the coincidence occurs has the courage, the intuition and the ability to invest it with a personal meaning.

Faced with this prayer, Dr. Frankl might well have asked 'In what sort of God could one believe in a World full of suffering?' But Logotherapy inverts the question and poses another — 'How can we afford to deny the existence of God in a World full of suffering?' The very essence of Logotherapy is the belief that there is ultimately 'Meaning' behind suffering, that God is manifest in the Universe as 'Logos' or 'Ultimate Meaning'.

If there were no meaning, if this World was a mere matter of chance — a giant joke, then suffering would be unbearable. Only by accepting a doctrine of meaning can suffering be overcome.

Meditating upon the particular incident of the prayer. Dr. Frankl realised that the destruction of his manuscript did not negate the meaning of his life, for the prayer found in his rags could only be interpreted as a command to realise his work in action, not only

to maintain his own dignity and integrity as a human being, but also that of his fellow prisoners.

In his narrative of his concentration camp experiences and the case histories of the people that he helped after the War Dr. Frankl reminds us again and again that the one freedom that can never be taken away from us is our freedom to choose our attitudes in the face of our circumstances. In the death camps he found that

'He who has a WHY to live for can bear with almost any HOW'.

'As long as Men could find some personal meaning in life —As long as Men could find a reason for continuing to fight on against apathy and despair — whether it be for some one or something beyond themselves —For just so long could Man retain an amazing power of endurance'.

Twofold nature of Man

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Man is taught that life is a two-fold battle: both within the soul of Man and in the outer World. But while Man is not permitted to shirk the outer battle against the evils of sickness and hunger, poverty and fear, discrimination and brutality, oppression and censorship, it is also demanded of him that he fight that outer battle with peace in his heart.

The inner conflict is the attempt by the Ego to fly from the true Centre. In the allegory of the 'Gita' it is portrayed by Arjuna's attempt to escape from his responsibilities.

Arjuna represents the Ego, and Krishna the Higher Self or Indwelling Divinity to whose guidance Arjuna slowly learns to submit himself in love.

In the Bible we find a close parallel in the story of Jacob and the Angel. The Angel is both Adversary (shadow) and Redeemer (Spirit) and it is only when Jacob perceives the twofold nature of the angel with whom he wrestles, that he is transformed from the egotistical Jacob into Israel and finds his true nature.

We mature by fighting that battle within ourselves and learning that we are not alone but rather an organic part of a much greater spiritual structure whose health and wholeness depends upon our actions and attitudes.

Loss of a sense of meaning

The spiritual neurosis from which we all may suffer to a greater or lesser extent is a lack of sense of meaning. This is largely the product of the times, of the breakdown of community bonds through the mobility of the Industrial Era, the increasing regimentation of our activities, the weakening and depersonalising of human relationships through bureaucracy, the impoverishment of our means of leisure through the increasing mechanisation of entertainment and the loss of a sense of personal destiny. In many

people this has become a source of spiritual neurosis which appears in feelings of apathy, frustration and depression.

At the highest level it expresses itself as a feeling of separation from the Spiritual sources of our being. At more mundane levels it appears in feeling of depression, frustration, apathy, and in extreme cases the total dependence or addiction to some form of crutch.

Faced with this problem, some of the younger disciples of Freud began the development of a new method that was far more spiritual in its approach. To distinguish it from the 'Psycho-Analysis' of Sigmund Freud they called it 'Existential Analysis'. They never failed to acknowledge their debt to Freud, nor did they deny that there are many problems of spiritual and psychic tension best treated by 'Depth' psychology. Nevertheless they demonstrated that there were an increasing number of problems that demanded what might be termed a 'Height' psychology.

Its essence lies in its endeavour to reveal and develop all those latent spiritual strengths within our selves that will enable us to transcend our personal suffering and to find healing from the highest and most spiritual elements of one's Self. It gives practical effect to the idea that a therapy can deliberately search out all those aspirations, potentialities and relationships to greater causes that give meaning to life.

Existential analysis attained its full maturity in Logotherapy, the system developed by Dr. Viktor Frankl, the man who 'learnt his Yoga in Hell'.

