

# MUSIC AS MEDITATIVE INQUIRY: DIALOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING AND COMPOSING INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC

ASHWANI KUMAR & ADRIAN M. DOWNEY

## ABSTRACT:

This dialogical paper explores Ashwani Kumar's concept of music as meditative inquiry and its implications for teaching, learning, and living. The notion of music as meditative inquiry is rooted in Kumar's journey of learning, composing, and researching Indian classical music. This paper makes use of an emerging methodological framework called *dialogical meditative inquiry* (DMI), which has been theorized by Kumar. Due to its emphasis on meditative and holistic listening, DMI goes beyond a usual interview where the intent is to elicit specific information. Through employing DMI to explore Kumar's ideas regarding music, meditative inquiry, and creativity, this paper engages with the following themes: 1) the role of rigour, discipline, and passion in learning music through the meditative inquiry approach, 2) the pursuit of music for spiritual and meditative exploration as different from using music as a means of entertainment, and 3) the implications of music as meditative inquiry for teaching, learning, and living with particular emphasis on the importance of creative play, experimentation, and originality.

## Bios:

**Ashwani Kumar** is Associate Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. His teaching and research focus upon meditative inquiry which is a self-reflective and aesthetic approach to teaching, learning, and

living. He has conceptualized several key curricular and pedagogical concepts, namely, *curriculum as meditative inquiry*, *teaching as meditative inquiry*, and *music as meditative inquiry*. He has also developed a contemplative research methodology called *dialogical meditative inquiry* to conduct subjective and inter-subjective qualitative research. He plays the harmonium and sings and composes Indian classical music. His current project focuses on researching the theory and practice of Indian classical music and their implications for the field of education. He is the author of two scholarly books: *Curriculum As Meditative Inquiry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Curriculum in International Contexts: Understanding colonial, ideological and neoliberal influences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019a).

**Adrian Downey** is a Mi'kmaw PhD Student at the University of New Brunswick, Canada, where he works in the following areas: curriculum studies, arts-informed research, poetic inquiry, Indigenous education, music education, environmental education, and spiritual philosophy. He has undergraduate degrees from Bishop's University in Music and Education, as well as a MAEd focused in curriculum studies from Mount Saint Vincent University. Before returning to graduate school he taught grade six and elementary music with the Cree School Board of Northern Quebec. In his spare time, he plays jazz guitar and listens to punk music.



Figure 1: Ashwani Kumar singing and playing the harmonium. Photo by Kapil Vyas.



Figure 2: Harmonium. Photo by Ashwani Kumar

## Introduction

This is a dialogical paper between myself (Ashwani Kumar) and Adrian Downey, which seeks to understand my idea of *music as meditative inquiry* and its implications for teaching, learning, and living. It provides an autobiographical and meditative exploration of my experiences with learning and composing Indian classical music (ICM)<sup>1</sup> and how it has informed my views regarding the meaning and purpose of life and education.

My creative, existential, and intellectual pursuits of exploring the interconnections between meditative inquiry and education have led me to venture into a new dimension of learning and discovery. While I have always been interested in ICM and the spiritual and meditative quality of the raga-based music,<sup>2</sup> it was in the year 2013 that I started my journey of learning Indian classical music. So far, my transition from being a “non-artist” to becoming an “artist” has been an incredible journey. I have not only begun to learn to play the harmonium<sup>3</sup> and to sing and compose raga-based compositions, but also to see the relevance of ICM for teaching and learning. My engagement with ICM has allowed me to conceive and theorize what I call *music as meditative inquiry*.

*Music as meditative inquiry implies an existential, creative, and spiritual perspective of music.* It underscores and celebrates the significance of freedom, intrinsic intelligence, independence, and originality in learning and experiencing music. Music as meditative inquiry is rooted in my exploration of the work of Indian philosopher and educator, J. Krishnamurti<sup>4</sup> (1953, 1954, 2002), my philosophical and pedagogical work on curriculum and teaching as meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2013, 2014; Kumar & Downey, 2018a), and my experiences of learning and researching ICM.

I theorize the notion of music as meditative inquiry in this paper by means of a dialogue with Adrian Downey. In this dialogue, we employ a novel research methodology that I call *dialogical meditative inquiry* (DMI) (Kumar & Downey, 2018a, b, c). I developed DMI to conduct a larger project entitled *Reflections on Education, Creativity, and Life: A Dialogical Meditative Inquiry* (The Dialogue Project). The current paper is one of the outcomes of that project. Because this paper has emerged from The Dialogue Project, I discuss its purposes and the methodology below.<sup>5</sup>

I conceptualized The Dialogue Project in order to explore and theorize my ideas regarding teaching, learning, curriculum, meditative inquiry, dialogue, the work of J. Krishnamurti, and music. Such exploration was to be dialogical in process and rooted in my previous writings including my book, *Curriculum As Meditative Inquiry* (2013), my practices as a teacher educator in Canada, the dialogues, workshops, presentations, and retreats that I conducted with academic and wider audiences,<sup>6</sup> as well as my pursuit of and research on ICM. The dialogical significance of the project was appreciated by Adrian Downey, who was then a master’s student in the curriculum studies programme at Mount Saint Vincent University. Adrian agreed to work as my research assistant for The Dialogue Project and accepted the role as the questioner for seven dialogues held over the summer of 2017. Adrian’s background with Indigenous spirituality and holistic visions of life, as well as his interest in my work and the philosophy of J. Krishnamurti, proved deeply significant while conducting this project.

Before each dialogue, Adrian prepared a series of questions after significant engagement with the literature surrounding the topic being discussed. In the case of this dialogue, Adrian, who has an extensive background in Jazz and Western classical music, prepared the questions after viewing a documentary on ICM called *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009) that I suggested he watch. He also read work on music from a spiritual perspective (e.g., Wooten, 2008), my own writing on the subject (Kumar, 2013, 2014), as well as one of my grant proposals that focused on ICM. The preparedness of the questioner and his or her ability to engage thoughtfully in the moment is crucial to the successful employment of the DMI method.

While Adrian asked prepared questions during the dialogue, he also asked extemporaneous and emergent questions. I did not see any of the questions prior to any of the dialogues, as I wanted to ensure that my responses were authentic and that the dialogic engagement was mutual. Adrian articulates his role in the dialogue thus:

Dialogue, as framed by Freire (1973) and other critical pedagogues, is rightly articulated as an equitable conversation. However, I also believe there is far more to how we engage with the world and

with each other than what we say. In this dialogue, my role was to ask, to listen, and to engage. I listened to Ashwani's words with my mind, yes, but also with my heart—it was a holistic, whole body listening. By holding this attentive space for Ashwani, he was given the freedom to be fully alive with his thoughts and feelings. My interest in Ashwani's musical journey was intense and genuine and lent itself well to deep listening.

The livelier Ashwani became in sharing his thoughts, poems, and compositions, the more closely I was able to listen. In those moments my mind would clear of all my preconceived questions, and I would become totally immersed in what was being said. I walked away from each of our dialogues with a richer and fuller understanding of the material we were discussing, but also more in tune with myself and the world around me. These meditative dialogues allowed me to experience a slower internal rhythm, one which helped me perceive the movements of my ego, be patient with those around me, and listen attentively to the silences of everyday life.

In this particular dialogue, I sat near my harmonium and often played selections to illustrate the concepts I spoke about. During the dialogue, I read poems and sang compositions that I had recorded on several scraps of paper. This article showcases some of my original compositions and poetry.

As the dialogue project adopted a unique methodology, DMI, it is important that I provide a brief discussion of what DMI entails.

I see DMI as a growing qualitative research methodology that can be employed to conduct subjective and inter-subjective research. It is theoretically informed by my previous research on the concept of meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2013, 2014) and appreciates Pinar's concept of "complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2012). Elsewhere I wrote,

DMI is ... [an] open-ended and emergent process. It is a holistic and spontaneous engagement where questions and answers emerge in the moment, guided by the meditative inquiry and understanding of the participants. The core of DMI comprises listening holistically and learning from silence .... In this kind of meditative listening, one hears completely and through silence and openness rather than with preconceived notions, which hinder deep understanding. Holistic and meditative listening creates the ground on which people can connect and communicate deeply, beyond judgements and a sense of "otherness." Such listening enriches us and brings about mutual understanding .... The deep listening and spontaneous silences that are central to DMI allow that space where authentic and meditative insights and responses emerge freely. Listening and silence create the possibility of an open and vulnerable state of being, a more comfortable place for deeper engagement, so that inner thoughts and feelings may be expressed in meditative awareness. (Kumar in Kumar & Downey, 2018a, p. 55)

DMI is thus a research methodology which is concerned with connecting to oneself and one's deepest understandings through the art of dialogue.

