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Toward a Synthesis of Eastern and Western Psychologies

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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 truth, into touch with each other.

Oppenheimer (1954)

WESTERN ETHNOCENTRICITY

That a book such as this has been written is a reflection of an increasing openmindedness within the culture in general, and among health professionals in particular, to non-Western world views, psychologies, and thought systems. This openmindedness is, unfortunately, a relatively new phenomenon and was preceded by a long history of ethnocentrism in which Western medicine and psychology alone were deemed worthy of serious consideration. With rare exceptions, non-Western systems were viewed as unfortunate relics of primitive thinking, which would doubtless disappear when East met West and Easterners were able to recognize the clear superiority of Western thinking.

We are now beginning to appreciate that certain of the non-Western psychologies represent descriptions of human nature that in their own quite different ways may be as sophisticated as our own. Both East and West, it seems, may benefit from greater knowledge of each other. This is by no means to say that all things Eastern are valid or indeed that all things Western are either. It is simply to acknowledge that we appear to have underestimated the validity and profundity of aspects of certain non-Western psychologies and that we stand to gain a great deal from their careful study, as has been made clear in this book.

Why have Eastern psychologies been so misunderstood and underestimated? The major factor is probably simple ignorance. We appear to have dismissed the Eastern traditions in large part through ignorance and ethnocentricity, much like the 19th-century British envoy to India who made himself famous by remarking that he had never felt the need to learn the Indian language because he knew that the Indians had nothing worthwhile to say. Moreover, we have commonly assumed that only one psychology, almost invariably our own, described "the truth" and that competing models were false.

At first glance, these assumptions sometimes appeared to be confirmed when Western psychologists did undertake initial studies of Eastern systems, for eastern descriptions of human nature and potentials sometimes run counter to basic Western assumptions and beliefs. Only recently with the emerging understanding of the problems of paradigm clash have we begun to appreciate the necessity of taking our own Western assumptions and world views into consideration when examining non-Western traditions (Tart, 1975b; Walsh, 1980). With this understanding we may be able to adopt a multiperspectivism from which we can appreciate that psychologies may address different aspects, perspectives, structures and levels of mind, consciousness, health, motivation, and the unconscious (Wilber 1977, 1979).

IMPLICATIONS OF EASTERN PSYCHOLOGIES

This chapter is intended to provide a brief overview of the implications of certain Eastern psychologies, especially Buddhist and Hindu systems, and examine the possibilities for beginning to integrate them with Western psychology. Since the subject matter and its implications are so broad, only synoptic statements can be made here, which is an injustice to the topic. Many of the implications of Buddhist and Hindu

psychologies are not only profound, but quite startling to our Western ways of thinking, and ideally they should be supported by considerable background data, logic, and discussion as is usually necessary when discussing paradigmatic assumptions different from the usually accepted ones (Kuhn, 1970). This support will be provided here simply by references. The reader should consult these if the validity of the claims appears dubious. Although many of the principles to be discussed are echoed in other Asian disciplines (e.g., Taoism, neo-Confucianism, and Sufism), for the sake of simplicity this discussion will be confined to the psychological aspects of Buddhism and Hinduism's Yoga and Vedanta traditions.

The Nature of Mind

What are some of the central claims and implications of Buddhist and Hindu psychologies? First, let us examine their descriptions of the nature of mind. The central claim on which their existence and trainings are based is that in our usual states of consciousness our minds are far less under our control than we usually appreciate.

As the *Bhagavad Gita*, the "Hindu Bible" says

> Restless mans mind is,
> So strongly shaken
> In the grips of the senses
> Gross and grown hard
> With stubborn desire
> For what is worldly.
> How shall he tame it?
> Truly I think
> The wind is no wilder
>
> (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1944, p. 68)

The result is said to be "that most of us, most of the time behave and act mechanically, like machines. . . . man merely imagines that he is in control of himself." (Schumacher, 1978, pp. 69, 29). These ancient claims have recently found support in the West from studies of cognitive processing, which suggest that "psuedothinking is more the rule than the exception" and that "there has been misdirected emphasis on people as rational information processors (Langer, Blank, & Benzion, 1978, pp. 638, 641). In fact, our minds are said to be so out of control that our usual perception, identity, and state of consciousness are so distorted that we do not even realize they are distorted. Therefore, the Eastern psychologies might be said to have extended Freud's (1917/1943, p. 252) observation that "man is not even master in his own house . . . his own mind."

Thus, whereas Freud shook the Western world by proclaiming that what we have taken to be "normality" is actually a culturewide form of neurosis, the Eastern psychologies shake it further by proclaiming that what we call "normality" is no less than a psychosis! Our usual Western definition of "psychosis" is a state of consciousness in which the mind is out of control and provides a distorted picture of reality in which the distortion is not recognized. Such, from the Asian perspective, is our usual state.