To understand Logotherapy, one must first understand its exponent and the circumstances under which it developed, for these illustrate better than any other example the nature of its potential.

Viktor Frankl began his career as a student of Sigmund Freud who encouraged him in his early writings. While acknowledging his debt to Freud's teaching and the fact that there were many problems best treated by classical Freudian depth psychology he found himself increasingly drawn towards those who were developing 'Existential Analysis'.

Before the War he had already started developing the techniques of Logotherapy and was holding official hospital posts in Vienna. After the war, Dr. Viktor Frankl became Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna medical school, Head of the Neurological department of the Poliklinic hospital of Vienna and President of the Austrian Medical Society of Psychotherapy — a man who received the respect of professional psychotherapists all over the world. It was a respect that was earned the hard way.

One of the objectives of the 'Yoga' in all Religions and Philosophies is the fulfilment of the command:- 'Man — Know Thy Self. To the Logotherapist, the answer to the question 'Who am I?' is found in posing and meditating upon two more questions: 'Where do I stand?' and 'What is expected of me?'. This demands three closely related sets of values:

When we are completely free, we have a potential for 'Creativity' in which we can choose our activities in the outer World and the manner in which we can transcend our Ego in service to others. When our freedom is partially restricted through physical infirmity or external pressures, we still retain a capacity for 'Experience', the ability to observe the things that are happening to us and around us, and to find meaning in life or to invest it with meaning through relationship with others.

Even when all freedom of action and experience is completely denied us and the agony of our suffering is at its most intense and humiliating, we still retain our ability to choose our 'Attitudes' in the face of our circumstances — one can still observe oneself — and this represents the ultimate freedom that no one can ever deny us, unless they completely rob us of our will through mind changing drugs. It is this ability which, in the last resort, establishes the Human as a potentially religious and self transcending Being.

The problem of dehumanisation

We talk about Psychoses and Spiritual Neuroses because they are an extreme manifestation of what affects us all in this stress-laden society and age.

We talk about the Concentration Camps because they are an extreme manifestation of the dehumanisation process which is always endangering the World and which George Orwell and other writers have so ably portrayed. But the fact that Man can retain his humanity, his capacity for compassion, courage and hope in the horrors of the Concentration Camp is an encouragement to all those who believe in the Spiritual Quality and Potential of Mankind and the ability to transcend one's circumstances .

Dr. Frankl is by no means unique in the way that he maintained his own dignity and that of his fellow prisoners under extreme temptation to despair. He is unique in that he had the background and the vision to use his experience to create a powerful system of psychiatry that will one day be as widely known as that of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung and that is in many ways far more appropriate to our times and needs.

In the terrible attempts to dehumanise Man in the Nazi death camps, Dr. Frankl saw for himself the ultimate result of that pagan and materialistic philosophy that reduces Man to a mere pawn of conditioning circumstances. This led him to make his great contribution to humanise psychiatry through Logotherapy.

Again and again he reminds us that the one freedom that can never be taken away from Mankind is our freedom to choose our attitudes in the face of our circumstances.

Dimensions Of Fulfillment

*"If you can meet with triumph and disaster -
and treat those two imposters just the same".*

Thus wrote Rudyard Kipling in his much quoted poem "If". Kipling spent many years in India and was influenced by Indian thought. Much of the poem "If" is excellent Karma Yoga in that Karma Yoga teaches detachment from the fruits of one's work.

Dr. Frankl, in the existential philosophy that underlies Logotherapy, carries this line of argument a stage further.

At the materialistic level, we tend to judge our lives in terms of Triumph and Disaster - Success and Failure. Let this Material dimension be represented by the horizontal member of a cross. Failure to the left. Success to the right. How many people are there, who are, in material terms, highly successful and yet their lives are empty to the point that they require psychiatric treatment and may even contemplate or turn to suicide. This can be illustrated by having the vertical member of the cross represent the Spiritual dimension. In this dimension, we see at the bottom - despair and at the top - fulfilment, which is not the same thing as achievement.