Using DMI, this paper explores my notion of music as meditative inquiry in a conversational manner. The dialogue is best taken as a whole, where elements of research are woven together in the flow of conversation, music, poetry, and meditation. This dialogue invites the reader to be part of the intimacy of DMI as an approach to research.

This dialogue on music as meditative inquiry explores the following key questions which have emerged from engaging in the process of DMI and subsequent re-readings of the conversation transcript:

- 1) How did Ashwani Kumar become interested in Indian classical music, and what challenges and opportunities did he face on his journey of learning music?
- 2) What is the role of rigour, discipline, and passion in learning music through the meditative inquiry approach?
- 3) How is the pursuit of music for spiritual and meditative exploration different from using music as a means of entertainment?
- 4) What are the implications of music as meditative inquiry for teaching, learning, and living?

## Dialogue on Music As Meditative Inquiry

**AD:** My first question is biographical. Everyone has a unique life history with music, and I am interested in yours. How did you come to Indian classical music?

**AK:** This autobiographical aspect of my music journey is very important. It will allow us to explore many issues and themes that are relevant to understanding the meaning of concepts like creativity and learning, and how factors such as support and discouragement of other people influence one's growth and development.

The role of parents and teachers is not merely to teach, but to engage with children in exploring what their potential could be and allow them opportunities to grow their potential. In my case, nobody saw my potential, including myself. When I was growing up, I was very close with one of my extended family members who had some training in Indian music. When he would play music, I would often ask him to teach me, but he never would—I don't know why. When he would play, I would tap on something using a natural sense of rhythm. My brain was naturally attuned to rhythm which I realized and discovered much later in life. He, however, even discouraged my tapping at times as my tapping might have been disturbing his playing. He supported me in so many other ways, but he would not educate me in music. However, I loved listening to him playing music, and we also listened to a lot of music together, which, I think, contributed to my developing a sense of musicality.

One of my aunts and her family used to live across from our house in New Delhi. My aunt's husband, Mr. M. C. Gotan<sup>7</sup> was deeply musical. At that time, I was seven or eight years old and my relationship with my uncle was not one where I could learn or experience his music. He would often keep to himself, and by the time I was a teenager, he was transferred from New Delhi to Rajasthan. My uncle has now been retired for a while and lives in New Delhi. A few years back when I visited India, he and my aunt came to visit my family. As soon as he realized that I like music and that I am learning music, he asked me if we could go to the upstairs room as he wanted to see what I have been learning. Given my short stay in India, he could only give me one lesson, but I was so happy that he actually wanted to teach me. I knew that professionally he was an engineer and that he had interest in music, but I had no idea that he had studied Indian classical music formally and that he is an excellent harmonium player, a violinist, and a composer. He also composed music for various programmes when he was posted in *Doordarshan*.<sup>8</sup> The following year, in 2016, when I went to India and visited his house, he played some music for me and said that he would start visiting my house and would teach me music. This was the first time I had someone who fully recognized my potential in music. He told me that I could learn very fast. He also appreciated my compositions and offered feedback to refine them. Last year, in 2018, I went back to India on my sabbatical to conduct a project on Indian classical music and stayed there for about six months.<sup>9</sup> He taught me with utmost sincerity, seriousness, and openness. He encouraged me to learn in a way so that I could perform in front of other people. At our wedding, my wife and I gave a music recital (it was my first and our first together),<sup>10</sup> which would not have been possible without his encouragement and support. When I am in Canada, I continue to learn from him over the phone. I have seen very few people who are as passionate about music as he is.

Back to my childhood now! In Canada, even in public schools you sometimes have a choice to learn a musical instrument or pursue your interest in arts and crafts. As a child, I went to one of the Indian government schools which are highly deficient in resources. There was absolutely no culture of taking part in sports, music, or the arts at my school. For me, there was no exposure at the university level either because of a lack of prior experience. I could not learn privately either due to lack of financial means. In India, the population is so large that one becomes focused on getting a job and good grades. My artistic side could not develop formally. No one really appreciated my voice either; I started doubting myself. In my thinking, I was really singing well, but no one seemed to appreciate it except on occasions when I thought my friends liked my rendition of some specific songs.

**AD:** It is interesting that ego, which is so central to everything in our lives, gets tied up instantly.

**AK:** Yes. Your heart is invested in it; your whole being is invested in it. It is a matter of your love for something and, thus, a very sensitive matter.

Others may have stifled my musical interest externally, but inside it never stopped. I believed in a few things

that helped to sustain me. One was that I have an ear for music, and I listen for things that some people may not – especially when it comes to composition. I kept this capacity to listen deeply to myself, of course. Second, singing for me was a meditative experience. I would close the doors, put on the songs I really love, and sing along with my full heart.

**AD:** Were you singing Indian classical music then?

**AK:** No. I thought Indian classical music was boring, other than some music with flute and santoor!<sup>11</sup> You have to develop an ear for ICM. It is a highly nuanced and developed form of music. What many people outside of the Indian subcontinent may not know, however, is that a lot of Bollywood music (especially the old Bollywood music) contains shades of ICM. Indian film composers from the golden era<sup>12</sup> would train in ICM and attempt to make their music melodious and appealing to the masses without compromising the quality of music.<sup>13</sup> I was always inspired by music that was rooted in classical music, but I didn't know that. At the time, it just touched my soul, but now I am discovering that all those songs were rooted in and inspired by the raga music.

Here is an example:

**Audio 1 Aansoon Bhari Hein Yeh Jeevan Ki Rahein (The Journey of Life is Filled with Tears)<sup>14</sup>**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-1-aansoon-bhari-hein-yeh-jeevan-ki-rahein-the-journey-of-life-is-filled-with-tears>

This is an old Bollywood song sung by the late Mukesh, one of the most beloved playback singers from India.<sup>15</sup> The song is based on a raga called Yaman Kalyan.<sup>16</sup> When I started to learn it recently, I realized it was based on a complicated rhythmic pattern – a ten beat cycle (Jhap Taal),<sup>17</sup> but because I loved the song, I was eager and able to learn it. *If you love something, deep learning and the creative production happens naturally.* Of course, you can also learn and produce when you hate something, but such learning and production will never bring you any happiness or satisfaction.

I started ICM classes in August 2013. By that November, I was already creating simple compositions, but I couldn't tell anyone because they wouldn't believe me. I would not even show my compositions to my teacher because it is unusual that someone who doesn't have a musical background and cannot sing exact notes is capable of composing – but the art of composition came naturally to me. The desire to compose and the compositions happened like an explosion; I was enthralled by music. It was only recently that I started playing my own compositions in the class where I study music.

A few days ago, I was playing raga Bhairavi<sup>18</sup> in front of my teacher, Mr. Vijay Vyas,<sup>19</sup> in Halifax, and then he was inspired and started singing a different raga called Gorakh Kalyan.<sup>20</sup> That touched me, and when I got back home, I started composing a tune. Here is an instrumental rendition on harmonium of what I composed.

**Audio 2: Raga Gorakh Kalyan Instrumental in Teen Taal (16 beats)**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-2-raga-gorakh-kalyan-instrumental-in-teen-taal-16-beats>

Indian music places tremendous value on rhythmic cycles.<sup>21</sup> Your composition has to be in a rhythmic cycle. From the very beginning and until now, it has never happened that I made a composition that did not fit one of the many rhythmic cycles. Initially, I received help from one of my classmates (who is now my wife), Nayha Acharya, in figuring out the rhythmic cycles in which my compositions could fit, but later on I was able to do it myself.<sup>22</sup> It took me some time, and I benefitted a great deal from the iTabla Pro App.<sup>23</sup> This app contains a plethora of rhythmic patterns, and it is the tabla accompaniment from this app that I have used in the audios recorded for this paper. I would compose my songs and then sing them along these rhythmic patterns to figure out the exact cycle and its variation that would be appropriate for my tune. Slowly, I became very proficient in figuring out the patterns, and now I can do that very easily. My desire to learn music also opened my mind to technology. Without this musical app and other free material available online, I am not sure if I would have been able to progress much in learning music.

Previously, when I was at the university doing my Bachelor of Education degree (2004-2005), there was a music group, and I always wanted to go and join them but never did because of the lack of time and also uncertainty as to whether they would accept me. Likewise, when I was teaching at a private school in India, there were musicians who were employed by the school because the management had resources to offer music classes to its students. I would always ask the music teachers about what they were playing. There was so much curiosity in me, but I had been told repeatedly by then that I could not learn music and, of course, I didn't have time. I had come to Canada to do my PhD in Education.