Thinkers of both East and West have acknowledged that our usual adult egoistic mind state together with its limitations may be a developmentally necessary stage (Wilber, 1983). The problem is that at this time most of us do not recognize, correct, and develop beyond the limitations of this conventional stage even though such transconventional development is the very raison d'être of Eastern psychologies.

Identity

No less radical than the claim about our usual state of consciousness is the claim about our usual sense of identity. Most Western psychologies take for granted the idea that our usual egoistic sense of identity is natural and appropriate. Yet these Asian psychologies point out that upon close examination, the ego is nowhere to be found. Rather, the sense of a continuous solid ego, when examined minutely as in Buddhist insight meditation, dissolves into (or in phenomenological terminology is deconstructed to) insubstantiality. Just as a movie presents an apparently continuous image, so too our lack of precise attention and careful introspection allows us to mistake a flux of individual thoughts, emotions, and fantasies for a solid continuous ego. This might be interpreted as an example of the "flicker fusion" phenomenon. For Buddhist and Hindu psychologies there is no "ghost in the machine," and those Western psychologies that are based on assumptions of ego identity are viewed as based on illusion.

Of course similar perspectives have occurred in the West. This dissection of experience and identity into a ceaseless flux is similar to the reports of Western introspectionists such as the philosophers David Hume, Henri Bergson, and William James. Hume, for example, concluded that the self is "nothing but a bundle of collections of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity

and are in perpetual flux" (Needleman, 1984, p. 169). His description could easily be mistaken for a 2000-year-old Buddhist text.

Transpersonal Realization

The very raison d'être for these Asian systems, therefore, is to overcome the limits and distortions of "normality." The means for this is mind training, and the methods are quite precisely laid out as, for example, in the Buddhist eight-fold path or the eight limbs of yoga. These comprise regimes designed to cultivate ethics, concentration, emotional transformation, and wisdom; these four dimensions appear to be common to all effective contemplative disciplines. Only in the last few years have we begun to gain some understanding of the cognitive processes involved in these practices, and we now have some initial syntheses of Eastern meditative phenomenology and Western cognitive psychology (Brown, 1977; Engler & Engler, 1986; Goleman, 1988; Shapiro, 1980; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984).

The aim of these practices is claimed to be the realization of our true identity and potential, and that potential is said to be vast indeed. So radical are the states and experiences that result from deep mind training that, in their upper reaches, they are best described in terms that have traditionally been thought of as religious (e.g., "transcendent," "ineffable," "noetic," "blissful," "all-pervading"). Ultimately they go beyond words and are described as transverbal and transrational (Wilber, 1977, 1980a, 1980b).

All of us, claim Asian psychologies, have the potential for transcendent experiences. The great saints and sages of human history are said to differ from the rest of us by virtue of attainment and realization, not by some unsurpassable God-given ontological divide that forever sets them off from us as a different order of being. In the classical Buddhist texts the Buddha seems to have made no claims to have attained anything that was beyond our own realization, and an ancient Buddhist saying reminds us to "Look within, you are the Buddha."

The implications of Buddhist and Hindu psychologies are not merely theoretical, but eminently personal and practical. They claim that the trained mind is capable of levels of well-being, states of consciousness, depths of love, breadths of compassion, heights of joy, and clarity of perception far beyond those available to the untrained person (Walsh & Shapiro, 1983). Buddhist and Hindu psychologies point to these possibilities and claim to provide road maps for attaining them—maps whose validity can be experimentally tested in our own experience. Indeed, the proper testing ground for these psychologies lies within us and is us. To think that we can establish their validity or falseness by theory and scholarship alone is to confuse conceptual with contemplative knowledge and to commit what is known as a "category error" (Wilber, 1983).

A Contemporary View of Religion

These implications of Eastern psychologies point to a view and understanding of religion that is radically different from our traditional ones. At the heart of the great religions, particularly in their more mystical aspects, can be found a common core whose dimensions have been variously described as the perennial wisdom, the perennial philosophy (Huxley, 1944), the perennial religion (Smith, 1976) or transcendent unity of religions (Schuon, 1975), the consciousness disciplines (Walsh, 1980), and the perennial psychology (Wilber, 1977).

In light of our contemporary psychological understanding, the perennial wisdom of the great religions can be viewed as providing road maps or strategies for the induction of transcendent states of consciousness. Likewise, the various forms of the perennial philosophy and psychology can be viewed as philosophical and psychological analyses of the perspectives, insights, understandings, and world views afforded by these transcendent states. As Indian philosophers have remarked, one of the differences between Indian and Western philosophies is that the Western enterprise is conducted in, and descriptive of, only one state of consciousness, while several Indian systems claim to be products of, descriptive of, and only fully comprehended in multiple states of consciousness. The same general claim could be made of Indian and Western psychologies. The integration of Eastern and Western psychologies may provide us with new understandings of religion since studies of phenomena such as alternate states of consciousness, state dependent learning, meditation, and so on suggest that the perennial wisdom, philosophy, and psychology may be viewed as multistate disciplines designed to access and analyze transcendent states of consciousness and their corresponding world views.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN PSYCHOLOGIES

