

## **Panackachira - a symbol of socially conscious revitalization of TCI India and International\***

**Companions on the way to the Grass Roots**

*Matthias Scharer, Innsbruck-Austria*

I am very happy to be here with you at this 10<sup>th</sup> annual Conference of TCI India. I am pleased to be invited to give the key note address at this Conference. However, by being invited to give this speech I feel a bit like President Obama when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I know that there are many members of the TCI movement who have more experience on how TCI can reach the grass roots. Many of you, my dear Indian TCI-friends, have such experience, exemplified by what happened in Panackachira, TCI rediscovered its roots and simultaneously its sustainability. Therefore, Panackachira and other places here in India can work as a symbol in an international context for a socially conscious reception of TCI.

### **Companions who go ahead and accompany us**

On our way we need people who go ahead and accompany us. Therefore let's remember three names that I deeply connect with the TCI way to the grass roots: There is Yitzack Ziemann, an American Jew, who died some years ago and there are Helga and Pietro Modesto, a cosmopolitan couple who, we may say, were involved with the attempts to begin TCI in India. Pietro died

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recently; Helga – almost blind now is living in a retirement home near Munich. Helga was invited by students from Tamilnadu to bring TCI to India. She came three times with her husband Pietro. This happened in the early seventies. It was the first time that TCI touched India. Later Helga narrated to Mr. Kübel very enthusiastically about her Indian experiences and so Mr. Kübel together with his wife Mary Anne also departed for India and started to establish together with Thomas Abraham and others the TCI-work in Kerala. Since her early TCI experiences in the south of India, Helga has always been very concerned about TCI finding its way to the grass roots so that not only the middle class, the rich and the established would benefit from it. This concern was also the reason for my first visit to India in a TCI context: motivated by Helga Modesto, Ulrike Rietz, Shirly Reinhaus and her husband Alexander, Sister Lioba, Teresa Peter and others who came to the South to give TCI lectures to those who could not afford to go to Kerala.

### Yitzchak Zieman

Yitzchak Zieman and I, some time before his death, had a long conversation in his flat in New York on the socio-political mission of TCI, which I recorded. In this interview Yitzchak talks about a common ground between him and Ruth Cohn on this issue: “I felt a special joint possession between Ruth and myself: we both were much more interested in the sociopolitical mission of TCI than the other aspect of leading people in WILL” [Workshop Institute of Living Learning]. Yitzchak summarised the sociopolitical mission of TCI in the following sentence: “You don’t have to fulfill the work but you don’t have the right not to take part in it.” This statement leads us to recall the argument between Ruth Cohn and Fritz Perls, the founder of gestalt therapy, concerning his so-called “gestalt-prayer” (Perls 1979,13). They agreed on the autonomy and the interdependence of people, the first TCI axiom: “I am I and you are you”. If we meet it’s fine. However, the important difference between Cohn and Perls, between TCI and gestalt therapy and any other therapy and methodology of humanistic

psychology concerns responsibility: there is a responsibility for the world with which all people have been entrusted (Cohn 1974, 164). Because of that responsibility for a livable world for everyone it is important to engage each other (Scharer 1987, 120f). Not only the individual but all of us together have to take on responsibility. “Everything true in life is encounter”, said the Jewish religious philosopher Martin Buber, to whom R. Cohn again and again refers (Buber 1973). For a good life in society, encounter and commitment are of utmost importance. In our social involvement for a humane society we are neither almighty nor powerless. We are “partly powerful”. We are all responsible for the world, claimed Ruth against her colleague and friend Fritz Perls: a thing she bitterly experienced during the Holocaust when millions of her brothers and sisters were brutally murdered.

By the time Ruth argued with Fritz Perls the Holocaust was over. The beginnings of TCI coincided with the American civil rights movement and the struggle for education for everyone. Within this racial conflict between black and white people, African-Americans were marginalised. If we think of such large socio-political movements we automatically think of symbolic figures like Martin Luther King in America or Mahatma Gandhi here in India.

**But what contribution can TCI make to a project that is ethnic, economic, educational, gender-specific and religious?**

Today this question is rarely asked within TCI. Y. Zieman enthusiastically told me about a workshop which he and Ruth Cohn led in 1968. In a predominantly black and poor area of New York, African-American parents fought for the right of their children to an education and for more collaboration in their schools; a majority of teachers and the school authorities tried to stop that. “In that workshop they particularly dealt with a reduction in prejudice and mutual fear of contact and the right to more participation,” Helmut Johach writes in his article on the historical and political basis of TCI that is part of the new handbook on TCI (Johach 2009,31). I

agree with him on the fact “that TCI from the very beginning on aimed at a political efficiency in the sense of communication and cooperation instead of oppression and brutal conflicts between different social groups” (Johach 2009, 31).