I came to do my PhD at the University of British Columbia in 2007. It was a year later, after I had completed my course work, I told my friend and classmate Mindy Carter, now an arts-based educator at McGill University, that I was interested in learning music, but that I didn't have any background or clue as to how I could start learning music. She taught me a few Western songs on the piano. She told me that I was learning fairly quickly, and that gave me more confidence. Eventually, however, we both became busy and stopped the lessons. At that time, I would sing all the time and play rhythms on any object possible. Mindy recently sent me an email:

I often am reminded that after the lessons stopped, you always played drums and percussion with Harrison [her son] .... The Eastern rhythms and tunes that you taught him he still sometimes hums. So more than this aptitude for learning music early on, it was always a part of your being. Remember sitting on the floor by the kitchen with Harrison and playing music? Also, when I tried to show you the formal piano techniques (scales and chords and songs), you wanted to write your own songs .... it seemed you were more interested in composition even then. (M. Carter, personal communication, 2018)

When I went to Halifax in 2011 as an Assistant Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University a few years later, my inner desire to learn music was intense. I would sing all day. I was staying with a friend, and I asked him if my singing bothered him. He said "No, no! Your voice is good; it is soothing. It is not necessarily my style of music, but I like it, so keep singing!" That was, for me, another vote of confidence, and he pushed me a little bit. He often told me that I should take formal lessons. So, I started looking for a teacher of ICM, but I couldn't find anyone in Halifax. There were three more events that happened between 2011 and 2013 which gave me more confidence and pushed me to look for a teacher. All of these events involved me playing Djembe (West African drum) with other musicians, first at a friend's place in Halifax, then at a campsite in Cape Breton, and another time at the Krishnamurti Educational Centre in Ojai, California. It was a complete surprise for me; while I had no formal musical training, I was able to jam with these musicians playing Western music and had no problem following the rhythmic patterns. In the first of these two events, it was Kevin Hayes, Mindy's former partner, and a very talented musician, who encouraged me to participate in and play with him and other musicians. These experiences also gave me some confidence that I had the ability to learn music.

The obsession to learn music, and therefore to find a teacher, was becoming more intense every day. Given the positive experiences with Djembe and without any possibility of finding an Indian classical music teacher in Halifax, I ended up taking a lesson with a Djembe teacher on a recommendation from Susie Brigham, my colleague and friend at Mount Saint Vincent University. After the first lesson, which went very well, I realized that there is no possibility of being able to play Djembe in my apartment because of its loud sound. With that, I also realized that what I wanted to learn was Indian music, so I needed to find a teacher. I kept trying to learn by singing along with the songs I liked the best and hoped that one day I would find a teacher.

During the summer of 2013, Susie Brigham asked me to attend the Indian festival in Halifax with her family. I did that, and while there I started exploring and asking around if there was an Indian music teacher in Halifax, and someone told me that there was a teacher who had been teaching music at the Hindu temple.

A few weeks later, I went to the temple and asked about the music teacher. When Mr. Vijay Vyas, the music teacher, came, I asked him if I could sit in the class. In that first lesson, I was terrible because I was unable to hit the right notes. I did not even know what it meant to sing notes and solfège! I was singing very poorly at the top of my lungs! The people in my class thought I was strange, but I was really inspired by what the teacher was doing. I needed to sing! That passion has deepened as my singing and musical understanding

has improved.

The friends, including my wife, that I have made from that class thought I was a bit crazy. Why would I sing so loud when clearly I was not in tune? Of course, they were pleasant enough that they didn't mind. I was so moved by that first class that I touched my teacher's feet, which we do in India. I asked him to allow me to attend the class, and he said yes. Even though he knew that I wasn't good, he didn't discourage me – that was a very important moment, and since then, I've just kept working at it out of my own passion. Sometimes, I've had to hide things from him because, again, I started composing after three months and no one would believe that this is possible. I was just so touched by music. Now, my playing has gotten better, my singing has gotten better, and my own conceptualization of music has become richer – and the passion that existed in the beginning is still there. This music class, along with online materials and books related to ICM, oriented me towards the framework of ICM and opened the possibility of my self-exploration of music. It was a sheer fortune to be able to find a class like this and a knowledgeable teacher of ICM in Halifax!

**AD:** Why do some people feel the need to discourage others? There is this hierarchy that implicitly states one must learn the basics before one can be creative: that is not the message of your educational philosophy.

**AK:** No, of course not. There is a definite hierarchy. It may be worse in India because there is a revered and entrenched system of guru and shishya (teacher and disciple).<sup>24</sup> That system may become stifling at times because students would always work under the shadow of their teachers and follow the system laid down through tradition. I, however, told myself from the beginning that I would learn from everybody, but I would not sell my soul to anyone. I wanted to keep my individuality and my identity as free and independent as I could, rather than be dominated by a figure of authority. In other words, I was, and still am, totally devoted to music, but not to any particular figure of authority.

Rather than worrying about seeking approval from the authority figures or following the defined stages of learning music, I intuitively sensed my potential, and I carried on learning and composing music. I told myself throughout this process that I have to continue to explore music no matter what others may think – this is what I call *intrinsic intelligence* or an intuitive trust in life. People very close to me have tried to discourage me, but I always trusted my intelligence and the process of learning. Slowly, I realized that what I was singing, playing, and composing was good *because it was coming from my heart*. After I realised that, I didn't care if anyone enjoyed and approved it or not.

**AD:** In youth, we can become heavily invested in the hierarchy and the path laid before us. I think, however, that as we become more self-actualized, the path matters less than our happiness. I think that is what you're talking about: just follow your heart.

**AK:** While in the beginning, I couldn't pursue my interest in music, I did become interested in meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2013; Kumar & Downey, 2018a). Meditative inquiry is a process of clearing blockages within you; it breaks down conditioning, fear of authority, fear of life, fear of anything. It is not a conscious process, but the deeper you go, the deeper the roots of the blockages will be broken. When there are no blockages, life will rush out. That is what happened in my case, I believe. By studying Krishnamurti, Gurdjieff<sup>25</sup> (1950, 1963, 1975; see also Ouspensky,<sup>26</sup> 1949, 1957), and Osho<sup>27</sup> (1983, 1987, 1989, 1996, 1998) and having an interest in understanding myself, I slowly removed the barriers (e.g., external discouragement and internal doubt) that were suppressing my interest in music. My blockages started to go away, and the music started to surge out. *When there is clarity and sense of integration within, you can do nothing but follow your heart.*

**AD:** *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009) that came out in 2009 showcased the spiritual orientation of Indian classical music, and you've talked about the spiritual aspects of your own philosophy ...

**AK:** It is two-in-one; *music and meditation are two-in-one*. I do music for meditation. Music takes me to meditation. From meditation, music comes.

**AD:** Perhaps, you could tease out some of the spiritual philosophies behind music? What is it about music that makes it spiritual?

**AK:** I can give you an example from my own experience, and then we can try to tease it out. Have you heard

of *alaap*? An *alaap* is free-flowing singing or playing a raga without any rhythmic cycle. To me, it is the most meditative part of music. It is a dialogue with the raga, the music, and life. From a technical perspective, when I started learning music, I did not know I was doing an *alaap*, but in some sense I was. I'll just show you a little bit in raga Bhairavi. In this raga, all twelve notes of an octave can be used with skill without changing the nature of the raga.

### Audio 3: A Short Alaap of Raga Bhairavi

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-3-a-short-alaap-of-raga-bhairavi?in=user-235458448/sets/ashwani-kumar>

There are a few websites that list ragas with their ascent, descent, *pakad* (key characteristic phrases), and *chalan* (movement).<sup>28</sup> I would go on these websites, look at one raga, and then play the notes and phrases specific to that raga for an hour or so without even knowing if I was playing the actual raga. I told myself, "I don't care about the pre-established concept of a raga any more. I will play because I love playing it." From that intuitive, spontaneous, and meditative playing, a song would emerge. It happened almost every time, and at times it has happened when there were other people sitting in the room, and they have witnessed that the composition came from nowhere. It has happened many times in front of my wife, once it also occurred in front of my brother-in-law and his wife, and another time it chanced in the presence of my niece in India. I am, of course, not saying that these compositions are perfect and that there are no mistakes in them. In the very beginning, at times it would not even sound good, but the joy that I got in the whole process is beyond description. As I learned more, worked more, understood more, things began to improve fast. I was able to create more refined compositions more quickly.

