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India and Appreciative Inquiry

Generative Connection between Ancient
Wisdom and Today's Endeavours in the Field

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Inside this issue

Welcome to a new year for AI Practitioner!
Anne Radford, Editor in Chief

We begin the year with an issue, gratefully sponsored by Involve Consulting in France, which focuses on India and AI and continue with issues on AI communities of practice, AI in Asia and the effect of AI within cities.

In this February issue, our articles connect ancient Indian philosophies with AI practices of appreciative engagement and mindset. Through the articles, pictures and poems, our contributors invite us to witness changes with GenY employees, tribal communities and innovation in Indian industry.

In our first Feature Choice article this year, Mo McKenna focuses on the urgent need for climate change in our physical and human world environments, including our organizations and communities.

In Research Notes, we focus on the potential complications which occur when the researcher is also a manager where she is collecting data and has a stake in the project outcome.

In AI Resources, you will find key books, articles and videos connecting AI and India. This column is dedicated to Suresh Srivastva, born in India and an instrumental figure in the creation and development of Appreciative Inquiry.

Inside this issue

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Advaita and Appreciative Inquiry
Perspectives on the Social Construction of Reality

ABSTRACT

When we inquire appreciatively we acknowledge different truths, thereby becoming capable of reaching a different level of truth and consciousness that we all believe. This is when transformation begins, helping us rise above differences and work towards a common dream. In this article, we explore the connectedness between *Advaita*, an ancient Indian philosophy, and Appreciative Inquiry, and the generative possibilities that emerge.

"Both the forces of good and evil will keep the universe alive for us, until we awake from our dreams and give up this building of mud pies."
Swami Vivekananda

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a practice that manifests the life-giving energy for an individual, group or system. When inquiring appreciatively, the focus is on "what is" and "what is emerging"; not on splitting it into good and bad, desirable and undesirable. Appreciative Inquiry is based on the theory of social construction, which emphasizes that the perception of reality is based on one's beliefs, i.e. "You will see it when you believe it."[1] Social reality is co-constructed by the players who participate in it and the stories that are told. We make a choice to focus on what gives energy, what is working and in amplifying it to create a new story for ourselves. That becomes the new truth or reality for that person, community or organization. It is held in common; everyone strives towards the dream that emerges.

Our differences emerge from the labels we give to our perceptions of experiences and objects. But the reality that we co-create is beyond labels. It is beyond all our differences: it keeps us all together and gives us energy. If we can tap into that source of reality, then the possibilities that we create for ourselves are limitless, and we can always remain connected with that eternal source of energy.

We have been practicing Appreciative Inquiry for more than a decade and the more we have become immersed in AI, the more we have realized how similar it is to the ancient Indian philosophy of *Advaita.*[2]

1 It is not clear as to who used this term first. Wayne Dyer wrote a book titled Y*ou Will See It When You Believe It*, published by Harper Collins in 2009.
2 Taken from lecture notes on Vedanta by Swami Vivekananda "Selections from the complete works of Swami Vivekanada" by Advaita Ashrama in January 1987.

Advaita is a belief that the world is one.

Advaita

Aadi Sankara proposed the concept of Advaita in 788 BCE. Advaita, a two thousand year old Vedantic philosophy, states that there is only one absolute truth, one common reality, that encompasses us all. It is quite abstract and featureless. To make sense of this, we give it different aspects, names and forms, creating a social construction to help us make sense of the world.

Advaita literally means non-dual. It is a belief that the world is one, and there is only one absolute truth, which is not manifest, called the Brahman. All that is seen is a manifestation of this truth. It is what allows us to make sense of what is essentially pure nothingness.

In Advaita, the way to understand reality is to grasp the absolute truth of oneness by seeking beyond the obvious. When we grasp the absolute truth, there is no ego: everything we see is only a manifestation of oneness and truth, a bit like a hologram. When we realize that, we stop judging others and ourselves, and connect with the higher consciousness, which is absolute bliss or *Sat Chit Ananda*.

