



# **University of Jaffna**

**Professor C. Sivagnanasundram**

**Memorial Lecture 2023**

**“Tat Tvam Asi und Dasein”**

**Eastern Concept of Self in Western Practice of  
Psychotherapy - A Historical Sketch**

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# **Professor Chellathurai Sivagnanasundram**

## **Memorial Lecture – 2023**

### **Vice Chancellor’s Message**

Professor Chellathurai Sivagnanasundram is a multi – talented academician and public health genius who has contributed immensely to the University of Jaffna and also contributed to the modern Tamil Literature and is well known as “Nanthi” among the Tamil Scholars.

He obtained the MBBS degree from the University of Ceylon in 1955 and served in the state health services in multiple posts until 1964, when he joined the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. He was in the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene and in 1967, he obtained the DPH (London), and was awarded the PhD from the University of London in 1971. Professor Sivagnanasundram, after serving for a while in the University of Peradeniya, under the Headship of Professor Malcom Fernando, accepted the Professorship in the newly created Medical Faculty of the University of Jaffna, adorned by Professor S. Vithiananthan, as its first Vice Chancellor. He held this post until his retirement and continued to serve in this capacity for 12 years even after he formally retired from university service. His contributions to the Faculty of Medicine, Jaffna were wide and varied. He served as the Dean of the Faculty and as a member of the University Council for 14 years. He was an excellent teacher and his humorous approach to complex issues were much appreciated by his students. His contributions to education were not limited to medical professionals. He was very much interested in uplifting the knowledge level and the

realization of the role of different categories of paramedical staff in the public health system. He conducted numerous practical training sessions to paramedical staff and were very much appreciated by all categories of such staff. His guidebook entitled 'Guidebook for Paramedics' was well received by medical practitioners internationally and also was translated in to Arabic. His book entitled “Learning Research”, is still very widely used by the undergraduate and postgraduate students in Sri Lanka, as their primary source as a research guide.

Professor Sivagnanasundram also served as a consultant to the World Health Organization and also the Ministry of Health in the Kingdom of Jordan. As a Consultant on health service research, he has served in Malaysia, Bangladesh, North Korea, Mongolia, India, Myanmar and Zimbabwe. He always spent his valuable time to strengthen the development of community-based medical education.

As a Tamil literary writer, Professor Sivagnanasundram, made significant contributions and his novels, and short stories attracted people from all walks of life. He had a fan base for his writing that touches the finer things in life. He was awarded with many prestigious awards including the “Saahithya Academy” award.

On the spiritual side he was a devotee of Sri Sathya Sai Baba and was the coordinator for the “Education in human values” program. He has written a number of articles and books on Sathya Sai baba and the educating human values.

As a humble human being he made significant contributions in three different areas on wisdom. The University of Jaffna conducts this memorial oration in these three areas triennially.

University of Jaffna wishes extended its gratitude to the family members of Prof. Sivagnanasundram and the Faculty of Medicine for instituting the "Professor C. Sivagnanasundram Memorial Lecture".

I thank Professor Gamini Hapuarachchi for accepting our invitation and delivering the "Professor C. Sivagnanasundram Memorial Lecture - 2023". Professor Hapuarachchi is a Professor in Philosophy at the Department of Philosophy, University of Kelaniya. He is also a certified counselling guide and has held many positions in the Sri Lanka National Institute of Professional Counsellors over the past several years. Professor Hapuarachchi contributed immensely to the fields of Philosophy, Psychology and Languages by writing a number of research articles and books, and by editing a number of books and journals in Sri Lanka. As a professional in the field of Philosophy, who has investigated the trauma faced by people due to various external factors and documented them in his articles and research papers, I am sure Professor Hapuarachchi is one of the most suitable persons to deliver the "Professor C. Sivagnanasundram Memorial Lecture 2023". Once again, I sincerely thank Professor Hapuarachchi for accepting our invitation and delivering this oration.

All glories to almighty God.

**Prof. S. Srisatkunarajah**

*Professor in Mathematics – Vice Chancellor*

*University of Jaffna*

## **Professor C. Sivagnanasundram Memorial Lecture -2023**

Vice Chancellor, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Members of the family of Prof.Sivagnanasundram, Professors and all the academics of the University of Jaffna, distinguished invitees, ladies and gentlemen.