What surprised me is that the songs which came were sad and heavy. Every song showcased a deeper urge to be free, to find the unknown, to merge into the unknown. For me, this is where spirituality and music meet; my meditative inquiry cleared the blockages, and then the music started to surface, which further deepened the meditative movement. *In my music, there was a calling for an even deeper meditation where even the meditator does not exist.*

Poetry also came during this time. I never thought that I would ever write a poem. Even when I did it, I doubted myself in the beginning, but later I allowed myself to trust my intrinsic intelligence, telling myself, "This is happening. This is happening without any reason. You are not forcing yourself to do it, so why don't you just stay with it?" Most of my poetry is spiritual in nature. It is a calling. It has been about my quest, my difficulties, and my existential conundrums. Some of it is also about real teachers, a guru who takes you from darkness to light. I was writing for a teacher like Krishnamurti, Kabir,<sup>29</sup> or Buddha. They were in my mind because they have inspired me so much. I would sing an *alaap*, and the compositions would come in a flash. That has happened with all my compositions; they are never a struggle, they just come. Refinement and setting them to rhythm may take some time, but the creative side itself just comes out.

I would like to recite one of my poems about true teachers, first in Hindi (my first language) and then its translated version in English. This was my first poem. I still remember how it happened. I was at Krishnamurti Education Centre in Varanasi in 2014. In the evening, I was sitting in my room, and suddenly I had the urge to write something down. The whole poem happened in a flash. I created a tune for it a few months later at another Krishnamurti Centre in Bangalore! That tune, too, just happened like a flash. Since then whatever I wrote or composed, I always kept a record of it because I wanted to be able to go back and see what I had been doing. I never knew that we would be having this dialogue, and all of it will be coming in handy!

### Audio 4: In Praise of the Great Teachers/ Astitva Ke Samaan Ho Tum

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-4-in-praise-of-the-great-teachers-astitva-ke-samaan-ho-tum>



### **अस्तित्व के समान हो तुम**

अस्तित्व के समान हो तुम।  
अस्तित्व की पहचान हो तुम।  
तुम्ही में तो पूरा जग है समाया।  
तुम ही हो प्रकाश जगत का।  
तुमसे ही उज्ज्वल हैं ये धरती और आकाश।  
तुम असीम, तुम उदार, तुम महापुरुष हो।  
तुमसे है सच्चाई जगत में, तुमसे ही अच्छाई।  
तुम्हारी महिमा कोई न जाने, तुम्हारी सरल है वाणी।  
मेरा प्रणाम स्वीकार करो तुम।  
मुझे मुक्ति प्रदान करो तुम।  
है प्रिय अनुदानी।

### ***In Praise of the Great Teachers***

O Great Teachers!  
You are the existence itself.  
The whole world is contained within you.

O Great Teachers!  
You are the light of the universe.  
Your beings illuminate the Earth and the sky.

O Great Teachers!  
You are eternal and compassionate.  
You are the awakened and the enlightened beings.

O Great Teachers!  
You embody goodness and truth.  
Your greatness lies in your simplicity, your nothingness.

O Great Teachers!  
O Dear Merciful Ones!  
Kindly accept my obeisance.  
Bestow upon me the freedom.

In many of my poems and songs, it is as if I am talking with God, by which I mean the whole existence and life. There is an irony here. You know how critical I am of any orthodoxy or belief system in my academic work and in my conscious self-inquiry, but in my music, I am the biggest believer, and *I don't want to interfere with it*. I would tell myself, "If this is what it is, it has to be this." Though it seems like a contradiction, I don't think it is; it is paradoxical. If you start talking to me about God and beliefs, I will start becoming critical

because blind faith, superstitions, and organized religions have caused a lot of conflicts and divisions between people. However, I accept a meditative and spiritual engagement with music, and it is fine if the inner expression takes the form of a devotional language.

**AD:** Perhaps there is a difference between spirituality and religion?

**AK:** That's what I think. All this poetry belongs to spirituality and is not tied to a belief system. I may have used words that are also common to the orthodox Hindu tradition because I grew up with that language, but once I translate them into English, those things go away because I don't need to use those terms. I made a song using the name Rama—Lord Rama is a famous Hindu deity—but when I use Rama, I am using it in the sense that Kabir uses it. It is a metaphor for the unnameable, the unknown, and the invisible! The song was in raga Jog. It is one of my very first compositions. I have not tried to refine it too much.

**Audio 5: Mori Nagariya Aao Raam/O Life! O Happiness! Won't You Visit Me Sometime Too?**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-5-mori-nagariya-aao-raamo-life-o-happiness-wont-you-visit-me-sometime-too?in=user-235458448/sets/ashwani-kumar>

The whole point of the song was:

*O life! O true happiness!  
Where are you?  
Where are you?  
Won't you visit me sometime too?*

**मोरी नगरिया आओ राम**

मोरी नगरिया आओ राम।

देखत तुम्हरी बाँट प्रभु,  
बीत गयी मोरी ज़िन्दगी राम।

अब तो दर्शन देदो राम।  
देदो राम, देदो राम।

काहे मुझसे रूठ गए हो,  
मुझको बताओ मेरा अपराध।

कब होगी मेरी प्रतीक्षा पूरी,  
कब होगा जीवन में प्रकाश।

तुम्हरे दरस बिना, मोरा जीवन सुना।  
दरस दिखा दो, प्यास बुझा दो।

मेरे प्रभु राम, मेरे प्रभु राम।

**AD:** This is your spiritual journey.

**AK:** It is, and I think many classical musicians are also devoted to music in this way. For them, music is their God. I have heard many of them, including the great Pandit Jasraj and Omkarnath Thakur, consider music to be divine. There are even many Muslim musicians (e.g., the late Mehdi Hassan, a legendary ghazal singer from Pakistan) whom I have heard say during his performances that music is God despite the fact that in Islam music is not always encouraged. *Notes are pure like God.* That is how musicians think about it.

**AD:** I can attest to that as well. I went to university in Québec where people can sometimes be anti-religious. In the music department, however, everyone at least partially submitted to the greatness of music. When you

are in the presence of great music, it is awe inspiring. The only thing you can think of is that you have to go play.

**AK:** Yes! Whenever I hear a good song, a good classical performance, there is this urge to play and compose. Schopenhauer said that although life is miserable, the way in which you can escape it a little is through the arts, and in the arts, it is music that is the best medium for this escape (see Chu, Morgan, & Wardle, 1999; Cox, 2016). Friedrich Nietzsche found the same experience in Richard Wagner's work (see Chu, Morgan, & Wardle, 1999; Cox, 2016). For me, however, *music has never been an escape from my conflicts or misery*. It is a way to bring out my questions and conflicts so that I can see them as clearly as possible through musical and meditative awareness. It was never a mere entertainment; what came from music is release from my blockages and conflicts as I said above.

**AD:** You just mentioned the difference between entertainment and the spiritual pursuit of music, which was also mentioned in *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009). Could you speak a bit more about that difference?

**AK:** First, if someone is devoted to music with their whole being, it is spiritual regardless of whether it is Indian, Western, Chinese, or Iranian. Entertainment is when someone is playing and listening superficially, as a distraction. If you play, and I listen to you with complete attentiveness and intent, then it is a spiritual experience for the one who is listening and the one who is playing.

In Hindi, there is a phrase, *rasik shrota*, which in English means, "The person who listens intently and derives enjoyment." *There is some kind of alchemy that happens when somebody is listening intently*. It makes you want to go deeper and deeper in your singing and playing. Listening and playing collaborate with each other. If you listen completely, my playing will become better, and if I am playing better, you will become more attentive in your listening. Entertainment, on the other hand, is, for me, a superficial engagement with the arts. A spiritual pursuit is when you are totally engaged, whether you are playing music, or you are experiencing it. To me, both are spiritual. It becomes entertainment only when you have a partial connection to the wholeness of music.

**AD:** That comes to meditative inquiry, awareness, and being in the moment. The difference between spirituality and entertainment is whether you bring your whole being to whatever you are doing.

**AK:** And I think that is a way of being, right? If I live a meditative life, then my teaching will be like that, my learning will be like that, and my relationships will be like that—my whole being will be involved in whatever I do. That is the whole purpose of meditation. It is not sitting in a corner and breathing in a certain way for ten minutes; *it is learning to live with your whole being no matter where you are*. Then the false division between a person and life drops. I will not focus more when I am working and less when I am playing with a child or playing music or eating food; I am always aware, and I am fully present in what I am doing.

Work obsession has become crazy in the West. People are completely going insane while pursuing their work and ambitions. They believe that God is dead, as Nietzsche says, but then their work has become their new God—and it really doesn't matter whether you like your work or not! Work in itself should not be the goal—if you love something, then that becomes a different kind of work, but even when people hate it they somehow won't question their obsessive commitment to their work. Have you noticed it? They will not try to disturb their work. They can be unyielding to a child, parent, or partner, but they won't let their work be interfered with, and they think that makes them responsible human beings. That completely baffles and saddens me—they have given so much importance to something that they don't even necessarily like.

