

The Meeting of Meditative Disciplines and Western Psychology

A Mutually Enriching Dialogue

Roger Walsh
Shauna L. Shapiro

University of California College of Medicine
Santa Clara University

Meditation is now one of the most enduring, widespread, and researched of all psychotherapeutic methods. However, to date the meeting of the meditative disciplines and Western psychology has been marred by significant misunderstandings and by an assimilative integration in which much of the richness and uniqueness of meditation and its psychologies and philosophies have been overlooked. Also overlooked have been their major implications for an understanding of such central psychological issues as cognition and attention, mental training and development, health and pathology, and psychological capacities and potentials. Investigating meditative traditions with greater cultural and conceptual sensitivity opens the possibility of a mutual enrichment of both the meditative traditions and Western psychology, with far-reaching benefits for both.

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The history of science is rich in the example of the fruitfulness of bringing two sets of techniques, two sets of ideas, developed in separate contexts for the pursuit of new truth, into touch with one another.

—J. Robert Oppenheimer,
Science and the Common Understanding

What happens when two major intellectual and practical disciplines from separate cultures and contexts—both of which seek to understand, heal, and enhance the human mind—first come into contact after centuries of separate development? This is one of the questions of our time, a question which is increasingly pressing as the meditative and Western psychological disciplines now meet, challenge, and enrich one another in ways that are only beginning to be understood.

The Evolution of a Relationship

This meeting has already progressed through three discernible stages. The first was a prolonged period of mutual ignorance in which each tradition remained blissfully or willfully ignorant of the other. Ignorance, of course, bred misunderstanding, and the second stage—from which we have not yet fully emerged—was one of paradigm clash. Practitioners of each discipline tended to dismiss or pathologize the other, using the distorting lens of their own

unquestioned cultural and paradigmatic assumptions, a process sociologists call nihilism.

For example, many meditation teachers dismissed Western psychology and psychotherapy as superficial, claiming they overlooked the deeper levels and potentials of the mind. Likewise, some mental health practitioners initially pathologized meditation, as well as disciplines such as yoga and shamanism. Consider, for example, the classic text *The History of Psychiatry*, which pointed to “the obvious similarities between schizophrenic regressions and the practices of Yoga and Zen” (F. Alexander & Selesnick, 1966, p. 372).

However, with greater knowledge has come greater open-mindedness and mutual exploration. With an estimated 10 million practitioners in the United States and hundreds of millions worldwide, meditation is now one of the world’s most widely practiced, enduring, and researched psychological disciplines (Deurr, 2004). The result is the third and currently dominant stage of growing détente and *assimilative integration*.

Nevertheless, much misunderstanding remains. Contemplatives often still view Western psychology and psychotherapy as limited adjuncts to meditation practice, and psychologists usually regard meditation as just another therapeutic technique to be applied and investigated in conventional ways. However, the applications and investigative measures have usually been very different from the classic goals of practice. Moreover, research findings have been interpreted almost exclusively within Western psychological frameworks, ignoring meditation’s complementary psychological and philosophical perspectives. This has been widely described as a necessary “decontextualiza-

Roger Walsh, Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, University of California College of Medicine; Shauna L. Shapiro, Department of Counseling Psychology, Santa Clara University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Shauna L. Shapiro, Department of Counseling Psychology, Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053-0201. E-mail: slshapiro@scu.edu



Roger Walsh

tion," but it is actually far more. It is also a major recontextualization and revisioning of the practices within an exclusively Western psychological and philosophical framework. In anthropological terms, this is the trap of adopting a purely etic (outsider) perspective rather than both etic and emic (insider or native) perspectives.

The result is an assimilative integration that feeds the global "colonization of the mind" by Western psychology that "undermines the growth and credibility of other psychologies" (Marsella, 1998, p. 1286). As such, it overlooks much of the richness and uniqueness of the meditative disciplines and the valuable complementary perspectives they offer. For example, there is little appreciation of the major implications that meditation holds for an understanding of such central psychological issues as cognitive and attentional processes, mental training and development, psychological capacities and potentials, health and pathology, and therapeutic and social practices.

This is an understandable early stage in investigating a new and very different kind of practice. However, if the prevailing kinds of research and theorizing are continued exclusively, they may prove limiting, distorting, and ethnocentric, as researchers themselves have begun to point out (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Eleanor Rosch (1999, p. 224) put it this way: "Yes, research on the meditation traditions can provide data to crunch with the old mind-set. But they have much more to offer, a new way of looking."

In other words, further stages in the meeting of meditative and Western psychological disciplines are possible. We suggest that at least three further stages await—the beginnings of which are already visible. The first is one of mutual enrichment via *pluralism and accommodation*, moving from, to use Piagetian terms, *assimilation* (forcing novel ideas into preformed conceptual categories) to ac-

commodation (expanding and enriching conceptual categories). The second is an *integrative* stage in which the process of mutual enrichment, both theoretical and therapeutic, becomes increasingly systematic. The third stage is *integral* (Wilber, 2000) as the processes of mutual enrichment and integration lead to, and are conducted within, an increasingly comprehensive, coherent, and holistic conceptual framework, adequate to both meditative and psychological traditions.

Consciously engaging these further stages can create a more sensitive, systematic, and mutually enriching dialogue. While continuing to conduct basic research, investigators can also examine the foci and goals of the meditative traditions themselves, assess their accompanying psychologies and philosophies, and explore their many implications for an understanding of human nature, pathology, therapy, and potentials. Such a research program may offer far-reaching benefits. These include facilitating such emerging movements as positive psychology and the psychology of spirituality and health, as well as such integrative movements as cross-cultural psychology, integral psychology, and integrative psychotherapy (e.g., Arkowitz & Mannon, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2002).

This research program could also facilitate one of the defining processes and opportunities of our time—namely, the global cross-fertilization and mutual enrichment of cultures. Something much larger than the mere introduction of a new therapeutic technique is potentially available.

Consequently, this article aims to investigate and foster these larger processes. To do so, we first examine the definition and varieties of meditation. We then assess current research findings and limitations and investigate how meditation produces its diverse effects. We next examine meditation's psychologies and philosophies, as well as some of its many theoretical, clinical, and cultural implications; finally, we explore the implications for understanding human nature and potentials.

Definitions and Varieties of Meditation

Definitions

There are many definitions of *meditation*. Nevertheless, common themes are apparent. Western definitions emphasize that meditation is a self-regulation strategy with a particular focus on training attention. The meditative traditions themselves say that there are multiple meditations and that they emphasize mental development, such as *bhavana* (mental cultivation) in Buddhism and *lien-hsin* (refining the mind) in Taoism. This refining is said to cultivate beneficial mental capacities such as calm and concentration and positive emotions such as love and joy; it is also said to reduce negative emotions such as fear and anger (Goleman, 1988). By integrating these common themes and others developed throughout the article, we offer the following definition:

The term meditation refers to a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring