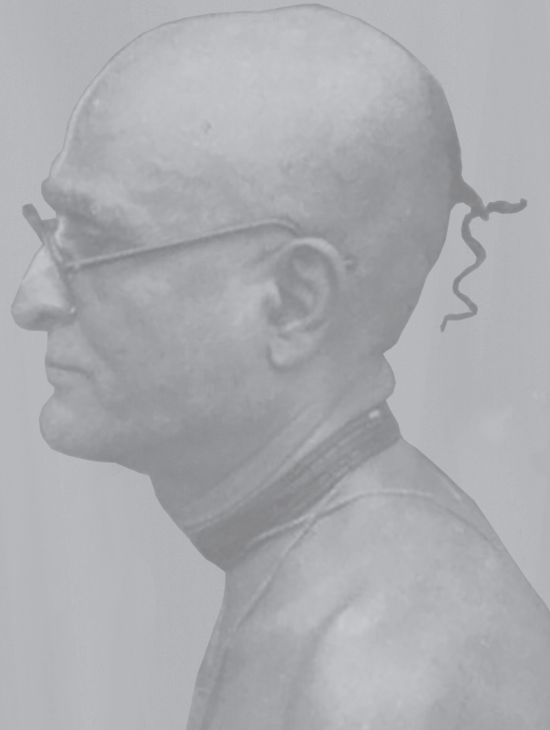


# TRANSCENDING CONTEXT AND CONTEXTUAL TRANSCENDENCE:

Initial Thoughts on C.G. Jung and  
Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati

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### Resumen

El diálogo, de ideas y prácticas, entre lo oriental y lo occidental es uno de los principales pensamientos que Sulagna Sengupta, autora de *Jung en la India*, ha descrito la manera en cómo Jung estaba fascinado por la profundidad psicológica de la espiritualidad hindú y budista. Jung habló enfáticamente, en sus conferencias de Tavistock, sobre cómo los europeos son incapaces de comprender la profundidad del simbolismo oriental y cómo los asiáticos han entrenado sus mentes en la psicología introspectiva durante miles de años. Aunque la vacilación de Jung hacia la adopción intercultural entre Oriente y Occidente puede haberse suavizado con el tiempo, una ola reciente de estudios ha sugerido el potencial de reacciones psicológicas negativas, a partir de la práctica de la meditación consciente, por parte de los occidentales. Hecho que, a veces conduce a un aumento de la ansiedad, depresión, etc., cuando se realiza sin la guía adecuada. Por lo tanto, el enfoque de Jung sobre la India es un intento de equilibrar dos necesidades en competencia: la adopción de capacidades ajenas a la propia cultura, inspiradas en un mundo que se globaliza rápidamente a principios del siglo XX, y la precaución de prestar siempre atención al contexto cultural de tales culturas.

Por otro lado, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, un monje, maestro e impulsador del linaje Gaudiya Vaishnava de Bengala, estuvo promulgando, de manera similar, una “trascendencia contextual”. Al ver el estado del arte mundial, desde el otro extremo del continente euroasiático, abogó por abrazar la tecnología europea moderna sin sacrificar el arraigo auténtico en la práctica vaishnava.

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta equilibró este enfoque paradójico del contexto cultural al desarrollar la doctrina de yukta-vairagya, que significa “desapego comprometido”. Esta situación para los vaishnavas significa que la renuncia (sannyasa) no es el rechazo del mundo, ya que el mundo y todos los seres son parte de la energía de Krishna y por lo tanto son valiosos. Los encuentros culturales, ocasionados por la era colonial, fueron oportunidades para abrazar la tecnología europea moderna para el uso del servicio de Krishna.

**Palabras clave:** Procesos dialógicos transculturales, meditaciones malguiadas, espiritualidad, Vaishnavismo, servicio a Krishna.

