

Painting: from traditional to intuitive. Exploring artistic practice together with professor Ram Chandra Shukla, through his work

I have met Ram Chandra Shukla during my second journey in India. It was at the opening of an exhibition of art works at Banaras Hindu University. As a retired professor and former head of the Department of Painting, he was invited to join the jury of graduating master students, as a guest. His appearance was distinguished yet casual, of a wise man who enjoyed chatting freely with students. He seemed interested more in how they think than in influencing them. We watched the works together. He kept asking me what do I think about a drawing or another and why, which was my favourite, what do I look for in a work of art, what speaks or not to me and so on. He wrote his home address and telephone number in my tiny notebook, and invited me to visit if I will travel to Allahabad, which I have done, a few months later. He showed me drawings and paintings from various periods in his life: traditional, some sort of modern (while rejecting western modernism) and his recent work, which he called intuitive painting. He invited me to write about his work, which came a surprise, as I am no art critic. He insisted, saying he thinks I understand the process. Thinking how to go about it, I decided to interview him and see what comes out while talking.

luliana: I'm here to interview you, and as I was preparing for it these days, I was thinking - it is not an easy job. I was wondering how far can we go in knowing each other through talking - using words, exchanging ideas, assumptions and so on - knowing what is beyond the thought, the words, and I thought perhaps we can only go as far as we can go in knowing oneself through words. Which means that this interview is not just an interview but an exploration. There will be questions I also have for myself. It's not only trying to understand your work, but also trying to understand through your experience, through the dialogue, anything that comes up.

Prof. Shukla: Yes, I think that an interview may be able to expose the ideas of a person, yet it is rather difficult to actually enter his heart or the mind of a person by mere questioning. It takes time to know a person but since our time is limited, we have to depend on this.

The maid interrupted for a second, bringing delicious chai, channa and homemade sweets: "Dadaji, Nasta".

luliana: Yesterday I said to myself, while looking at your previous work - "This is the past". The past. And the Past is dead. Every single thing that professor Shukla has created, painted and thought at some moment in time, before right now, everything has died at the moment it has been expressed, and something else, new, came the following moment. By now, all the things that I have watched are dissolved, and Professor Shukla sitting in front of me may be - I guess it is - a totally different person.

Prof. Shukla: Yes, you are right. I also feel that I have never tried to remember the past. I don't believe in my past. I generally try to be in the present and if possible, to think about the future. So, whatever you have seen in this book, my previous paintings, done over a stretch of forty - fifty years, I am quite different now, my work is different. My personality is like that: I may do a thing but next time I would not like to do it in the same way. The experiences that I have now are different than those I had previously, so you will see the changes in my work as well.

luliana: As you say, this is what the mind is made off: impressions, memories of experiences. Each new experience will leave a new impression, a memory in our mind, and in this way the mind continuously refreshes itself, every day an idea may die, and new ideas are stored in the mind. If we look through your previous work, we can see several, more or less distinct styles, perhaps representing various periods of your life. Looking back, if you would have to make a selection, do you have your favourite paintings?

Prof. Shukla: I sometimes feel that my paintings are like my children to me. I've never, hardly sold any paintings, as you know, and I have a love for them. I can't say, but if I see all the paintings, I may be able to say: that one I like better than the other, but actually I like all my paintings. There is no question which one is better. Because you see, at that moment when I was doing it, I did it; and how to compare a moment to another one? Each one was done in a particular moment and expresses that moment.

Iuliana: We see indeed a lot a variation in the way you paint and still we can see, you *are* an Indian painter. I read something yesterday and I would like to try an analogy with music: *in Indian raga music, there are some predefined frames, and in this context, there is full 'scope' for improvisation. The musician may eventually fully improvise within the traditional, inherited frames.* Do you recognise something like this in your painting?

Prof. Shukla: You see, India in a way has always been in favour of tradition. And there are long traditions, in painting, music, philosophy, religion. It is very difficult for someone to get out of that tradition, because you are born in it and it is very strong. The way tradition works is just as when a baby learns a language: in the beginning he imitates his parents, the way they speak, in order to communicate, to learn the words. In the same way, in any field, we follow the tradition while we are learning. But when you have learned - suppose in painting - from your guru how to use the materials, the colours, the brushes and all that, then you can become free. If you want to express yourself the tradition will not help. Everyone is born with a different body, a different mind, thinking; if that is to be expressed, then we have to go beyond tradition. I have learned traditional painting in the beginning with my guru, but as soon as I learned the techniques and the materials and all those things, I tried to become totally free, and began to experiment with my own ideas. Tradition is important as far as the beginning is concerned; afterwards, if you have the capacity to create new things, then you certainly want to change things.

