

Were Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda Synaesthetes?

ASIM CHAUDHURI

One who has synaesthesia is called synaesthete. Synaesthesia, if one has never heard of the term, is the opposite of ‘Anaesthesia’. ‘Syn’ stands for ‘together’ in Greek, ‘aesthesia’ means ‘perception’. Loosely translated, it means ‘perceiving together’; anaesthesia, therefore, means lack of perception.

There was a remarkable incident where Sri Ramakrishna felt the pain of one boatman, when that boatman was struck by another boatman.¹ Even the marks made by the boatman hitting the other appeared on Sri Ramakrishna’s body. ‘Though rare’, it has been said by way of explanation, ‘such things happen in the lives of those who are very sensitive and who have great sympathy* [empathy] for others.’² A similar thing happened to Swamiji as he felt pain in his ribs while watching a Bhutia (resident of Bhutan) woman stumble and fall with load on her back. The explanation given above is correct in a general sense. But the heightened empathic response might have been caused by a complex neurological phenomenon dealing with brain and nerves called synaesthesia, which will make both Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji synaesthetes. Both of them were perceiving the feeling of pain together with the victims, Sri Ramakrishna with the boatman, and Swamiji with the injured Bhutia woman.

For a long time, reports of synaesthesia-like behaviour were attributed to various causes, including an overactive imagination,

mental illness, drug-induced hallucinations, or supernatural abilities. It is only in the last few decades that the authenticity of synaesthetic experiences and mechanisms that contribute to them has been explored in depth as a medical condition. A synaesthete neurologist, whose personal experiences have been discussed later in the article, calls it a *trait*, or a *variant*. The renewed research on the subject has made scientists use scanning images to look for differences in brain structure and connectivity between synaesthetes and non-synaesthetes.

This is not a truly scientific article, but rather an empirical one, with a scientific bias. The article describes the incidents in further detail and shows how synaesthesia could have played a role in their sensations, citing modern examples of this phenomenon at work. It may, however, be presumptuous to attribute to personalities such as Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji a mundane trait, but Swamiji probably would have endorsed an attempt to explain their paranormal experiences from a scientific point of view.

The boatman episode involving Sri Ramakrishna

As recounted by Mahendranath Datta in his book cited previously, once Sri Ramakrishna was intently watching a fight between two boatmen on the Ganges at Dakshineshwar. Needless to say, he was watching the confrontation with his customary rapt attention. The boatman who

was struck developed marks on his body. Sri Ramakrishna, as he was watching that, developed the marks at the same places in his body. Hriday Mukherjee, who was attending him at the time, saw those marks and became impatient to appropriately punish the person who struck the Master and left marks on him. Sri Ramakrishna allayed Hriday's fear and said, 'Can't you see one boatman striking another? It is for that reason the marks appeared on my body.'

The Bhutia woman episode involving Swamiji

After he returned from his first trip to the West, Swamiji went to Darjeeling to recoup his failing health. The incident happened there and was reported as follows:

One day, when he was out for a morning walk, he was pained to see a Bhutia woman trudging along with a heavy load on her back. Those who were with Swamiji noticed Swamiji's feeling for her, sharing every bit of her suffering as it were! Suddenly the woman stumbled and fell down with all her burden. She sustained serious injuries to her ribs. But Swamiji also felt excruciating pain in his ribs at the same time. He stood still for some time, then said, 'I cannot move. I am suffering from terrible pain!' The companions asked, 'Where do you feel the pain Swamiji?' Pointing to his ribs, Swamiji said: 'Right here! Did you not see how badly that woman was injured a few moments ago?'³

Synaesthesia: Modern examples, one involving a neurologist

Wikipedia defines synaesthesia as 'a perceptual phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway.' There are many forms of synaesthesia. A detailed discussion of all the forms is beyond the scope of the

present article, but the one that most resembles the experiences of Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji is called 'Mirror-touch Synaesthesia', and it has aroused significant interest among neuroscientists in recent years. This is a form of synaesthesia where if the synaesthete observes someone being struck on the head, the synaesthete involuntarily feels a strike on his own head; there could even be a mark on his head in some extreme cases. The term mirror, in this case, just means that one is mirroring the other person's sensations, or feeling what he feels. This type of synaesthetes have been shown to have higher empathy levels, much higher, compared to the general population. This can also be construed in terms of over-extension of the bodily self into others.