### Helga und Pietro Modesto

Anyone who knew the Modesto’s small and modest flat in Munich knows where and to whom TCI belongs: TCI belongs to those who do not possess a powerful voice of their own. It belongs to people who learned the hard way to say “I” because they were never respected and appreciated as persons. TCI above all belongs to those who can hardly defend themselves against the superiority of the powerful. To help those people in Latin-American countries, in Siberia and Russia to speak for themselves was the Modesto’s life-task. In workshops people should learn to stand up for their own and their villages’ needs. With the help of the TCI experience a “WE of solidarity” developed. Together people stood up for the rights of children and gained new confidence in their own culture and religion. The Modestos worked for years against a powerful globe of fascistic systems and ruthless multinational companies that threatened the life of whole villages. However, the Modestos never showed fear in the face of people in charge of church or society. They particularly worked with the religious leaders in charge, especially with Latin-American bishops and friars. In Siberia and Kiev they enabled the people in charge to meet in TCI-groups.

### The European-German change of TCI into an in-group process

As we can see by the involvement of Ruth Cohn, Yitzchak Ziemann, and Helga and Pietro Modesto and others, particularly here in India, the basic impulse of Ruth Cohn (“the couch is too small”) has not completely disappeared. We still need to move from a focus on individual therapy to one that gives more attention to social therapy. German colleagues, like the deceased Manfred Krämer (2001; 2006), put the focus on the self-determination of

the people concerned. He and others were spokespersons of a political TCI which broached the issues of economic and political unfairness, ethnic, religious and cultural differences and other socially relevant questions. Nevertheless, we can summarise with the already mentioned Helmut Johach: “If you follow the recent discussion you get the impression that the development of the TCI theory can be reduced to a group-pedagogical concept of character building. In an interview with Manfred Krämer, Ruth Cohn protested against such a reduction.” (Johach 2009, 32; Cohn, Krämer 2002). Maybe she thought of her former experience together with Y. Ziemann where her understanding of the relationship between therapy, education and fairness emerged: “We need a therapeutic pedagogy and more fair economic relationships” (Farau and Cohn 1984, 230).

TCI has developed into an in-group process in the European-German context during the last decades and as a result has partly lost the socio-political dimension that was at work in its beginnings. Thus, the following question becomes urgent: Which TCI did we (and do we) German TCI leaders want bring to India? Thomas Abraham’s invitation to his Indian TCI-colleagues brings about a new explosiveness in this context when he says: „Let us try to adapt TCI to [the] Indian situation rather than adopt it” (Abraham 2006, 56).

### Ruth Cohn’s TCI, Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy of life and Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed

Not only can people within the TCI-scene inspire the TCI encounter with the grass roots, people from the outside can also be included. Certainly we would have to mention Mahatma Gandhi in an Indian context. Let’s recall the conference in Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh) in February 2007 where professor Mathai spoke about the connection between Mahatma Gandhi and Ruth C. Cohn. I hope that the studies and the practical work about that continue. I think they are very important.

## Rabindranath Tagore

Teresa Peter always points out another Indian who inspired TCI on its way to the grass roots: Rabindranath Tagore. Song 35 from *Gitanjali* shows us the direction TCI can go on its way to the grass roots:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by  
narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the  
dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening  
thought and action –

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

*(Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, song 35)*

## Paulo Freire

One of my former doctoral candidates, Silvia Habringer-Hagleitner, pointed out the connection between the Latin-American educator and political activist Paulo Freire and Ruth C. Cohn. Silvia's thesis, with the telling name "With delight in the world and concern for it." Her thesis deals with the work of feminist-political education informed by both the approach of Freire's liberating educational work and Cohn's TCI. Thereby she notes a weakness of TCI which H. Raguse had already rightly pointed out: The globe has become a "dead metaphor" and needs so be rethought and renewed (Raguse 1992, 273). In view of Freire's approach, Silvia brings precision to the concept of the "GLOBE" through the following questions. I think her questions are helpful and necessary in regard to the way TCI reaches the grass roots:

- Where and how does oppression and dimishment of human life take place in the society that surrounds the group? Who benefits

from that oppression? In what ways is the group or individuals in the group directly affected by it?