Iuliana: Perhaps when an artist is aware of the fact that he/she is working within a certain tradition, having little space for innovation, own creativity and expression, one can take the freedom to explore more and sees everything - including the tradition - as a vast range of choices for inspiration.

Prof. Shukla: Yes, the choice is always there, but for most people it is very easy to follow the tradition. You see a thing and you follow it; you are not supposed to use much of your own mind. You watch and imitate your parents, your teachers. That also is a way. I don't say that there is nothing good in it. Every country, set of people, have a tradition, everywhere. If you look at my paintings, my previous work and even today, you will find symbols. I try to express with the help of symbols. Symbols have a very powerful expression and they have been a long tradition in India. I have also used symbols in my work, but not in the same way other artists were doing. I feel free to use old symbols, new symbols, as well as my own, created symbols.

Iuliana: I feel very much the same. When one follows tradition, remains on the well-known and accepted paths, it is indeed easy, perhaps no big questions will arise. Society will accept what one is doing partly because his/her approaches are familiar. The challenge is "freedom from the known". Do we dare to experiment, to step out of the known, out of the tradition, and to explore by ourselves?

Prof. Shukla: Yes. It is like that in painting. When people see traditional painting they easily like it. Because they recognise the forms, the colours, the motifs, the figures and characters. Let's take Rama, Krishna, Radha, Shiva and all those. Because these symbols are already known, when a person watches, recognises them and thinks he understands. But what a modern painter feels, is that he wants to paint his own times. What we are living today is more important than what we have not seen. We have not seen Akbar, why paint Akbar? We have not seen Ram, why paint him? And Krishna?

Iuliana: True. And still, professor Shukla - hundreds, thousands of years ago, we were doing the same thing: we have not seen Ram, yet painted Ram, and Krishna, and the other gods. I feel that religion is something that is rather alive. Perhaps the main lines, whatever was there in the beginning, the core message, should remain unchanged. But as time passes, as we are continuously changing, transforming, our understanding and the way we see religion changes. I find it justified to look at religion with an eye of a modern artist and, why not, to represent it again, if one feels like that.

Prof. Shukla: Well you see, because religion is always traditional. If they don't follow tradition, religion would be nowhere. It is essential for those who want to be religious to follow tradition. In every part of the world, the traditions

exist, and it is very difficult to change that to your own way, nobody will like it.

Iuliana: Yes. But that is the challenge, the risk that the artist may take. I think everything that we have in terms of scriptures, myths, the Vedas, the Bible, the Quran, paintings of Buddha and so on, all is made by human hand, is written by the followers, those who have been very near to such prophets. But all that was created in a specific context: social, historic, geographic; everything was in a certain way at the time these things were written/painted. My question is: today, in our specific context, can we look at religion with our own eyes, get inspired and eventually re-present it in today's languages?

Prof. Shukla: What I feel is that there is hardly any use to think of the past, of the epics, religion. See, there are many gods and goddesses. Sarasvati for example is the goddess of knowledge. Why do we talk about Sarasvati? Paint knowledge in your own way. Why should you follow religion, tradition?

Iuliana: That would mean leaving aside the symbol.

Prof. Shukla: Yes. Why should we say, "goddess of knowledge"?

Iuliana: It's a way of saying, people perhaps always needed symbols.

Prof. Shukla: That is the past. But today eventually, what we want is to express what knowledge is. Why should I call it goddess Sarasvati? I say I paint knowledge. The artist's own expression is more important than the past and the names and so on.

Iuliana: What I feel is that there is an ongoing fascination, relationship that people have with religion, and that is what keeps it alive. We love it or we hate it, yet in so many ideas and actions we relate to it or refer to it, daily.

Prof. Shukla: Yes. Let's take Ramayana, our great epic. Every line is interpreted in a new light even today, there is a lot of discussion about what it meant. While reading it and interpreting it again today, there are changes made, and people not always agree on the meaning of various verses.