**AD:** Even when we do try to take time off work, we are ridiculed or looked at as less than efficient.

**AK:** That's why it has become a conditioned response to say that I am really busy, as though being busy is a really good thing to be. When I came to Canada eleven years ago, I was surprised and wondered if people were really happy if they were busy all the time. I have seen that only when my brain is free and empty does the music flow. When it is cluttered, it does not. I think that because we have obsessed ourselves with work and external pursuits, our creative expression doesn't come out fully. We have prioritised things, put some things above others. For me, cleaning the floor is as important as playing music. I may not clean the floor very often, but when I do it is as good as playing the harmonium. I can't divide tasks into lower and high-

er – our whole lives are significant and sacred. When I am walking through Point Pleasant Park in Halifax, it is as good as when I am doing intellectual work. Why does there have to be a division? This division has narrowed people’s creative potential because they have fragmented their minds. This is the cause of anxiety and stress – living a partial, fragmented life.

**AD:** That’s quite profound. Do you want to read more of your poetry?

**AK:** Sure. When I wrote this poem, it was a full moon night, and I was sitting on a rock in Point Pleasant Park. That particular day is called Guru Purnima<sup>30</sup> in the Hindu and Buddhist calendars. It is a full moon night dedicated to all true spiritual teachers like those I have mentioned above: Kabir, Buddha, and Krishnamurti. People also say that the full moon night is the night when people become enlightened. This poem is my call to the universe. I will translate the poem into English for you.

### *The Full Moon Night*

So many full moon nights have come and gone.  
So many moments of life have come and disappeared.  
But why am I still asleep?  
Why have I not become awakened yet?

### *कितनी पूनम की रातें आयीं*

कितनी पूनम की रातें आयीं,  
और चली गयीं।

कितने जीवन के पल आये,  
और मृत्यु में सिमट गये।

जाग न मुझको आयी प्रभु,  
जाग न मुझको आयी।

इस पूनम की रात प्रभु,  
कर दो मुझको प्रकाशित प्रभु।

पूर्णिमा की शीतल चांदनी से,  
मेरी प्यास बुझा दो प्रभु।

कण-कण मेरा कृतज्ञ रहेगा,  
अपनी झलक दिखा दो प्रभु।

These words are also very personal and emotional, but that is poetry. In Indian mythology and culture, the moon is associated with the cool light, while the sun is linked to hot light. The next line is:

On this full moon night,  
Quench my thirst with the coolness of the moonlight.  
Every fibre of my being will be grateful if given a glimpse of you.

I composed this poem in a very beautiful and serious raga called Chandrakouns. Chandra in Chadrakouns means moon, and that is the reason I chose this raga for this composition.

### **Audio 6. Kitni Poonam ki Raatein Aayeen/Full Moon Nights Have Come and Gone**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-235458448/audio-6-kitni-poonam-ki-raatein-aayeen-full-moon-nights-have-come-and-gone>

**AD:** This sort of plea has certainly been present in my own life. I know there is something more out there, something higher than this – can’t this moment be it?

**AK:** Everything that I have written is a plea. Everything is a plea.

**AD:** Why do you think that is?

**AK:** My whole being is a calling for something that I do not know. My musical pursuit came out of my calling, an inner calling for something that I think I intuitively sense, but which is beyond my comprehension. Is it for life, beauty, or happiness? I don't know. It is not, however, a matter of worry or anxiety for me, it is the expression of the whole being – it is how my being wants to unfold.

**AD:** It's not a plea to alleviate your discomfort.

**AK:** No, it is not a prayer. I am not praying to God to take away my problems. I am sharing with existence the agony or difficulty I may have. It's like a poetic relationship with existence. I am sharing my innermost feelings with existence, but not in a way that asks for them to be taken away so that I can get on with my life.

**AD:** Buddha said existence is suffering, and it sounds like you are revelling in that.

**AK:** But Buddha also said there is a possibility to be free of suffering. That's what I think Schopenhauer might not have realized. Buddha called the absence of suffering nirvana. So, you can say all my musical and meditative explorations are a call for nirvana, but it is not a desire. It is a deeper calling of the unknown. But even in this total and intense calling, there is a sense of deeper release, creative flow, and joy. Every time I play with my whole being, it is like a meditative experience; it leaves me in a silent and rejuvenated state. The same happens when I am sitting quietly without having any purpose or direction in my mind.

**AD:** In *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009), the musicians were very serious about music, and they continually mentioned rigour and discipline. Could you share your reflections on these concepts?

**AK:** I am both for and against discipline and rigour. I am against it when it comes from external pressures. I won't be disciplined or rigorous because a figure of authority wants me to be. If you love something, however, would anybody need to tell you that you have to practice? If somebody has to force you or persuade you to practice, you know that you don't love it. Krishnamurti says that love is the most efficient thing in the world. He is making fun of people's concept of efficiency because people want to be efficient whether they love it or not. *If you love something, you will be efficient.* We will create more and more if we love what we are doing. If, however, you want to learn and create without loving something, even if you try very hard, it will be conflict-ridden. Thus, the discipline and rigour that come because you love something has value, but it won't have a pattern or rigid structure. Sometimes I play all day. Sometimes I don't play at all. Sometimes I am happy with what I am playing. Sometimes I am not happy with what I am playing. It is like life, changing all the time, but because I love it, I will continue to do it. I will also be rigorous with it, but not because of any external pressure.

**AD:** What are your thoughts on the concept of improvisation?

**AK:** Improvisation to me means going where my heart wants to go. If you have a sense of melody and deeply feel it, then it may take you where it will. Music to me is a living being, and it has its own movement. Recently, I was practising raga Bhairavi with my wife. We have been practising that raga for the past few months. Then, one day suddenly that raga changed into a different raga which I had not heard of or learned from anyone. It kept on going for a while. My wife and I both loved that experience and were pleasantly surprised. I have recorded parts of it and will develop it further and will also try to find out if there is an existing raga that corresponds to what we came upon.

If you are playing something and your heart wants to go somewhere else or the melody itself wants to flow in a way that the rules do not allow, I don't see any problem with it. There are hundreds of ragas in ICM. Musicians have creatively conceptualized these different ragas, and within those ragas, they have created phrases and movements that are particular to each raga. But the interesting thing is that there is no absolute agreement over what a particular raga in actuality is. There are general characteristics, but each musician has his or her own interpretation of what that raga actually means. Even the nature of the ragas has been changing. What a particular raga was 200 years ago is not necessarily the same now.

To get stuck in a particular box is not very musical in my view. You may come upon those combinations and permutations of notes that are so pleasing but do not necessarily fit with what others might be conditioned to hear. It is perfectly fine to play under the established rules if you really love it that way. But at the same time, you can also bring your creativity to it. I have heard many small phrases from some musicians, and I loved them so much that I created something around them. I took something from them, but then I created something of my own. But I don't think there is anything wrong with playing something that has already been established. What is limiting is if you get so stuck in it that you can't go beyond it or be creative. Even when I didn't know how to sing or play at all, I was never able to do the same thing twice: that has not been my life. So, when I play something I would always think, "Okay, what else can be done to it?"

*Improvisation is the essence of a creative mind, and creativity flowers in freedom, not in chains.*

**AD:** *Raga Unveiled* (Desai, 2009) touches on the submission to a guru, who is almost like a parental or divine figure. How does that factor into your thoughts on rigour and discipline?

**AK:** There are music teachers, and there are spiritual teachers (all these terms are so ridden with problems, of course). In some cases, a music teacher may be a spiritual teacher. For example, Guru Nanak,<sup>31</sup> the founder of the Sikh religion,<sup>32</sup> also happened to be a musician (see Kapur, 2015). I think this is rare though. Most musicians are not spiritual teachers. That means they may be hierarchical in their orientation: they may be oppressive, they may be exploitative, and if you are really good, they may be threatened – it depends on the kind of person the teacher is. The general tendency in Indian culture is that you have to respect your teacher, which I am all for. If I have to give up my individuality for the ego of the teacher, however, this is not respect. To give up your individuality so the teacher can feel gratified is not true reverence in my mind. Teachers can sometimes get caught up in ego gratification – "If you don't gratify my ego, I am not going to share my knowledge with you." Can such ego-gratification lead to true respect, or is that a cunning game?