When a politician says to a potential voter, 'I feel your pain', he is probably fishing for votes rather than being empathic. But when Dr Joel Salinas, the Harvard-trained neurologist, says that he feels the patient's pain, he really does so because he is, admittedly, a synaesthete by nature. Dr Salinas specializes in brain health, with emphasis in neuropsychiatry and cognitive behavioural neurology, and is attached to both Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital. He now shares his experiences as a synaesthete, and explains the science of synaesthesia, in his earnest and revelatory memoir: *Mirror Touch*.⁴

Without going deep into the neurological details, Dr Salinas's book and other references will be used to explain Sri Ramakrishna's and Swamiji's behaviours of extreme empathy in the episodes.

As a modern example of the phenomenon at work, Dr Salinas's personal experience in his own words, while looking at a man having a cardiac arrest, was as follows:

Right around the corner from our office, a man was unconscious on the ground....I was absorbed in the man in cardiac arrest, fully immersed in his bodily experience. The sensations in my body mirrored the sensations in his. Compression after compression on his chest and on mine. I felt my own vocal chords tighten as doctors slid a tube down his throat—a sharp object shoved down the back of *my* throat....But, as the doctors continued chest compressions, I felt my back pressed firmly against the linoleum floor, my limp body buckling under each compression, my chest swelling with each artificial breath squeezed into me through a tube, a hollow slipping sensation.

I was dying, but I was not.⁵

Dr Salinas has that rare medical condition: by genetic disposition, he is a synaesthete since his childhood. But we are dealing with only mirror-touch synaesthesia here. He is peculiarly attuned to the sensations of others around him. If he sees someone slapped, he feels a hint of the slap himself.

Once Dr Salinas was in London attending a symposium on mirror-touch synaesthesia arranged by the U.K. Synaesthesia Association (yes, there is truly an association by that name) where a lady named Fiona Torrance related her own experience.⁶ She said she was sitting in her car in a parking lot where two people were fighting over a parking space. During the altercation, one man punched the other. She felt the punch and passed out. The medical team attending her thought she probably had a seizure of some sort. Later, she learned that it was mirror-touch synaesthesia and felt validated. Sri Ramakrishna had a similar sensation watching the boatmen fight each other. Fiona was probably a born synaesthete. But how did Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji acquire that trait will be discussed next.

Meditation might enhance synaesthetic potential

Dr Salinas and Fiona Torrance were synaesthetes since their childhood, maybe because of their genetic neurological make-up. They did not cultivate it. There were a lot of incidents in Sri Ramakrishna's life, which make him appear a synaesthete since childhood. One such incident among many was documented as follows:

Whenever his [Sri Ramakrishna's] mind, which was naturally one-pointed, became absorbed in a particular object, his body-consciousness almost vanished and he became completely identified with the idea on which he set his mind.... He would then lose himself completely and enter the unknown, distant, and solitary domain of the spirit. The experience we shall now relate also had its origin in the boy's tendency to the spiritual contemplation of beauty. One day, while roaming carefree in the fields, Gadadhar looked up at the sky and saw a newly formed dark cloud and against it, the rhythmic movement of a flock of cranes in full flight, with their snow-white wings outspread. The boy became so completely absorbed in the beauty of it all, that awareness of his own body and of all other earthly things vanished altogether, and he fell down unconscious.⁷

Although the related story does not represent a case of mirror-touch synaesthesia, the paragraph accurately describes the workings of a synaesthete's mind, as Dr Salinas was also absorbed in the man having a heart attack, and identified with the man's bodily experience, losing his own body-consciousness. An intense attention to the incidents, coupled with a heightened sense of empathy, or sensory sensitivity, seemed to drive the salience of

Dr Salinas's and Sri Ramakrishna's synaesthetic experiences.