Iuliana: Reading and interpretation of religion continuously changes, and people keep finding inspiration in their own or different religions, motivation, even justification for their actions. People kill, protest and perform rituals, charity and sacrifices in the name of religion. These are all signs that religions are alive. It is like the raga music in which there are the main lines - the stories - like a frame, a space in which we keep improvising, interpreting according to our own needs and originality.

Prof. Shukla: What the artist feels, talking about Raga: sometimes I feel that I don't want any particular frame, or a particular area that I have to be in and I can't transcend. Any type of frame limits us and today the artist doesn't like to have limitations. Your mind can go beyond all that, so why should you accept any frame or limitation?

Iuliana: I don't say one should. It can be a free choice, when one is free - as far as we can be free as human beings, as thinkers. We may choose to work totally outside of such frames or traditions or take some of the inherited symbols or forms and use them as elements in our own process.

Prof. Shukla: That is also possible, and inherent. Even as we speak, we are using words; these words are symbols so how can we say...

Iuliana: So, we can never be free... (laughing).

Prof. Shukla: Yes, because language is symbolic. And if I speak in a language that you don't understand, that would be meaningless. We have to use symbols in language, and similarly, if you want your art to be appreciated by people, you should use a language that is understood by them.

Iuliana: What you are saying brings me to another question I had in mind. Do you need, as an artist, to be understood, to be appreciated? What happens when the message of your work doesn't reach the destination?

Prof. Shukla: This is a good question. A poet, a singer, an artist, if they create something - paint or write, why do they create? Why paint, why write, what for? There are many possible answers. Some paint to sell the paintings, to make money. But there are artists who do not earn money by their art. They like it, they like that act. They enjoy doing that work so they do it. I think that firstly, the artist enjoys the work, enjoys the act, and doesn't think about what will happen afterwards. If people will accept it or not, like it or not, whether they will exhibit or not - at least I don't think about that. But one thing I want. Because human beings are always trying to help the growing of society, trying to search something: the truth. If I feel like I might have found something through my search, should I not share it with others, so that they can also be benefited? It isn't about me or my paintings getting appreciation, no. That is not important. But if I have been able to get nearer to the truth, that truth must be shared, so that they may be also benefited.

Iuliana: When you are performing the act of sharing that truth, of showing that work, it might happen that others will not understand. How would that feel, if that happens - if they can't see the message of your work?

Prof. Shukla: It is difficult to say... Sometimes, I feel that if you try to change your language, so that others will understand, it doesn't always work. Every person is different, and everyone contributes according to his personality. If you allow him to be free, to express in his own way, then he will be able to come to a real achievement. Otherwise, if you ask him to adjust, to speak in a particular language, he may not be very successful. You know that I also write. Why do I write? Because I felt that - as sometimes the language of our paintings is not properly known - there are difficulties in understanding the work. I see it as my duty to write about the language we use, to make the understanding of our paintings easier. But whatever I try, do you think that after reading my books, another person will be able to go into the depth of my painting or another artist's work? To some extent we can help people by art theory, we may have art education, but this doesn't mean that anyone will be able to understand or to realize the painting in totality.

Iuliana: When you decided to step out of traditional painting, of the teachings of your guru, how did you feel? Did it feel like a challenge, a risk, was it joy, was it fear, how did it feel?

Prof. Shukla: I remember, from the very beginning, even though I learned the techniques from my guru, as far as my expression concerned I did not follow his style, his tradition. I always tried to create my own language, and I tried to express what was in myself. As we said, it is easy for a person to follow a tradition and get appreciation. But if you have something in yourself that you want to express, it is not possible to do that within a limited frame. You need to be totally free to express that. And I think from the very beginning I felt like this; I did not want to tread the paths of others. I wanted to be free, as far as my expression was concerned.

Iuliana: And how did that feel, that freedom? Was it like a weight, a fight, a struggle, did you feel that you needed to break with something?

Prof. Shukla: No, because you see... I never had in mind selling my paintings or anything like that. Those who have such worry, they need to look at the likings of other people.

Iuliana: It's not only about money. It's about being appreciated, I mean understood.

Prof. Shukla: I was always firstly interested in expressing myself and only secondly in knowing how much my paintings are being appreciated or understood by others. That was not the problem, because I enjoy painting. I enjoy expressing myself and that gives me relief.