Such expectations can negatively influence your learning experience. For students aspiring to be professional musicians, the teacher really has to like them and teach them "secrets" so that they can become great musicians. I think my relationship with teachers and proponents of Indian classical music has been complicated at times, and I am not unique in that. As mentioned previously, I would try to do things which I was not supposed to do according to the traditional linear way of developing musicality, and that is challenging for anyone who has blind faith in a tradition. Learning to me is neither sequential nor linear. If you have love in your heart and if you follow your intuition, you can jump around; you can learn many things in a short time. You can learn difficult things before you learn easy things. The art of composing music is considered difficult, but that was the first thing I learned on my own as it was part of an intrinsic, intuitive movement. I learn from music teachers, from books, from material available online, but I have my own direction of learning and growth. I have learned the most from my own compositions. However, just because I compose does not mean that I am not paying attention to the script or the text. It is a thousand of years old tradition, and people have devoted their lives to it, so there are tonnes of treasures in it. However, I don't want the scriptures to become such a burden on my life that I stop living and creating. It is similar to the difference between technique and approach. If I have an approach to life, to living fully, I can use the techniques. If I have a love for music, I can pick up techniques, the tradition, and the text. It is only when those texts and authorities become a burden on my throat, when they begin to stifle me, that I should stay away from them.

One has to make sure that one maintains one's originality and independence. However well-intentioned, external pressures, standards, and expectations can force you to do what is not in tune with your own way of being. One must make sure one's inner flow is not suppressed by outside pressures and that one follows one's own path.

**AD:** In any music system there are rules that give it its defined features. How do you balance learning the rules of something versus seeking self-actualization through it?

**AK:** If a tradition has developed over thousands of years, of course, there are going to be rules, structures, systems, and instructions. The question is, can you associate with them through a free mind rather than a narrow and caged mind. Did music or rules exist first?

**AD:** Music, of course.

**AK:** There is a beautiful poem by an Indian poet, Amrita Pritam (2016), to which I composed music. It is called “ancient music.”<sup>33</sup> In it she says that the seven notes or 12 notes came much later. Music has always existed. It has existed in nature always, then in the folk music from which ICM is derived. ICM has become more formulaic and rule-based, but that doesn’t mean that it hasn’t created good music—it has. However, ICM and other established forms of music have come out of the larger reservoir of music and creativity, which is the very movement of life, so why not directly tap into that creative reservoir?

People say you need religion to tap into happiness and what they call God. I say, why not tap into God first? Take help from religion if it is true for you, but if it is an obstacle, don’t hesitate to remove it. Similarly, tap into music directly from the heart. Folk music around the world has emerged from this emotional and spiritual connection to nature. ICM is rooted in the folk music of India. We first tap into the source of music, which is life itself, then we make use of or change whatever rules exist. I would say the same thing about learning too. You can learn directly and intuitively, and you can also learn from the textbook. When we seek overreliance on rules, textbooks, and scriptures, we narrow our minds and become afraid to experiment, to learn, and to live freely. We just want to follow and conform, but if our spirit is free, we can learn so much more from traditional knowledge. If our spirit is burdened, then that tradition is a bondage. It won’t help your growth. That’s what I have done in music. I have learned a lot from the traditional knowledge, but I have not let it burden me. I always learn from my intuition first. I was and am ready to play “wrong” and go against tradition, but I wasn’t and am not ready to give up my intuition and my own inner trust.

Many times, I bypass the rule if that helps me make a richer melody. I may use a note or combination of notes which are “against the rules.” I follow the melody rather than the rules. Sometimes these rules stifle me. I try to tell myself, however, that I don’t have to be bound by any rules or seek approval from the authority figures. I am the last person who should be bound by these rules as freedom is the essence of my philosophy of teaching, learning, and living. To me, *melody is the core of music; if your heart knows melody, you know how to break the rules*. That’s how it goes with life. If you know how to live life intelligently, that is without succumbing to external pressures, rules, and structures and by trusting your creative and intuitive capacities, you will know how to use the rules that are imposed on you by the social structures including schools.

**AD:** How have you brought that to your career as a teacher and a researcher?

**AK:** I have always followed my intuition. In writing all of my three theses, I followed intuition. In my teaching, I have followed intuition—responded to students’ concerns, sometimes had a bad teaching evaluation, but always followed my intuitive spirit. By being responsive, you can introduce changes if there is a valid need. Being on my own doesn’t mean that I am rigid or that I won’t listen to my students. I have designed all my courses from scratch based on my interests. In teaching my very first graduate level course, I only focused on the work of Japanese Canadian curriculum scholar Ted Aoki,<sup>34</sup> and it did not go well. I learned that teachers do not necessarily like to learn theoretical ideas. Later that year, however, I focused on Krishnamurti and Aoki, and it was a huge success. I listened to students’ responses but kept my individuality—that is how teaching has to be. Teaching cannot be a cookie-cutter profession because then you don’t bring passion, creativity, and love into it. With the cookie cutter approach, your students don’t appreciate you; they are just there for the credentials. They just wait for the course to be over, and then they are happy. I have always loved teachers who are passionate, and I think that goes for all students. If you are passionate and creative, your students will learn so much from you in so many ways, not just the subject matter. Where will you find a student who loves a teacher who is bound by the book? Have you ever met a student like that?

**AD:** I can remember one student who actually may have enjoyed a teacher who was more by the book than I was.

**AK:** There are students like that, but I engage with them. Consider this common back and forth I have with students:

**Student:** Why are you not talking about curriculum outcomes?

**Me:** Because they are boring and because they won’t help you become a good teacher; they won’t give you any depth or any insight.

**Student:** But that’s what the system is demanding.

**Me:** If the system will ask you to be a racist, will you be? If the system will ask you to be unhappy,

will you be? If the system is asking you to do something anti-educational, why are you willing to do it? Of course, you have to maintain your job, but can't you question, can't you be critical, and bring some changes in your own context?

**AD:** Bringing your own passion to whatever you do in life is a piece of criticality. That passion and drive allows you to see through what's being spoon-fed to you.

**AK:** Also, it allows you to be original and responsive. Being original and creative doesn't mean you have to be rigid. You can be responsive to students' concerns—don't give them exactly what they want, but certainly pay attention to their needs. It is fine for them to learn about outcomes as they are responsible to teach through them, yet it is also important that they understand how outcomes-based education undermines deep and authentic learning (see Aoki, 2005; Eisner, 1967; Kumar, 2019a; Macdonald, 1995; Pinar, 2012). It does not hurt to change certain things so that students feel more comfortable and open to a new kind of learning.

**AD:** Where do you think the line between egocentrism or self-indulgence and intensity is?

**AK:** I think you are the best judge. If you are intensely interested in something, it won't matter what anyone says, you will continue to do it. That is my definition of it. Intensity is not externally driven; it does not work on reward and punishment. It is something internal. The big question is: are you seeking escape in it? Are you seeking refuge from your conflicts in it? Many people might play music because it relieves them of their misery for a while. That is self-indulgence. I don't think that is the case for me, but I would not say that I am completely free of egocentric activity. Part of it is egocentric because it is gratifying and pleasing, but I feel that music is somehow beyond me. *Music is the movement of life.*

People say that they want to learn music, but you can look at it another way too: *music wants to be learned. Life wants to learn music.* This perspective completely undermines egocentric activity and external and rewards-based motivation. *Do you want to play notes correctly, or do the notes want to be played correctly? Do you want to sing melodiously, or is it the melody that wants to express itself through you?* The whole perspective changes. It takes the ego away. If the notes want to be correct, I have to support them in that so that the melody and music may flow freely. You become part of the creative movement of life.

**AD:** It sounds like that notion in *The Music Lesson* (Wooten, 2008) of music or life as a living entity.

**AK:** Music, just like meditation, is a living being. You just tap into it, come into association with it, and then you begin to flow with it. It is nothing but the creative movement of life.

**AD:** Some of what we've touched on here reflects what I see as the problem with music education in the West, specifically things like the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) exams. In my experience, many people can be pressured into taking piano lessons and pursuing the RCM exams by parents and teachers. These people learn a lot about music, but it is all goal oriented.

**AK:** And primarily technical, perhaps?

**AD:** Yes. They even develop a technical analysis of musicality, but it alienates a lot of people from the experience of music because they have felt so much pressure. So, how do you encourage someone who has been alienated by a hierarchical system to re-engage with music?

**AK:** The whole problem is rooted in our fears and our lack of understanding of the process of life. As I have said before, music wants to be learned. If you look at it that way, it takes away the entire burden. When one sets a goal, such as an RCM grade, there is a possibility that one might turn a creative activity into an instrumental activity of meeting external expectations of parents and teachers, and even internalize these expectations. In my view, deep, intense, and meditative learning does not happen when one is externally motivated. Your whole being will never become enflamed with the desire to learn because what you are learning is externally driven—by people in authority and external motivations. Even if *you decide* to do 8<sup>th</sup> grade piano, you may be doing it for other people—perhaps to impress them, but not necessarily because your whole being wants to learn. However, when you want to learn something because you are intrinsically drawn to it,



then you respond to external requirements, standards, and expectations differently. So, one has to really look inward and explore if what one wants to do has deeper connection with oneself or not. It is also important that people do not force their desires on their children. All that does is block their creativity from flowering; it prevents their own internal discipline and rigour from developing. They are forced to be disciplined and rigorous, which they resent explicitly and implicitly, and which may bring about internal complexities and psychological and behavioural issues.