- Where and how does exploitation of human and natural resources occur and who benefits by this?
- Which myths and mechanisms of alienation influence the social surroundings of the group as well as their thinking and actions? As a result what inner and outer limits? How do the individuals and the group contribute to the maintenance of these myths and alienations?
- Where are the powerful and the powerless, the rulers and the ruled located in the society that surrounds the group? What role do the group members play in that system?
- Where and how does cultural invasion and anti-dialogue occur between the rulers and the ruled? To what extent are the group members concerned or involved in such endeavours?
- Which topics are socially taboo and which are covered up by a "culture of silence" or a "culture of noise"? How far and to what extent is there voicelessness? (Hagleitner 1996, 163f).

## Panackachira – a symbol for TCI-adaption in India

When Teresa and I arrived in Panackachira with a small group of Austrians and Germans, who were attending the Master's Degree Course in Communicative Theology at the University of Innsbruck, Thomas was not present. This was not necessary because the spirit of TCI was already present in the village and especially in the group we were supposed to work with. Sheela was waiting to take me for "home-stay" with her family, although Thomas had decided that Teresa and I should stay in the village centre so that there was enough time for planning. However, when I saw that my European colleagues were anxious about following their Indian host in the dark of night and that Sheela would be alone without a guest, I knew that I had to go with her to her family and so did Thomas.

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I will never forget the evening with Sheela and her family. When I entered the house it was like I returned to my childhood. My parent's house was so similar to Sheela's that I felt at home from the very first moment. Kunchako, her neighbour, was lying on the couch, which is a very common image from my childhood. The highpoint was reached when Sheela got her "Gita" and started singing. I, as a stranger, was allowed to take part in something deeply personal: her religiosity and how she expresses it.

Kunchako and Sheela came to our course into the education center. At no time did I feel that TCI was inaccessible to them although they could hardly follow our English conversation. The presence of two "grass roots" people within the group enabled us to get from *explanations* of the present experience, to come into *direct* communication. I could go on for hours telling you about that workshop!

When I returned to India half a year later I had to go to Panackachira. What I found was like a miracle: Our former hosts were now participants. For a whole afternoon quite a large group of villagers were working on existential themes for their village. Panackachira had become a Guru Guru for TCI International.

**What can and what must we as TCI-people learn on our way to the grass roots?**

**Let me summarise:**

1. How TCI can companion the grass roots is not self-evident. The history of TCI in America and Europe, in particular in Germany, shows a trend from a socio-political responsibility of TCI to a group process that could be used for different purposes. The option for the grass roots is threatened and is in danger of getting lost. This development of TCI is connected to a reduced understanding of the GLOBE about which R. Cohn several times warned: "Whoever does not respect the GLOBE, is the one devoured by it." In other words, TCI can act like a match in a haystack if one forgets the axioms.

2. According to this European-German trend to reduce the socio-political responsibility of TCI, Thomas Abraham's awareness in connection with the Indian way of TCI gains special importance: „Let us try to adapt TCI to [the] Indian situation rather than adopt it." In India it is critical to check what is imported from Europe.
3. People such as Ruth Cohn, Yitzchak Ziemann, Helga and Pietro Modesto and many others who brought TCI to the grass roots can accompany us on our way without requiring us to copy them.
4. But also people from outside TCI, in particular people from our own culture like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore as well as people from other cultures, who are conscious of a deep social responsibility can help us to open up the social and political dimension of TCI.
5. Panackachira and other Indian villages and cities could become symbols for TCI International to show what belonged to TCI from its beginnings: most of all to the grass roots.

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## To lead is to empower:

REVIEW OF A TCI WORKSHOP

*Jainamma Jose and Bindu K.P.*

We, Jainamma and Bindu, are making an attempt here to recapture the feelings, thoughts and dynamics of a workshop (covering 22 sessions) which took place at Kottayam in May 2010. Here are the details:

The workshop theme	: <i>To lead is to empower: I look at my leadership compass; I decide my first steps.</i>
Leader	: C. Thomas Abraham
Venue	: Gurukulam (Office of Mary John Teacher)
Participants	: 21 including 5 from Certificate Course
Dates	: 13 <sup>th</sup> to 16 <sup>th</sup> May 2010

### 1. Theme and its implications

Thomas introduced the theme quoting Stephen Covey: "Leadership is the process of communicating people's worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves." The

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