Iuliana: Alright, so there are two aspects. On one side, as an artist, you were free and that felt good because you enjoy painting, disregarding of the appreciation of your work by others. On the other side, when you share your work, it is important that the public, knows the language so that they can grasp the message.

Prof. Shukla: You see, while painting I am happy, I am enjoying. Mostly my painting is for myself, not so much for

others. But if I have painted something that others can also enjoy, I am more than happy. However, that is not my condition that whatever I paint, must be appreciated. No. I mean, if people like it, it's all right, I'm happy. But it is not my condition. I have done my work. As a plant grows, a flower comes out, it doesn't expect any appreciation. It is its happiness that has come out in the form of a flower. For the society, for its development, it is important that whatever her leaders, her artists have expressed, should be understood, so that other people may also reach that high. The culture has been built by those who led the people, having their own purpose. And particularly the artist - the poet, the painter - does not worry about what will happen to his work, they just have this urge, this "I must". All artists are searching truth. Just like scientists, they also search for truth. And those who think that they have come nearer to truth, they write about it, paint it, share it - so that others may also come to that level. But who has got the truth, nobody knows.

Iuliana: So, with other words, professor Shukla, the engaged human being, the man that lives in this society, would like the society to see the message of his painting, just as he would like people to see the beauty of a flower... and Ram Chandra Shukla the artist, while he paints, he doesn't care if someone will appreciate or understand his work, just as the flower has no worries about who will see her or not...

Prof. Shukla: Yes, yes.

It was time for a break, we were talking for about an hour. Chai and sweets were brought to us, exactly what I needed to refresh and recharge for the next part. Professor Shukla has made a paan for himself.

Iuliana: Professor Shukla, you said that when you are painting, you are trying to express yourself. Now let's talk about that self. What is the self you are trying to express?

Prof. Shukla: If I knew what self is, then there would have been no need to express it. Because we don't know the self we are trying to express it. Once you know what that is - yourself - there is no need to create or to express anything.

Iuliana: With other words, as long as we need to express *something*, it is because we are searching for that *something*. It is our own exploration, our quest for that *something*, and we express it again and again, so that we can see if we can grasp it, if we can get closer to it.

Prof. Shukla: Yes, yes, that is the process.

Iuliana: And looking at your work, how do you feel about that self - that we may not be able to express now in words - for how far is it there in your paintings? How much of it have you succeeded to grasp in your work?

Prof. Shukla: I can't evaluate that. Only I can say that while painting, I get a pleasure and that is more important to me, to get that pleasure. I never think about how well I have expressed, what are my shortcomings, what else has to be achieved and all those things. I just want to be totally free to paint and to express whatever is there; and the self, I don't know what is that self.

Iuliana: You say when you paint, you experience a kind of pleasure. Where do you think that comes from?

Prof. Shukla: It is a difficult question, from where does it come... You do know when you feel happiness, you are happy - that feeling is there. Just like now, we took some sweets, we know that they were delicious, that is enough. While I am painting, I am enjoying. But how far I am enjoying, why I am enjoying? It is the act of painting that is enjoyable.

Iuliana: Have you tried to go into the nature of this pleasure, of this joy, have you tried to understand where is this joy coming from? Why do you think you experience that joy in painting, and not in some other activity?

Prof. Shukla: You see, it is like when you go in the garden, you may see hundreds of flowers and out of them, you may select one and say, "I like this one the most". Similarly, with work, in life, there are many ways one can get enjoyment. I

find that the most important enjoyment was during my painting periods.

Iuliana: I'm asking this, because you said that when you are painting, you are trying to express yourself, and expressing the self is inquiring, exploring, trying to grasp that self and also you said that there is pleasure when you paint. So, there is pleasure in this search, in this exploration of the self. Is this correct?

Prof. Shukla: Yes, yes. But if you are asking me what is that self, that is not answerable. Because that is not answerable. I mean, self, as we call it in Indian philosophy, is atman. And we say in our philosophy that atman is like param-atman, like God.

Iuliana: Atman and param-atman, the personal and the universal soul.

Prof. Shukla: Yes. And once you know what is your atman - what we call self-realization - you have reached your aim. It means to know, to realize your-self. Then, there is nothing left for you to live for, nor to do anything.