Also, if you have developed a relationship of hate with something because of bad experiences, you must ask yourself if it is necessary to have this hate relationship. If you don't like to play, don't play; it is as simple as that. It is, however, important to reflect on why you have developed a hate for something. Hate isolates you; it creates a wall, and by creating that wall of hate you are suffocating yourself. It has nothing to do with music, or any individual or any activity. Can you not play music and at the same time have no hate for it? Just drop the hate relationship, or at least interrogate the reasons for your hate. Is music something to be hated, or is it my parents and teachers who forced me to do something in which I wasn't naturally interested? Once the burden and hate go away, it is possible to live a creative life. The real question to ask is, "Am I living a creative life?" That creative life may translate into music, it may not, but the flow of my creative movement should be my concern.

**AD:** There is also a narrative in the West that music makes you smarter. Playing music will develop brain areas that are not hit by other activities like math and reading – which is accurate if you look at the brain science behind it but ...

**AK:** That is true for everything.

**AD:** Of course! And that narrative actually alienates the creativity you are talking about because people buy into the cognitive benefits of music without actually engaging with their creativity in a meaningful way.

**AK:** Education has become infested with this problem of hierarchy and measurement. We want to measure, control, predict, and create a sequence, and there is this assumption that if you follow the sequence, you will presumably become smarter. And similarly, we have divided subjects and activities into higher versus lower, marketable versus unmarketable, competency, efficiency, and skill-based versus theoretical and abstract, and academic versus artistic. In my view, *any activity done consciously and with interest makes you intelligent*. My toaster oven is broken, so I have to open it for the first time and see if I can fix it. In this task, I have no doubt I will learn. Any activity you do – walk in nature, look at a tree, play with kids, play music, study grammar, study scientific theory – *your brain will develop through anything in which you take an interest*. Music is in no way different; it is not higher than anything else. Even if it is elevated in some way, I don't want to accept that because that creates an unnecessary hierarchy: some activities are better, and some activities are useless. Math is worthwhile, the arts are worthless. The real question is, "Toward what do you feel drawn?" Your brain, your whole being, is craving that toward which you are drawn, so give in to it, and it will develop. Just listen to yourself and see where you want to go.

Our work as teachers is to give students opportunities to figure out toward what they are naturally drawn. When people become afraid due to parental, societal, educational, and economic pressures, they go out of synch with themselves and find it difficult to discover their own interests. When I started ICM, I was 35. Of course, I was afraid and uncertain, but the desire to learn was much more pronounced than the fear. I had to learn. If you can help students discover that kind of energy, capacity, and resilience, they won't need a test, and they won't need an exam. It is the mentality of measurement: the belief that only through measurement can you prove that something is learned. This mentality creates hierarchies and sequences to make sure that somebody has learned. I think that is completely unnecessary. *For you to be passionate about something, to be serious about something, and to learn something, measurement is not necessary*. In fact, it can become detrimental because you will become so interested in those goals and those achievements that you forget to enjoy the process.

Based on my own experience, *I think that you learn from both technical and creative playing, but much more from free and creative playing*. In creative playing, you are not worried about making a mistake or failing on a test. What you learned from technical practice will show up in your creative playing anyway. In not worrying about mistakes, however, your brain opens to so many possibilities for which technical playing, memoriza-

tion, or sticking to an outcome cannot allow. When you play freely and creatively, all those technical things can be used, but then you are leaving space for anything new and unexpected that wants to come up. You can play creatively and freely as long as you like because that won't burden your brain. The same is true of all learning.

If you just do technical practice, if you are just obsessed with measurement, and predetermined objectives, activities, and outcomes, you are destroying your brain's creative capacity by limiting it. You are narrowing it; you are conditioning it so hard that it can only function in a narrow groove. *There is nothing wrong with technically training the brain, as long as you leave space for the creative movement.*

**AD:** In closing our dialogue, I'd like to ask you a few simple questions and perhaps you can answer as succinctly as possible.

**AK:** Sure!

**AD:** What is music?

**AK:** To me, music means a process of deepening my connection with the creative flow of existence. It is an unfoldment of meditative inquiry. *Music is a living being which is ever present, and you can become part of it and flow with it when you are in a meditative state of mind.* Then, you yourself become a part of this musical flow. It is vast and expansive like an ocean. It is an eternal source of rhythm, melody, and beauty.

**AD:** What is creativity?

**AK:** Creativity is existence itself. The whole universe is creative. Look anywhere, and you will find nothing but creativity. *The whole of life is creative and is an expression of universal creative energy.*

**AD:** What is the relationship among music, creativity, and meditation?

**AK:** They are one and the same in my view. Music is a creative and meditative flow. True creativity grows out of meditateness, and music is just one of its expressions. Meditation is awareness. Through paying attention to oneself and one's relationships, one experiences a state of integration from which creativeness, including music, flows effortlessly.

**AD:** What advice would you like to offer to people who are passionate about music?

**AK:** I would like to say that music is a vast phenomenon. It is not just a matter of technical expertise, mechanical practice, and blindly and uncreatively repeating the tradition. Technique, practice, and traditions have their due place in teaching and learning music, but an overemphasis on them without realizing the significance of creative play, freedom, originality, and intrinsic intelligence may prove very limiting. Music is a sacred, spiritual, and meditative experience. We must allow ourselves to experience its vastness, its beauty, and its eternal and creative flow.

### In Closing

This dialogue on music, meditation, and creativity unfolded much like a raga of Indian classical music. A raga is a "melody which delights the mind." It emerges as a dialogue between the music, the musician, and the intent listener, and it involves spontaneous improvisation and exploration of melodic themes. Similarly, the ideas and insights offered and explored in this paper emerged spontaneously through a dialogue, allowing a profound exploration of the ways in which music as meditative inquiry inspires holistic teaching, learning, and living.

### Acknowledgements

I (Ashwani Kumar) wish to thank the three sources of funding within Mount Saint Vincent University – School of Graduate Studies, Faculty of Education, and Internal Standard Grant – which allowed me to hire Adrian Downey as my research assistant and which enabled him to work on The Dialogue Project. Adrian

deserves my sincere thanks for his serious engagement with my work and for his help in putting this paper together. I would also like to thank the Halifax Central Library, its staff, and its free media studio service that made possible the audio files included in this paper. Last but not least, I thank my wife, Nayha Acharya, a professor of law at Dalhousie University and a violinist. She has been generously listening to all of my compositions, and notating many of them, from the very beginning of my musical journey. Without her pre-existing knowledge and her goodness of heart, it would have been difficult for me to find my way in my musical journey. Nayha also assisted in recording music for this paper

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Indian classical music (ICM) is one of the oldest and most complex forms of music on the planet. Broadly, Indian classical music is divided into two types: North Indian or Hindustani classical music and South Indian or Carnatic music. As I am learning North Indian classical music, my remarks and reflections in this dialogue will be related to North Indian or Hindustani classical music. See Khan & Ruckert (1998), Shankar (1968), and Srivastava (2008) for an introduction to North Indian classical music. The links below also provide a good introduction to ICM:

<http://raag-hindustani.com/Introduction.html>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=invvO3bN6iA>

<sup>2</sup>“A raga is a melody bejeweled with notes and emotions that colours or delights the mind” (Sage Matanga, Circa 700 AD, in Desai, 2009). See the following links for an introduction to the concept of raga:

<http://raag-hindustani.com/Scales1.html>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0fSUOiar0k>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bFzS6upIW4>

<sup>3</sup>A harmonium is a melodic instrument that came to India with European missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a reed instrument. In its present form, it is very different from its predecessors. Over the centuries, Indian musicians have modified it, and continue to do so, to suit the needs of Indian music. Because of its simplicity, it is the most widely used accompanying instrument in India from folk music to classical stage performances. Recently, it has also been accepted as a solo performance instrument on the Indian classical stage (see Brockschmidt, 2004). Here you may watch live performances from the World Harmonium Summit 2018:

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=world+harmonium+summit+2018](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=world+harmonium+summit+2018)

<sup>4</sup>Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) was a world-renowned philosopher and educator of Indian descent. In addition to his books, dialogues, and public lectures, he established many schools that continue to enact alternative approach to education based on his philosophy of personal freedom and self-understanding (see Jayakar, 1986). You can read more about Krishnamurti and his work here: [https://jkrishnamurti.org/about\\_landing](https://jkrishnamurti.org/about_landing)

<sup>5</sup>The discussion here on The Dialogue Project and *dialogical meditative inquiry* (DMI) draws upon “Teaching as Meditative Inquiry: A Dialogical Exploration” (Kumar & Downey, 2018a). Several other dialogues from The Dialogue Project have been used in conference presentations (see, for example, Kumar & Downey 2018b, c).