First, let me thank Prof.Surenthirakumaran, and the Faculty of Jaffna Medical School for the very kind invitation to deliver this year's Professor C. Sivagnanasundram Memorial Lecture. I feel exceedingly privileged and honored, and at the same time, humbled by your gesture. The opportunity to pay tribute to a revered medical educationist, an eminent public professional, a medical researcher of the highest caliber, a loving family man, and above all an exceptional human being, is indeed a matter of deep pride to me.

# **Tat Tvam Asi und Dasein**

## **Eastern Concept of Self in Western Practice of Psychotherapy – A Historical Sketch**

01. Three thousand years ago during the philosophical period known as ‘Upanisad’ in India, the concept of self (or Atman) was formulated. The word Atman contains the meanings of soul, spirit, ego, mind and perception. Atman was philosophically a much broader concept compared to the transcendental ‘soul’ in the Middle East and the cognitive ‘Psyche’ in Greece.
  
02. ‘Tat tvam asi’ (that thou art) is a well known teaching in Mandukya Upanisad and is one of the ‘essences of the person’ in history. This essence was analyzed as the self, self-consciousness, spirit and the person’s identity by modern Western philosophy.
  
03. ‘Dasein’ is a unique German word introduced by Heidegger, which is very difficult to translate to another language. However, the meaning of the word dasein in some aspects is very close to the idea given in ‘tat tvam asi’. Dasein explains the self-conscious nature of a person’s existence, and it is the essence of the person. However, there are differences between the two concepts.
  
04. Though Western philosophy, before the twentieth century, has used the concept of self, it is not similar to Atman. The Upanisad concept of self on the one hand is an exercise of introversion with the goal of achieving the essence of the

person. And, on the other hand, this goal can be achieved only by following a hermit life pattern and by growing a moral character. The concept of rebirth, as an idea supporting this life goal, is also included in the Upanisad. Until the person actualizes the self, Brihadaranyaka says, the soul moves from life (body) to life just as a caterpillar having to come to the end of a blade of grass to draw itself to the next blade”.

05. Actualizing the Atman is a pure conscious state. In this state, according to Prajapathi in Chandogya, the subject-object difference disappears; self and not self unite into the same unit; the trinity of knowledge-knowledge, known and knower-becomes a single entity.
06. In the West, until the twentieth century, the knowledge of self was limited to a few aspects. What can be observed in the West are Greek Philosophers used the thesis ‘know thyself’ to give the idea of self awareness; the basic idea of ‘flesh and soul’ in the Old Testament, which, St.Paul analyzed into three aspects, pneuma (spirit), psyche (soul) and soma (body). Meanwhile, St.Augustine and St.Aquinas elaborated the imperfections of man compared to the perfection of God.
07. The Philosophers during the 17th and 18th centuries, Locke, Burkele and Hume, clarified the person’s ability to be conscious of himself. This is the conscious awareness of the person himself. Kantian philosophy contained the elements of the idea of unconsciousness. German Philosophers such as Shelling, Nietzsche, Hegel, Bradely and Bergson, analyzed the person’s self into three divisions: transcendental ego, ideal ego, and empirical ego.



08. The objective of this presentation is to review how the Indian thought of self, which started from Upanisad and evolved to Yoga and Vedanta, influenced the Western psychotherapy through the Western concept of self. However this review would be limited to a historical framing; it would not be of any type of a comprehensive analysis. Further, it would be limited to psychiatrists and psychotherapists; experimenters and other types of researchers would not be considered.
09. Since the 17th century missionaries working in India began to translate Sanskrit work into European languages, and it is a historical fact that German and French scholars were highly impressed with the classical Indian culture, language, literature, art, music, religion and philosophy. August Schlegel was the first Sanskrit professor in Germany; A.L.Chezy was the first Sanskrit teacher in France (both in the mid 18th century). Hegel, the great German philosopher, as a student of Schlegel had a knowledge of Mahabarat, in addition to his knowledge of classical India. Max Muller was the most celebrated among the scholars who translated Indian classics into German. However, Veda (1805) and Upanisad (1847) were translated well before Muller.
10. With the integration of classical Indian influence and 19th century German philosophy, a new thinking trend arose in the early 20th century. Arther Schopenhauer is considered the pioneer link between German and Indian philosophy. Will, or the existence of the person, is the central idea of his philosophy. A person and his will are not separate entities; they are interdependent. Will is very much similar to the Upanisad self. The person has a will-to-live, and it is the main cause of his suffering. Negation of will is his salvation.