There are not many documented instances in Swamiji's very early life that would make him a synaesthete by nature. However, meditation has been shown to cultivate synaesthesia, because the goals of meditation are to increase the sensory sensitivity. Meditation, in other words, can unleash our hidden synaesthetic potential. That was what probably happened to Swamiji, as shown by his comments to Swami Turiyananda on the eve of his departure to the U.S.⁸ He said, 'Believe me, I feel intensely indeed.' We have to believe him when he says that. In the entire Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, there is only one instance where 'mirror-touch synaesthesia' has been mentioned in passing, and that was with reference to Swamiji's 'Bhutia woman episode' indicating his heightened empathic nature.⁹

An empirical study has actually linked meditation to synaesthesia. Seventy-five Buddhist meditators and a comparison group of 39 medical students were surveyed as subjects by Dr Roger Walsh, a professor of psychiatry in the medical school of University of California in Irvine. He found, in questionnaire surveys, that 35% of the meditation retreatants, 63% of a group of regular meditators, and 86% of advanced meditation teachers claimed to have experienced synaesthesia, and their responses displayed significant correlations with amount of meditation experience. 'A review of ancient texts found reports suggestive of synaesthesia in advanced meditators from India and China. These findings suggest that synaesthesia may be cultivated by meditation, and that laboratory studies of meditators could be rewarding,' he noted.¹⁰ He further noted that synaesthesia could be innate in rare individuals, and could be enhanced by

meditation; ancient texts from both China and India describe apparent synaesthesia in advanced contemplatives.¹¹ That probably explains Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji's behaviours. Dr Walsh did not discuss the mirror-touch variety in particular, but dealt with general synaesthesia.

Once Priya Nath Sinha went to see Swamiji with his friends who wanted to ask Swamiji about *prānāyām*. But before they could ask, Swamiji answered the questions they had in their minds. Later, Priya Nath Sinha asked Swamiji how he knew the questions beforehand. Swamiji replied: 'Similar occurrences having come to pass many times in the West, people often used to ask me, "How could you know the questions that were agitating our minds?" This knowledge does not happen to me so often, but with Shri Ramakrishna it was almost always there.'¹² It is entirely possible that this sort of supernatural things happen to synaesthetes. Instead of mirror-touch, it may be called *mirror-thought* synaesthesia. There is a prevailing thinking among some researchers that it may be necessary for spiritually illumined people to have synaesthesia as a trait.

Concluding remarks

It has been shown that both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda were synaesthetes. Sri Ramakrishna was probably so from his childhood, and meditation later enhanced his perceptual sensitivity. In the absence of any tell-tale episodes from his childhood, it can be assumed that Swamiji acquired this trait later in life through meditation, although that was not his objective. If deep meditators with increased sensory sensitivity experience mirror-touch synaesthesia, or just synaesthesia, then one wonders, why didn't the other *antarangas* (members of the inner circle) of Sri Ramakrishna feel similar sensations? Maybe

they did, but never revealed them, thinking that those were of no major significance. Moreover, the Master's, or Swamiji's life events, including those that were paranormal, are better documented than those of the others. This gives us a chance to analyze the Master and Swamiji's unusual behaviours in modern neurophysiological terms. ■

Note: **Sympathy* and *empathy* are not synonymous. *Sympathy* means you can understand other people's situations from your own point of view. *Empathy* means you can see and feel things another person is experiencing as if you were experiencing them yourself. It is like putting yourself in the other person's shoes.

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* A resident of USA, Sri Asim Chaudhuri is an eminent writer and a Vivekananda scholar. He is the author of several books on Swami Vivekananda.

The word Vedanta must cover the whole ground of Indian religious life, and being part of the Vedas, by all acceptance it is the most ancient literature that we have; for whatever might be the idea of modern scholars, the Hindus are not ready to admit that parts of the Vedas were written at one time and parts were written at another time. They of course still hold on to their belief that the Vedas as a whole were produced at the same time, rather if I may say so, that they were never produced, but that they always existed in the mind of the Lord. This is what I mean by the word Vedanta, that it covers the ground of dualism, of qualified monism, and Advaitism in India. Perhaps we may even take in parts of Buddhism, and of Jainism too, if they would come in—for our hearts are sufficiently large. But it is they that will not come in, we are ready; for upon severe analysis you will always find that the essence of Buddhism was all borrowed from the same Upanishads; even the ethics, the so-called great and wonderful ethics of Buddhism, were there word for word, in some one or other of the Upanishads; and so all the good doctrines of the Jains were there, minus their vagaries. In the Upanishads, also, we find the germs of all the subsequent development of Indian religious thought. ■

—Swami Vivekananda