<sup>6</sup>Over the past eight years, I have conducted regular dialogues with academics and the wider public in Canada, the UK, and India regarding the meaning and significance of meditative inquiry. Some of these dialogues have included symposia on published works and discussions with counselors and educators (see, for example, Kumar, 2012, 2016, 2019b; Kumar et al., 2013; Kumar et al., 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Please note that I (Ashwani) have received written permission from the individuals named in this article.

<sup>8</sup>*Doordarshan* is India’s one of largest broadcasting organizations. It was founded by the Government of India in 1959.

<sup>9</sup>As my interest deepened in ICM, I began to realize its connection to my own research and the field of education. I decided to integrate this interest of mine as part of my research. I conducted a project titled “Exploring the Significance of Indian Classical Music for Curriculum Theory and Pedagogy” as part of my sabbatical research leave (2017-2018). The overarching research question for this project was, ‘In what ways can the philosophical, pedagogical, and spiritual foundations of Indian classical music (ICM) inform curriculum theory and practice?’ I approached this question through

two avenues: theoretical and experiential. The theoretical part comprised a thorough review of the philosophical, pedagogical, and spiritual foundations of ICM. The experiential part had two sub-components: (a) interviews with ICM teachers from Canada and India to understand their experiences of learning and teaching ICM, and (b) reflection on my own process of learning and composing ICM to understand how it has influenced my approach to teaching and learning. As part of this project, I traveled to three cities in India and interviewed 7 Indian classical musicians and observed their classes. I have also interviewed two Indian classical musicians from Canada. The present paper is also connected to the autobiographical component of my research project.

<sup>10</sup>The performance can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/moYuloryj00>

<sup>11</sup>A santoor is a stringed instrument similar in shape to a harp which is played by striking the strings with two small hammers. Here you may get a brief introduction to this instrument: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPOS3cxxjcA>

Here you can listen to an amazing flute and santoor performance by the legendary Indian musicians, Hariprasad Chaurasia and Shivkumar Sharma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXzAKBVGelA&t=1s>

<sup>12</sup>The period from the 1940s to the 1960s is considered to be the golden era of Indian cinema. This period was characterized, among other things, with the emergence of melodious and soulful music that had its inspiration in Indian classical music. Film songs from this era are still popular with Indian people around the world (see Anantharam, 2008; Beaster-Jones, 2014). Consider watching this short excerpt from an excellent documentary on the subject: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfaS1yJzJPK>

<sup>13</sup>It is a common knowledge among music lovers that the contemporary film music in India does not match the melody, depth, and meaning that was present in the Bollywood classics.

<sup>14</sup>All of the audio files included in this paper were recorded live in the media studio of Halifax Central Library. This was my first experience of recording music in a studio setting. It is also important to point out that while I have continued to play the harmonium since the beginning of my formal musical journey, my singing has been interrupted because of a throat condition I developed four years ago. My throat has become better, and I have recently started singing again, but only for short durations at a time.

<sup>15</sup>You can listen to the original song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UE-LcQ5NNg>

Its English translation is available here: <https://www.petervis.com/gallery/web/bollywood-translations/aansu-bhari-hain-yeh-jeevan-ki-rah-en-lyrics-english-translation.html>

<sup>16</sup>See the following link for a brief description of the raga Yaman Kalyan: <https://swarajyamag.com/culture/the-ethereal-beauty-of-yaman-kalyan>

<sup>17</sup>For an introduction to Jhap Taal see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5j9mRTHjB4Q>

<sup>18</sup>A good introduction to raga Bhairavi can be found here: <https://theinkbrain.wordpress.com/2012/01/12/raga-bhairav-a-mode-and-a-mood-in-hindustani-music/>

<sup>19</sup>Mr. Vijay Vyas has been offering free Sunday music classes in Indian classical music in Halifax for more than 15 years.

<sup>20</sup>You may listen to several illustrations of raga Gorakh Kalyan here: <http://www.itcsra.org/Thaat-Details.aspx?id=9&Rid=152>

<sup>21</sup>Tabla, a set of two drums, is the key percussion and rhythm instrument used in North Indian classical music. You can find an introduction to this instrument here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KQj-abXrPk> Also see: <https://raag-hindustani.com/Rhythm.html>

<sup>22</sup>At that time (2013-2015), while I was able to compose, I was not able to perform as I was not proficient in playing the harmonium and singing along with it and the tabla accompaniment. On my request, Nayha would learn my songs and

play my songs for her family and friends.

<sup>23</sup>Read about this App here: <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/itablapro-tabla-tanpura-player/id337350026?mt=8>

Also see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q15\\_7uOiXw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q15_7uOiXw)

<sup>24</sup>For an introduction to “guru shishya” tradition see: <http://www.itsra.org/Indian-Oral-Tradition>

<sup>25</sup>George Gurdjieff (1866–1949) was a Russian mystic and spiritual philosopher of Armenian and Greek descent. Deeply concerned with human consciousness, he developed meditative practices, dances, and music to guide the process of self-transformation (see Patterson, 2017). You can read more about Gurdjieff and his work here: <https://www.gurdjieff.org>

<sup>26</sup>P. D. Ouspensky was a Russian journalist and spiritual philosopher. He studied with Gurdjieff (see the footnote above) for many years. He is best known for his book, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949), which is considered a foundational text of Gurdjieff’s ideas.

<sup>27</sup>Osho was a twentieth-century Indian spiritual philosopher and mystic. In addition to his commentaries on Western philosophical and Eastern spiritual texts, Osho is well known for his open criticism of religious orthodoxy and his views on sexuality. He considered meditation, creativity, and laughter as key aspects of a spiritual life. Always a dissident figure, in the 1980s he was involved in controversy surrounding his commune in Oregon, USA, and was eventually deported on charges of immigration fraud (see Joshi, 2009; Way & Way, 2018). You can read more about Osho and his work here: <https://www.osho.com/read/osho/about-osho>

<sup>28</sup>Two of these websites that have offered tremendous help in my learning include: <http://www.tanarang.com/>  
<http://oceanofragas.com/>

<sup>29</sup>Kabir was a 15<sup>th</sup> century Indian philosopher and poet associated with the *Bhakti* (devotion) movement. He was critical of religious orthodoxy and emphasised alternative paths to self-realization, including personal engagement with the divine. His work is an important part of the Indian literary and spiritual tradition (see Hess & Singh, 2002). Four award-winning documentaries on Kabir by Shabana Virmani are available here: <http://www.kabirproject.org/>

<sup>30</sup>This link provides a brief introduction to the event of Guru Purnima:  
<https://indianexpress.com/article/religion/guru-purnima-2018-importance-significance-guru-purnima-5271315/>

<sup>31</sup>Guru Nanak (1469 -1539), the founder of Sikhism, was born to a Hindu family and influenced by the *Bhakti* (devotion) movement. In addition to carrying forward the founding tenants of Sikhism (see footnote below), Guru Nanak also composed 974 hymns that form the foundation of Sikh devotional literature (see Kapur, 2015).

<sup>32</sup>Sikhism, founded around the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Northern India by Guru Nanak (see footnote above), is the world’s youngest major organized religion. Sikhism can be seen as monotheistic and is built upon the foundational tenets of faith, meditation, unity, selfless service, social justice, and honesty (see Kapur, 2015).

<sup>33</sup>The link below provides access to Amrita Pritam’s poetry and its English translation. See the fifth poem on this page that is referred to as “Adi Saneet” or the “First Music.” <https://ghazala.wordpress.com/2008/07/09/amrita-pritam/>

<sup>34</sup>Ted Aoki was a renowned Canadian curriculum theorist whose ideas have tremendously influenced the nature of curriculum studies in North America. Aoki’s work (see Aoki, 2005) contributed immensely to the reconceptualization of the field of curriculum studies from “curriculum development” to “understanding curriculum” (Pinar et al., 1995). Aoki’s scholarship, on the one hand, critiques the dominant behaviouristic conception of curriculum centered on standardized testing and outcomes-based education and, on other hand, lays the groundwork for a subjective, critical, and phenomenological view of curriculum, which invites interpretation and creation of and transformative engagement with the educational experience.

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