### **Abstract**

Dialogue, of ideas and practices, between Eastern and Western is one of the main thoughts of Sulagna Sengupta, author of *Jung in India*, she has described how Jung was fascinated by the psychological depth of Hindu and Buddhist spirituality. Jung spoke emphatically in his Tavistock lectures how Europeans are unable to understand the depth of the Oriental symbolism and how Asian people have trained their minds in introspective psychology for thousands of years. Although Jung’s hesitation toward cross-cultural adoption between East and West may have softened over time, but a recent wave of studies has suggested the potential for negative psychological reactions from the practice of mindfulness meditation by Westerners, leading at times to an increase in anxiety, depression, etc., when performed without proper guidance or boundaries. Therefore, Jung’s approach to India is an attempt to balance two competing necessities—the embrace of capacities from outside one’s own culture, inspired by a rapidly globalizing world in the early 20th century, and the caution to always pay attention to the cultural context of such practices.

On the other hand, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, a monk, teacher, and author in the Gaudiya Vaishnava lineage of Bengal, was similarly promulgating a “contextual transcendence.” Viewing the state of world affairs from the other end of the Eurasian continent, he argued for an embrace of modern European technology while not sacrificing authentic rootedness in Vaishnava practice.

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta balanced this paradoxical approach to cultural context by developing the doctrine of yukta-vairagya, which means an “engaged detachment”. This situation for Vaishnavas, it means renunciation (sannyasa) is not rejection of the world, since the world and all beings are part of Krishna’s energy and therefore valuable. Cultural encounters, occasioned by the colonial era, were opportunities to embrace of modern European technology for the use of Krishna’s service.

**Keywords:** Dialogical cross-cultural processes, misguided meditations, spirituality, Vaishnavism, Krishna’s service.

I am a novice in the study of psychology and particularly the thought of C.G. Jung, but as I delve into his life and work, I cannot help but notice important points of dialogue with Vaishnava Hinduism, which is my field of academic study for the past 25 years. Sulagna Sengupta, author of *Jung in India*, has described how Jung was fascinated by the psychological depth of Hindu and Buddhist spirituality. Jung spoke emphatically in his Tavistock lectures:

We Europeans are not the only people on the earth. We are just a peninsula of Asia and on that continent, there are old civilizations where people have trained their minds in introspective psychology for thousands of years, whereas we began with our psychology not even yesterday but only this morning. These people have an insight that is simply fabulous, and I had to study eastern things to understand certain facts of the unconscious. I had to go back to understand Oriental symbolism. (Sengupta, 2013, p. 38)<sup>1</sup>

And yet, for all his admiration of Eastern psychology, Jung argued that Westerners must be exceedingly cautious in adopting Eastern spirituality without proper consideration of how it would interface with their own culturally-specific background and proclivities. In his essay, *Yoga and the West*, published in *Prabuddha Bharata* in 1936, Jung warns:

My criticism is directed solely against the application of yoga to the peoples of the West. The Spiritual development of the West has been along entirely different lines from that of the East and has therefore produced conditions which are the most unfavorable soil one can think of for the application of yoga. Western civilization is scarcely a thousand years old and must first of all free itself from its barbarous one-sidedness. This means, above all, deeper insight into the nature of man. But no insight is gained by repressing and controlling the unconscious, and least of all by imitating methods which have grown up under totally different psychological conditions. In the course of the centuries the West will produce its own yoga.

Although Jung's hesitation toward cross-cultural adoption between East and West may have softened over time, we should note that his insistence on paying attention to the cultural specificity of yogic practices is prescient. A recent wave of studies has suggested the potential for negative psycho-

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1 Quoted in Sengupta (2013) from chapter The Tavistock Lectures (1935) of the book Jung, C. (1950). *The Symbolic Life*. Vol. 18. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Princeton University Press.

logical reactions from the practice of mindfulness meditation by Westerners, leading at times to an increase in anxiety, depression, etc., when performed without proper guidance or boundaries.<sup>2</sup> In short, we find in Jung's approach to India an attempt to balance two competing necessities—the embrace of capacities from outside one's own culture, inspired by a rapidly globalizing world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the caution to always pay attention to the cultural context of such practices.