Iuliana: That makes me think of what the rishi Dirghatamas has said, according to the RigVeda: "I know not clearly whether I am the same as this Cosmos; a mystery I am, yet, conceited in mind, I wonder". Talking about the soul - atman the personal and param-atman the universal soul - perhaps we can't say whether they are the same.

Prof. Shukla: Yes. In our philosophy it is always said that we are not the body. The body is perishable; those things that remain, those things that never perish, that is atman. What is that? As I told you the other day, when we were talking about *sanātana*, that what you cannot touch, you cannot see, but it is always there.

Iuliana: All right, that is what is said in the philosophy. My question is, do you know that? Do you feel that for yourself? No matter how we call it - atman or soul - that thing that we cannot touch, cannot see, what they say in the ancient scriptures that the real self is - can we feel this in ourselves? Do we have that knowledge, that awareness, that intuition inside? We are in this journey of expressing, of finding the self with our mind, right? When Professor Shukla paints, his conscious mind is there, it works: the coordination between the eye, the hand, the fingers... if you draw a face, the two eyes make sense, there is a mouth, or not - still there is a logic; there is 'rational mind' working in that act of painting. There is another beautiful verse that comes to my mind from the Veda. It talks about "the sacrifice of the mind" for the sake of Purusa, the only true seer. "This Purusa, is not yours or mine, it is the true power of seeing". So, when you paint, this pure power of seeing - Purusa, as well as the conscious mind - chitta, perhaps are both there. I am wondering whether you are aware of that. I also remember, three years ago when we first met, you have stopped painting; you said you wanted to forget yourself. What has happened at that time?

Prof. Shukla: When I said I wanted to forget myself, I was talking about something else. The world is so powerful and your relationship with that world, that you are sometimes getting lost, and you are no longer in yourself. There are so many things around that distract you, and you may feel lost, as if you were not there. Everything is there but you are not there. That can be a problem, that you have gone away from your atman. And when I say that I want to forget myself, it' is the lower self that I'm talking about, the one that is dominating sometimes. But the real Self, no one can forget, it is always there. Even if you forget it, the self is there. And you see, many times, we are just thinking about getting things, doing things for appreciation, thinking about our children, our property, living for the outside - the lower self. Then the other self, the inner self, we are not knowing it. Suppose in painting, say I want to paint you: I'm trying to paint your figure, your body. I may be able to paint it, but I might not be able to approach your atman, your soul. I may be happy to have drawn a good figure, but I have not touched the truth: that self, the inner self - that is to be expressed; and that we are trying to express. Since I started the intuitive painting, I never know what I am going to paint today. The only point is that I'm trying to bring out my inner self on paper. This way of painting - intuitive painting - is different from the making of a portrait or representing an object. Intuitive painting - what I am doing since last year - is only for expressing my inner soul, my atman.

Iuliana: Yes... I like the way you speak about the two selves: the lower self - the one that keeps us busy with the outside world, and the real self, atman - the one that you perhaps try to catch in your paintings.

Prof. Shukla: One thing: I don't *try*, actually I don't try to catch it. I don't try to know it even. It is an act, a natural act. If you are in search, the search is more important. What I am going to achieve, what is that I am searching, I do not know. Nobody knows. The act of searching itself is important. That is what I do. When I paint intuitively, I never know what I am searching for. If I knew what I was going to search or find, there was no need to search. Search is there only when you don't know a thing. But when you know a thing, there is no need for searching it.

Iuliana: But then... why are you painting? (smiling).

Prof. Shukla: See, what in Gita it is said, that karma is very important. And Karma is a thing from which you can't get away. Because you see, your eyes are tinkling - you don't want but they are tinkling; your nose is working and similarly your fingers are there; you can grasp this, you can throw things, paint and so on. You are always doing something. Someone may be a musician, may take this work, that profession, someone may paint. He doesn't know at that time why he is doing it. He only likes it. I like singing, I like painting. It gives me enjoyment. And you know - everybody is in search for enjoyment, in search of pleasure.

Iuliana: That is the enjoyment of the senses: the sense of seeing, of hearing - are you talking about the enjoyment of the senses?

Prof. Shukla: Not the senses. Because, suppose you are painting. If you are painting, where is the enjoyment of the senses? I am moving my hands, and with the help of my eyes (...) the sense is not the question. The enjoyment is not in the eyes. The eyes are only a medium. They convey whatever they are seeing to the mind, to the heart or to the atman. The eyes are not seeing. The Seer is your atman.