One can meet people who in material terms have failed and yet have fulfilled their destiny, and who in a strange way have influenced their immediate circle of kin and friends by bringing a quality of humanity, compassion and encouragement to them.

It is of course possible to be both materially successful and also to have fulfilled one's destiny spiritually, and happy is the person who is in that case. It is tragically possible to fail materially and to be sunk in apathy. But most tragic of all, it is possible to have fulfilled one's purpose and yet to despair because one cannot see one's own spiritual potential. And this is where the insights of Logotherapy or Karma Yoga can be of the greatest help.

Investing life with meaning

Logotherapy demands of one that we stop looking backwards and downwards into our hidden subconscious motivations and that we should look forwards and upwards into life to do all of, and more than, that which is demanded of us. More particularly, however, although 'Absolute Meaning' is something upon which we can speculate by Philosophy but can never truly know except by mystical experience, Logotherapy is concerned with the 'Unique Meaning' for the concrete situation facing this person at this moment in time. It suggests that although 'meaning' in the human dimension is not the same as 'meaning' in the Divine dimension, nevertheless part of the concept of Man created in the Divine Image suggests that one of his faculties is his capacity to invest life with meaning.

Our task through both creative action and creative meditation is to bring 'Logos' (meaning) into life. The therapeutic technique of Logotherapy is essentially to show each person how they can achieve this for their own circumstances.

In the battle to harmonise the conflicting elements of the personality one often needs human counsel and guidance from one who is more experienced and integrated. This may be sought from a person or from their writings. But both the genuine Guru and the true

Logotherapist is a guide who acts as a catalyst to stimulate, and yet no more than stimulate, the unfolding and flowering of the person from within.

Dr. Frankl describes his experiences with patients who were on the verge of suicide and who had to be helped to find a reason for living: — patients who were crippled with phobias and who had to be helped to use their sense of humour to conquer their fears: — patients who were depressed and apathetic, and who had to be helped to find a new meaning in life itself. In these case histories everyone can find their own problems set out and analysed.

Of course, major neuroses and psychoses are a subject for the professional qualified Logotherapist, who may use pharmaco-therapy or analytical psychology where indicated in addition to logotherapeutic counselling. The most important feature of clinical Logotherapy is the personal dialogue between therapist and patient. These aspects of the work of the Logotherapist are beyond the scope of this article. But Logotherapy is a philosophy and a technique that in many cases people can apply to their own problems for themselves by using reflective meditation to observe the incidents that befall them in as detached a manner as possible, and to penetrate into their significance to invest them with meaning.

We can use for our inspiration the message of the Bhagavad Gita and similar parables from other Eastern and Western scriptures. We can study Viktor Frankl's own books on the subject, for his writings are geared to the needs of the 'Man in the street' who can apply them to his own needs. For all those engaged in the day to day battle of life, who need to help themselves or their colleagues, the philosophy that underlies his spiritual healing techniques is of the utmost urgency and importance.

The prayer of the 18th century Chassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, is a forerunner of Dr Frankl's approach and is one of my favourite sources of personal inspiration:

Master of the Universe!

I do not beg you to reveal to me the secret of your ways - that would be too much for me - I could not bear it.

But show me one thing, show it to me ever more clearly and more deeply.

Show me what this, which is happening to me here and now, means to me. What it demands of me. What it is that you, Lord of the World, are telling me by way of it.

Oh! it is not why I suffer that I wish to know, but only whether I suffer for your sake.

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The details of the book which is introduced in this article are: **Man's Search for Meaning - an Introduction to Logotherapy** by Viktor E. Frankl. Published by Rider Books @ £7.99 ISBN 1-84413-239-0

I am indebted to Waterstones, the booksellers, for providing me with details of the following two books by this remarkable man that also have been reprinted this year. I read these many years ago and found them of great value.

Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning by Viktor E. Frankl. Published by Perseus Publishing @ £ 11.99 ISBN 0-7382-0354-8 (This was originally published under the title "The Unconscious God")

The Doctor and the Soul. From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy By Viktor E. Frankl Published by Souvenir Press @ £ 10.99 ISBN 0-285-63701-0