11. Existential philosophy emerged under the influence of Schopenhauer. Both Existential philosophers and Schopenhauer established the concept of self on a psychological basis. Nietzsche, for example, emphasized the existence of the individual; however, this existence was not the political existence as said by Aristotle or Hobbes, and it was neither the social existence as said by Rousseau or J.S.Mill. Nietzsche's existence is an inner psychological state and freedom of the will is a significant part of this existence.
12. For Heidegger existence is a part of Being. Heidegger used the word Dasein to explain Being. Dasein is to be conscious of the world, and to be conscious of self (both in life and death). A person lives in a private world; hence he/she modifies the world by living in it; at the same time he/she modifies his/her own self. Therefore, existence is a dynamic process. As said in 'tat tvam asi' the person and his/her world are neither a single unit nor two separate entities.
13. Sartre, the great French philosopher, mentioned pour-soi or the self conscious aspect of existence; to be conscious is the essence of personhood. All the existential philosophers agree that non-existence (dread for Heidegger and bad faith for Sartre) causes existential anxiety and it is the source of all mental and psychosomatic illnesses.
14. While German and French philosophers developed a philosophy of self consciousness, (or a philosophy of existence), Freudian Psychoanalysts developed a psychology of unconsciousness or the uncovered aspect of the self. Conflicts in the unconscious are the source of all types of mental and psychosomatic disorders; these conflicts are made

by repressed unresolved problems. While in this tradition analysis is used as a method to uncover the conflicts, both Freud and his follower Jung used self-analysis to analyze their own unconscious. Meanwhile, Jung declared a primordial layer of the unconscious and it contains certain archetype memories: both saint and satanic memories are among them.

15. Rogers and Maslow are two other prominent psychologists who mention the importance of self-actualization. For Rogers, the disturbance to achieve self-actualization would create incongruence or primary reason for all mental disorders. For Maslow, self-actualization is the highest stage of the self-growing process, and at the self-actualizing stage a person comes to a transcendental state in which he/she receives a certain mysterious experience as well.
16. In the meantime, a tendency started at the end of the 19th century where people from Asian countries started migrating to the West. With them various types of meditation practitioners- Yoga, Buddhist, Zen, Tibetan- also migrated to the West. In the 1930s Western scientists began to focus their attention on meditation practices. Edmond Jacobson was a pioneer among them and he observed a significant effect of meditation practice on a person's physical features; for example body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure and so on.
17. In the 1930s after the discovery of the EEG test, scientists such as H. Berger used it as a tool to test the activation of brain waves of the meditator, and made a Copernican revolution in meditation research. Some important milestones of EEG testing in meditation research are as follows. They are taken from a presentation by Alfred Lagmay in 1991.

- ❖ In 1935, H. Berger founded the Alpha Blocking event.
- ❖ In 1971, T. Mulholland found that Alpha Blocking can be activated by turning eyeballs upward.
- ❖ In 1973, C.F.S. Stroebel and B. Glueck found that Alpha Blocking can be intentionally activated by the elimination of external stimuli.
- ❖ In 1975, E.M. Devan found that by directing attention at external stimuli Alpha Blocking can be activated.

18. What are the benefits of the Alpha condition for health? Jacobson discovered that the Alpha experience is highly effective to manage tension, fear, anxiety, anger and pain. Y. Akishige found that the Alpha condition strengthens cognitive skills including mathematical ability, a problem solving skill. Based on the results of these laboratory tests, Jacobson for the first time introduced a relaxation exercise method in the West, under the title Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR).

19. Nevertheless, meditation became popular in the West only after introducing transcendental meditation (TM) by Maharisi Mahesyogi during 1960-1970. Though the Theosophical Society (end of the 19th century and early 20th century) had a trend of meditation, its orientation was occultism rather than meditation.