Figure 1: The inquiry into *Brahman*
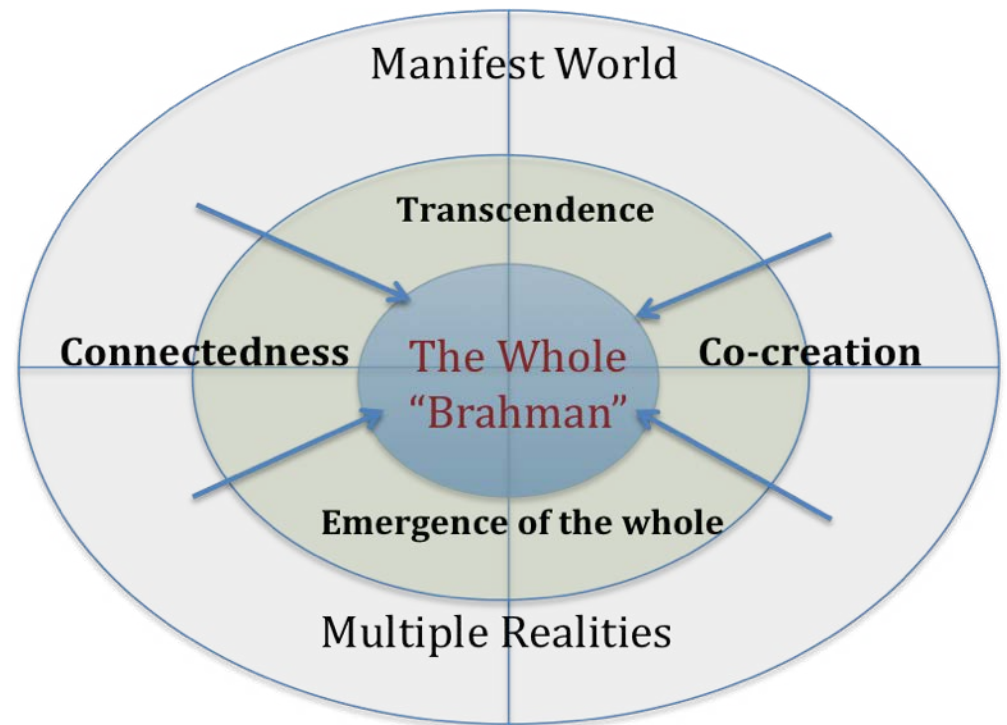
The dynamic process of interaction between the manifest world with multiple realities and the Whole or *Brahman* is depicted in Figure 1. The interaction is based on the four processes of transcendence, emergence, co-creation and connectedness. The Brahman emerges in its various forms that bring in the diversity of co-creation. The forms manifest in our experiences as stories, and when we inquire into each other's stories, we experience the deep connectedness between all forms. This awareness helps us to transcend the forms and to connect to the ultimate reality or Brahman. Chief Seattle, a 19th century Native American tribal leader from the west coast of the USA, once said "man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it." Fritjof Capra used the metaphor as the title of his 1997 book, *The Web of Life*.

'Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it.' Chief Seattle

Daoism and Advaita

Similar views are shared by other eastern philosophies: in Daoist metaphysics yin and yang are not opposing forces (dualities), but complementary forces; unseen (hidden, feminine) and seen (manifest, masculine), which interact to form a greater whole as part of a dynamic system. Everything has both yin and yang aspects; light could not be understood if darkness did not exist, and shadow cannot exist without light. In Daoist metaphysics, good–bad distinctions and other dichotomous moral judgments are perceptual and not real, and yin–yang is an indivisible whole, which closely resembles Brahman in Advaita.

Quantum physics mirrors the Advaita philosophy in its approach. In the mental experiment called "Schrodinger's cat", the cat inside the box is both living or dead, and yet neither living nor dead. The quantum cat lives parallel lives in perfectly possible stories. Hence the reality of the cat is in the eyes of the observer, who has no way to know the absolute truth.

Similarities linking Appreciative Inquiry to Advaita

In Appreciative Inquiry, stories are the means of understanding our deep human connectedness. They help us understand that each person has his or her own understanding of what is real, and what is believed to be true. But it is also a place where we are in touch with our interconnectedness and commonality. This raises the level of consciousness and we can let go of our positions, and value and even embrace differences. It allows us to see the world anew by changing the lens with which we view the world. It enables the collective to write a new story for the common future.

The principles of Appreciative Inquiry can be understood from the perspective of Advaita as described below:

Appreciative Inquiry	Advaita
Constructionist principle There are multiple social realities and it matters what we focus on. The way we know is fateful.	Everyday reality as we understand it is a construction of the mind (*maya*). The absolute truth can be experienced only when we transcend our construction of reality.
Heliotropic and positive principles There are multiple themes generated from the stories. The link that connects them is the essence, the life-giving energy.	It is unimportant how we label reality, since what we are labelling is the form and not the essence. The essence has no label.
Simultaneity principle When we change the questions we ask we change what we look at and the world we live in.	We cannot split reality, but we choose to see what we want to see. Good and evil are how we experience the manifestation. The core or Brahman is neither good nor evil, it just is.
Poetic principle The metaphors we use are endless sources of learning, inspiration and interpretations. What we focus on grows.	Brahman is *Sat Chit Ananda*. Truth, essence and bliss and can only be experienced, not described, and are the real source of energy.
Anticipatory principle A positive image creates positive action and the energy to bring about a new future, breaking the cycle of current problems.	*Moksha*, or liberation from the world of the illusion (maya) created by "name and form", helps us move from darkness to light and from ignorance to learning.

By not labelling the experience or its meaning, we honor the truth of the storyteller.

Conclusions

Appreciative Inquiry is inclusive in its philosophy. Maybe this is why AI has such universal appeal, and is effective and magical in all parts of the world. We can see in it what we relate to, what we believe in from our ancient wisdom and tradition. It calls us from a deeper place of knowing. However, AI is often approached with a perspective that only a positive experience can be life giving. Perhaps what is important is the meaning that was made of the experience. In our practice, we appreciatively inquire into what is energizing and life giving, without labelling anything as positive or negative. These are societal constructs that can, and do, vary between individuals and societies. By not labelling the experience or its meaning, we honor the truth of the storyteller, which is the essence, or Brahman. Our invitation is to inquire into that essence in people, organizations and communities.

In our experience, when we as AI practitioners hold the space without polarizing and honor the truth of the storyteller, something beyond the obvious happens, something very generative, vibrant and almost magical.

We invite you to a place of a different knowing, where we can connect to our ancient wisdom and transform our beliefs of looking at our world.

Om purnamadah purnamidam purnaat purnamudachyate,
purnasya purnamadaya purnamevaavashishyate.
Isha Upanishad.

"That Brahman is whole
This creation is also whole
From that whole, this whole has come out
Even though this whole has come out from that whole
Yet that whole remains whole only."
Translated from Sanskrit

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