Iuliana: When you are enjoying the act of painting, intuitive painting lately - how would you describe that state, is it something like samadhi, or trance, or dhyana?

Prof. Shukla: Yes, to some extent, but you are not totally in samadhi. The conscious and the subconscious mind, the two are also there. At some moment you are subconscious or unconscious, the next moment you are conscious; this play goes on and you create something. If you would be only unconscious you can't paint; you have to be conscious so that you can move your hand.

Iuliana: With other words, in the act of painting, professor Shukla expresses himself as composed of the individual self - the personal memories, thinking, ideas; the social self - the context in which you have learned painting, your surroundings, the tradition; and perhaps the other self - the atman, part of the universal self, the param-atman. The three of them are there, in a play, as you say; are you aware which one of them is more present in a certain moment?

Prof. Shukla: No, I'm not aware at that moment... You see, throughout our life, we have experienced so many things, met so many people, seen so many places, had so many different feelings, moments of difficulty, of pleasure and so on; all those are accumulated within our self. And while painting, if you are totally free, if you are not dominated by any particular idea or a particular feeling, what you do is that - there is a gate, a flood gate - you are just able to open that flood gate, and the water will gust through. You don't know what that water is, what colour it will gust out. Similarly, if you open the flood gate of your mind, things will force themselves and come out on your canvas. They may be from your childhood, other periods of life, things stored in your mind; they will automatically come out.

Iuliana: From the unconscious mind...

Prof. Shukla: Yes, it is like in a dream let's say, or in trance: you don't know what things are coming out. It is like sadhana. It is like yoga: that you free your mind, you open the gate of your mind and let things pour in, on your canvas.

Iuliana: And still, the conscious mind is there...

Prof. Shukla: Yes..., because your hand has to move, to catch, and it is perhaps sometimes difficult. Because the mind, the forces of the mind are so strong and so much is coming out that sometimes it is difficult to... as if when you have a short hand, your hand is not able to paint the whole thing that is coming out...

Iuliana: And the conscious mind, does it know what is happening?

Prof. Shukla: No, you are only conscious to the extent that, well... this is colour, here you are required to put green, here required to put red, the brush is there, put it there or there - by the dictator of the self.

Iuliana: Is that atman - part of param-atman - who has his own action, Brahman, pure creation? Is that atman that manifests itself, that creates, that is the creator that actually puts together the conscious and the unconscious mind to work?

Prof. Shukla: Yes. This is a good idea... as we have to come back to our Indian philosophy, we say that He is the Creator and we are the medium. When we think that "I have done this and that. I am great." actually we are not doing anything; somebody is there who is dictating you to do a thing and you are just doing. See, there is a tree; there are seasons, there is water, there is dryness, there is heat, there are so many things - and the tree is growing. Is it growing by itself? It was just a seed; and from that seed it is growing, becoming a big tree. Is it his own effort to grow or is it somebody else's direction that makes the tree develop in this way? I mean to say that philosophically and spiritually, we don't know. We think that whatever we are doing is our own doing. But no; as the tree doesn't know - see it is getting air, water, so many things are interacting, and the tree is growing. Can a tree say "it is because of myself that I am growing"? Similarly, an artist is interacting with so many things, and who is asking him to do that? We don't know. If there is heat, the sun is very hot; what will you do? You have to avoid it and go to the shade. Who is asking you? The sun is asking you to go to the shade, he is directing you.

Iuliana: Professor Shukla, are you trying to say that life, this force that manifests in a tree, through which the tree is growing, just in the same way this creation is present in us, in our atman, and this is the creativity of the artist - and all the rest, our mind, conscious and unconscious - are materials used by this creation to manifest itself?

Prof. Shukla: Yes, yes.

We're both happily smiling, laughing...

Iuliana: Coming back to the Rigveda, as the rishi said: "I know not clearly whether I am the same as this Cosmos - as you say, we don't know - a mystery I am; yet, conceited in mind I wonder". Then he says "When the first born principle of R:ta entered me, then of this vak I obtained a portion". We don't know this actually; these are the words of Dirghatamas, according to the Rigveda. I personally don't know when this first-born principle entered me... but, we may wonder... and perhaps, this is the search. So Brahman, the pure creation, in the same way it uses the elements of the Earth to make this tree grow, uses our brain, our knowledge, our talent and so on to express itself. That was clear; now getting back to expressing the self that we are searching... and you said, if one knows, then one doesn't search, then there is no search.