20. In the 1970s and the 1980s the idea of health meditation popularized in the West. Psychiatrist Ainsli Mears, was a hypnotist as well as one of the pioneers to introduce meditation practice for health. He said that the anxiety response state (or 'fight or flight condition' as popular in society) was responsible for increased heart rate, to raise blood pressure, and as parasympathetic responses to increase the mobility of

bowels and contract the bladder, and to feel chest pain, impotence, migraine and to produce nervous asthma; mentally it produces inner tension, over alertness, restlessness, irritability, poor concentration, insomnia, fatigue, phobia and depression. Mears developed muscle relaxation methods to control the above responses.

21. Ian Gawler, veterinarian, the founder of a well known cancer fighting organization in Melbourne, showed that under relaxed conditions the body regains its balance which is weakened under stress conditions. He introduced more than a dozen relaxation methods.
22. From Jacobson's day to the present hundreds of relaxation methods have been developed by various therapists. However, after 2000 a new perspective based on self-awareness came to the stage; mindfulness. It is defined as a state of conscious attention, and its roots run into Buddhist meditation methods. The literature given below on the research findings of mindfulness is taken from the Doctoral thesis on mindfulness by P. Jayatilake.
  - ❖ In 1990, the first therapeutic model based on mindfulness (MBI) was developed by Jon Kabat.
  - ❖ In 2004, P. Grossman and others discovered mindfulness as an effective tool to improve immunity.
  - ❖ In 2009, A. Moore and P. Malinowski discovered that mindfulness strengthens the informed processing system.
  - ❖ In 2016, S.B Harpin and others discovered that mindfulness improves prosocial behaviours.
  - ❖ In 2017, C.C. Boyle and others discovered that mindfulness had a high ability to control negative emotions.

23. R.D. Laing, consultant psychiatrist, applied the concept of self to 'cure' schizophrenic patients. According to Laing, a person's inability to maintain a 'false self' is the cause of schizophrenia, and therefore in reality these patients express their true self.
24. Elizabeth Kublar-Ross, psychiatrist, took mind research into a new stage; death and near death experience (the concept of NDE was introduced and popularized by Raymond Moody, consultant psychiatrist and not by Kublar-Ross). Kublar-Ross mainly worked with patients suffering from terminal illnesses who were a group of patients rejected and ignored in the medical world at that time. Kublar-Ross was successful in changing this attitude and developed a new theory on death which brought global fame to her. Later on, she began to disclose that the dying patients have NDE, and also visions of life after death and she began to believe in rebirth as well. Under this new situation she lost all the fame achieved.
25. Ian Stevenson, Professor of Psychiatry for fifty years, is another prominent character in the 1970s and 1980s in studying reincarnation. He studied nearly 2000 cases of reincarnation in North America, Europe and Asia, including Sri Lanka. Compared to Moody and Kublar-Ross, Stevenson's speciality was that he attempted to explain how certain physical features, personality characteristics, and mental health issues came from previous births. For these studies he used social science and statistical methods.
26. Brain Weiss, consultant hypnotic psychiatrist, who worked in the 1990s and the 2000s, used hypnosis to cure mental disorders and certain personality issues. Weiss believed that

difficulties run into a person's previous births, and such memories have been repressed in his/her subconscious. Furthermore, same as Jung, Weiss also believed that in a person's subconscious there were masters or angel gods, and they were willing to guide the person to a moral life.

27. Finally, the historical chain elaborated above can be summarized into four points.
  - I. A Person's essence, his/her psyche and chemistry, is hidden in his/her self concept.
  - II. Self-awareness and actualization of this inner nature makes him/her happy (Anana) and brings his/her salvation (Brhaman).
  - III. Unresolved conflicts in this inner nature cause mental and psychosomatic illnesses.
  - IV. Death is not the end of suffering. Suffering comes after humans from birth to birth.

Thinkers, Psychiatrists, and Psychotherapists who were mentioned above illuminated this 'satyam' in their own words and deeds.

“Lead me from delusion to truth;  
from darkness to light;  
from mortality to immortality.”

## **For Further Reading**

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