In exactly the same time period as Jung, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, a monk, teacher, and author in the Gaudiya Vaishnava lineage of Bengal, was similarly promulgating a “contextual transcendence.” Viewing the state of world affairs from the other end of the Eurasian continent, he argued for an embrace of modern European technology while not sacrificing authentic rootedness in Vaishnava practice. Much to the chagrin of the traditional brahminical community, and going against common practice for renunciants, he wore sown cloth, traveled in motorcars, met with British dignitaries, sent his disciples overseas, and argued that white Europeans, not to mention low-caste Indians, were eligible to become brahmins if they achieved a certain standard of character. He rejected hereditary guruship and asked that his religious institution, the Gaudiya Math, be run by a Governing Body Commission, in the manner of the British India railways. And yet, he was a fierce defender of Vaishnava doctrine (*siddhanta*), the truth of scriptural knowledge, and the practice of temple worship ritual. He was a strictly renounced monk (*sannyasi*) who never evaded an opportunity for philosophical debate (*samvada*) and wrote extensive commentaries on Gaudiya texts.

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta balanced this paradoxical approach to cultural context by developing the doctrine of *yukta-vairagya*—a phrase that is first found in the *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* (1.2.255) of Rupa Gosvami in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but is applied to a modern context by Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati. The word *yukta* comes from the Sanskrit verbal root, *yuj*, which means to “link, connect, or engage”. The word *vairagya* means “a state without passion or attachment (*raga*).” Together, the words are explained as, “detachment from the material world, by engaging all things in Krishna's service”. I like to translate *yukta-vairagya*, as “engaged detachment”, or even “contextual detachment”, namely, detachment that leads us to engage correctly with the world. Often, the idea of detachment or renunciation is construed

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2 See, for example, this study from 2019, which found that 25% of meditators reported unpleasant psychological effects as a result of their practice. See Schlosser, M., Sparby, T., Vörös, S., Jones, R., Marchant, N.L. (2019). Unpleasant meditation-related experiences in regular meditators: Prevalence, predictors, and conceptual considerations. *PLOS ONE*, 14(5). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0216643>



Carl Gustav Jung, (July 26, 1875, Kesswil, Switzerland / June 6, 1961, Küsnacht, Switzerland). Psychiatrist, psychologist and essayist, founder of the school of analytical psychology and depth psychology.

in India as a rejection of the world. But for Vaishnavas, renunciation (*sannyasa*) is not rejection of the world, since the world and all beings are part of Krishna's energy and therefore valuable. Rather, Vaishnava *sannyasa* is an opportunity for renunciates to give up selfish possessiveness, so that they may engage even more deeply in benefiting others by giving them spiritual knowledge. In other words, Vaishnavas renounce only to more deeply attach themselves to Krishna, and by doing so, they make the world their family. The doctrine of *yukta-vairagya* makes the profound point that the person who is best-positioned to help the world is the one who is detached from it, for they have nothing to gain or lose from their actions. This echoes Krishna's statement in the *Bhagavad-gita* (6.1): "One who is unattached to the fruits of his work and who works as he is obligated is in the renounced order of life, and he is the true mystic, not he who lights no fire and performs no duty."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati argued, all modern, Western facilities can be accepted if they are used for Krishna's service, i.e., they are seen in proper relation to spiritual truth (*siddhanta*). Thus, he embraced the cultural encounters occasioned by the colonial era,

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3 See A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, v. 6.1.



Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura (Puri, February 6, 1874- Calcutta, January 1, 1937). Prominent spiritual Master of Bhakti-yoga. He wrote more than 108 publications between books and essays. He is a scholar in Gaudiya Vaisnava philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, Sanskrit, and other languages.

while exhorting his followers not to relinquish the spiritual wisdom of India in its culturally-specific forms. This creative tension was at the heart of his mission, which was then carried forward by his disciple, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the global Gaudiya Vaishnava institution, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

How do we know whether we have gone too far in adapting to our context, at the cost of our own identity, as Jung had worried, or at the cost of sacrificing *siddhanta*, as Bhaktisiddhanta was concerned? This is, of course, a deep hermeneutical question about which much has been written, but suffice it to say that the Gaudiya tradition insists on the importance of having

a teacher, *guru*, who can apply ancient wisdom to one's individual context and avoid the pitfalls seen among, say, those meditators who find themselves unmoored in the decontextualized practice of yoga.

Thus, Jung and Bhaktisiddhanta share a certain resonance—a synchronicity, if you will—in regard to contextual spirituality. They both eagerly reach out to the other while remaining grounded in their own tradition, adapt to the new global order while holding authentically to the local, and adjust details of their respective traditions while preserving key principles.

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