Prof. Shukla: When you don't know, you search.

Iuliana: Hmm... then why are you still painting? (smiling, both).

Prof. Shukla: I think, this search is not a conscious search. You are not consciously searching. This search is directed by somebody else. If let's say, you want a glass of water; who is asking you that water?

Iuliana: The body.

Prof. Shukla: You can say that, but it is not the body. The body may be lying there and never demand a glass of water, suppose is a dead body. So, the demand is not of your body. Something, that we call self, that atman, (Life itself)

wants/needs water. So, if you are dead, that atman is not in connection with your body, then you will not demand anything. As long as you are living, the search goes on, and it is not your conscious effort to search. But the search always goes on. Just like the tree that is always growing.

Iuliana: There is always transformation.

Prof. Shukla: Yes. That transformation, that search is natural; you may know it, or you may not know it, the search goes on. I said sometimes that I need not paint. And I leave painting, I do many other things, not thinking about it. But after some time, I feel like I want to paint again; because there is an urge, and that inner urge - that I don't know who directs - that urge makes me do things.

Iuliana: Because that force, that movement of the self that wants to express himself through painting, it never stops, right?

Prof. Shukla: Yes... as it is said in our religion - the soul, atman, is like a drop of water. And then, there's the ocean. This drop of water always wants to mix with the ocean. Similarly, the atman and the param-atman; the atman has been in a way separated from the param-atman and it always searches to meet him again, by any means - such as painting or by any other medium.

Iuliana: This search of the drop of water - atman - that wants to meet the ocean, is not necessarily the search of not knowing; this drop may know that it is a part of the ocean. It is the desire for identification, the need to unite with the ocean that moves it.

Prof. Shukla: Yes, because if you are a partition, you are not the whole. And you want to become the whole. The drop wants to become the ocean. That process is always there, and that is beyond our command.

Iuliana: It is maybe the ocean that attracts the drop of water. The ocean attracts the drop of water, from which the drop receives this movement, that makes it want to be part of the ocean...

Prof. Shukla: Here I will ask you a question: why does that ocean separates the drop? Why throw it away from the ocean?

Iuliana: In order to know itself. If this drop is always inside the ocean, it may not know anything else, and also not know the greatness, the stillness, the immensity of the ocean. But when it comes out of the ocean, then from outside, it can see the ocean.

Prof. Shukla: What is the necessity for the ocean, why should the ocean separate the drop? Why it throws it away from itself?

Iuliana: It is maybe... I'm trying to answer (we're both laughing) as I said, because from outside, one can see? From inside, one can't see the ocean, as you come out of it, you can see it?

Prof. Shukla: Yes... but what is the need of doing even that?

Iuliana: Not you, or me - the ocean does that.

Prof. Shukla: What is the need? Why? (both laughing)

No... You see, what we in our religion and philosophy we say, is that god Krishna is like a player, and that play we call *lila*. Why this world is like this? Here are people taking birth, here are people dying... There are people playing, there are people happy, there are people unhappy... why? Why all these things are like that? And they are all the creation of that God. Why?

Iuliana: Why?

Prof. Shukla: Why? The answer is that He is playing!

Iuliana: Why is he playing?

Prof. Shukla: That is very difficult to say, because it is the play that is the connector.

Iuliana: Connector of what?

Prof. Shukla: Of that God; his connector, that is always there.

Iuliana: Why?

Prof. Shukla: Well... (laughing).

Iuliana: Please let's go into this, it is very interesting!

Prof. Shukla: No "why". This is a question to which there is no ultimate answer. You can go on and ask why and why, and there is no answer, after all. Because our knowledge, our expression is limited. And we are trying to know, to approach the biggest thing, the highest thing.

Iuliana: With other words, we are separated from God, and supposed to be attracted back to God because God is playing?

Prof. Shukla: Yes. This is what it is said, I mean in the scriptures. Or, look at the atom, made of protons and nucleons; the dance of the centre and these outer particles never stops. They are always dancing and running after each other. Why the atoms and these particles are always moving, who is making them move? It is the same...

Iuliana: When you say "God plays" actually, that is a way to say that there is always movement, which is the dynamic aspect of God, right? That dynamism, that movement is always there. It is that movement that creates the separation and it is through that movement that union is possible again, between the ocean and this drop. And actually...

Prof. Shukla: That will unite and separate, it will unite and then separate... and that goes on. This is play, this is *lila*.

Iuliana: And actually, this ocean - if we call this ocean God - its creation as well as its movement - is also God; so the separation and the drop is God, and the coming back in the ocean is God...

Prof. Shukla: Yes... yes... yes.

Iuliana: ... everything is the same - the ocean, the separation of the drop, the drop itself, and coming back in the ocean.

Prof. Shukla: Yes, they are not separate things. That is only a drama, a drama that is going on. *Lila* is going on. Things are moving on. Karma is going on, nobody can stop karma. Like in the movement of the atom, this action goes on, without anybody's demand or anybody's liking or disliking.

Iuliana: It is the intrinsic nature of life. Life lives itself... and we are just part of it, there is no choice.

Prof. Shukla: We are part of that game played by somebody; nobody knows who. But the game is going on, and we are part of it. The problem is that we think we are separated from this play, this ocean; and we are trying to know, "why I am small, how can I again meet with the ocean?" This is also natural and is going on, it will never end. The human goes on searching and searching, this is never going to end...

Iuliana: This is *sanātana*, it is eternal...

Prof. Shukla: Yes... (laughing) *sanātana*.

Iuliana: What is left for us to do?

Prof. Shukla: You are not the master of yourself, and if you ask: "what is left for us to do?", well you will have to do, you will do, and you are doing... you will go on doing, because you are not the master of yourself.

Iuliana: Am I just a small particle, like a tiny atom inside that movement, the whole movement of Creation?

Prof. Shukla: Yes. A particle doesn't know why it is moving, who is moving it... like in cosmos, there are so many planets, but who is moving them?

Iuliana: "I know not clearly whether I am the same as this Cosmos; a mystery I am, yet, conceited in mind, I wonder".

Prof. Shukla: Yes. And when you are nearing the truth, you will only wonder, "what is happening?" "what is this?". You can only wonder, you don't know why these things are going on... and no saint, no thinker has ever reached the zenith of the ultimate. So, the search will always go on. But there can be a particular moment when this search finishes. If you get that moment, whatever you were searching, you become that, and the search ends. When you become that which you were searching, there is no search and there is no question left.

Iuliana: There is no searcher, there is no seeker. There is nothing to be sought. When the drop reaches the ocean, the drop doesn't exist anymore. It has become part of the ocean.

Prof. Shukla: Yes... they are one.

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A few days later, I have visited professor Shukla again and asked him to make an intuitive drawing, one he would start with the words atman or param-atman in mind; not trying to explain or to represent anything, just take the words in the mind, as one does with a mantra, take a pen and paper and see what happens.



You have asked me to draw atman and param-atman. Well, I don't think it is so easy, but because you are asking me, I am trying. Suppose that I started here; this is a small point and this small point is atman. When this atman develops its consciousness, the consciousness circulates; this circle goes on developing, enlarging and there is no end to it. So that small point is the atman, but when it develops, it becomes the whole cosmos, and then there is no difference between the atman and the cosmos. But as long as it is just a point, it has not realized itself, it is only a small entity. But when it becomes conscious it begins to travel, it begins to know itself. And when he travels, he finds that his travel is finished, and he is nowhere, and he has become the param-atman. This is what I can say and actually I don't think that I am able to explain it, and I always say that to explain is to become itself; and when you become itself, then there is no question of explaining. So as long as I'm not able to realize it properly, I am talking, I am explaining. The moment I will realize it, there will be no question of explaining it, because you yourself have become param-atman and there is no question of explaining anything to anybody. Then you are telling everything to yourself and nobody else is there. Param-atman is only, and that is why, everything that we see in this world is all false. There is only one being and that is param-atman. The param-atman is the only thing which is there in this universe and that manifests itself in different forms, and we are a part of that - which we call atman. The atman and param-atman are trying to talk to each other and the small atman wants to again unite with param-atman and become one. Actually, they are one, they are not separate, but there is a feeling that they are separate things. It is param-atman which has created itself into different parts and knows that there is no difference between this part and that part. They are one. But that is his play and that is what they call *lila*.