What, then, is the general nature of the relationship between Hindu and Buddhist psychologies and Western psychologies? Clearly there are areas of intersection and overlap between the two systems; these have

been most fully investigated by the field of transpersonal psychology, which specifically aims at an integration of Eastern and Western perspectives (Vaughan, 1986; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980; Wilber, 1977). Several investigators have suggested that Western and Asian approaches may focus on different developmental levels (Vaughan, 1986; Wilber, 1980a). Likewise, others have noted that Western psychology has mapped psychopathologies in considerably greater detail than have Eastern systems, which have almost nothing to say about early development, the dynamic unconscious, or severe psychopathology (Russell, 1986; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986). However, Asian psychologies appear to describe levels of development and well-being beyond those recognized in Western models other than the transpersonal (Goleman, 1988; Walsh, in press; Walsh & Shapiro, 1983).

Thus it may be that Asian and Western psychologies may be partially complementary, with the Asian systems focusing on advanced stages of development and states of well-being and with the Western providing details of psychopathology and early development. Integrating the two perspectives, such as Ken Wilber (1980a) and his associates (Wilber et al., 1986) are doing, may thus provide us with the first "full spectrum" models of development, which trace development all the way from infancy through adulthood on into transpersonal, transconventional stages and then through the various stages of enlightenment.

Since they include a significantly wider range of states of consciousness, identity, and perceptual modes than do traditional Western psychologies, Buddhist and Hindu psychologies may offer broader models that encompass and extend the scope of traditional Western models. Indeed, the Western model may have a position in relationship to the Eastern comparable to the Newtonian model in relationship to the Einsteinian model in physics. For example, the Newtonian case applies to macroscopic objects moving at relatively low velocities compared to the speed of light. When applied to high-velocity objects, the Newtonian model no longer fits. The Einsteinian model, on the other hand, encompasses both low and high speeds; from this broader perspective, the Newtonian model and its limitations are all perfectly logical and understandable (employing Einsteinian and not Newtonian logic, of course). However, the reverse is definitely untrue, for Einsteinian logic is not comprehensible within a Newtonian framework. Furthermore, from a Newtonian perspective, reports of incongruous findings, such as the constancy of the speed of light and objects increasing in mass at high speed, are incomprehensible and suspect.

In terms of abstract set theory, the Newtonian model can be seen as a subset nested within the larger Einsteinian set. The properties of the subset are readily comprehensible from the perspective of the set, but the reverse is necessarily untrue. The general principle is that to try to examine a larger model or set from the perspective of a smaller is inappropriate and necessarily productive of false conclusions.

The implications of this for the comparison and assessment of Asian and Western psychologies should now be clear. From a multiple-states-of-consciousness model, the traditional Western approach is recognized as a relativistically useful model provided that, because of the limitations imposed by state-specific relevancy, learning, and understanding, it is not applied inappropriately to perspectives and states of consciousness and identity outside its scope. If it is so applied, then misinterpretations and misunderstandings may result.

Classic examples of such misunderstandings include the pathologizing interpretations of mystical experiences that were almost the norm, particularly among psychoanalysts, until recently. Thus, for example, mystical experiences have been variously interpreted as regressive psychopathologies due to artificially induced catatonia (Alexander, 1931), infantile helplessness (Freud, 1917/1943), regression to union with the breast (Lewin, 1950), or irrational thinking (Ellis, 1986). These interpretations are classic examples of the confusion of preegoic, prepersonal, prerational states with transegoic, transpersonal, transrational ones—a confusion that has become known as the "pre-trans fallacy" and that has been analyzed in considerable detail by Ken Wilber (1983). It results when traditional Western psychological models, which recognize only prepersonal and personal developmental stages and states, are applied to transpersonal phenomena. Since the transpersonal experiences are not personal, they are, logically enough, misclassified in the only other available category—the prepersonal. However, closer examination reveals clear differences. For example, Wilber (1980a, p. 78), when comparing the absence of self-other boundaries in infants and schizophrenics, on the one hand, and mystics, on the other, points out that schizophrenic or infantile fusion "is pre–subject/object differentiation, which means the infant cannot distinguish subject from object. But the mystic union (*sahaj samadhi*) is trans–subject/object, which means that it transcends subject and object, while remaining perfectly aware of that conventional duality." Both phenomenological (Kornfield, 1979) and conceptual analyses now make it clear that "pre and trans can be seriously equated only by those whose intellectual inquiry goes no further than superficial impressions" (Wilber, 1980a, p. 78).

A further implication of this Newtonian-Einsteinian analogy concerns the testing of Eastern claims about the information, insights, and perspectives that alternate states of consciousness afford (e.g., that the ego

is illusory). It may be, just as the Eastern disciplines have long maintained, that full testing of the validity of these alternate-state claims may require entering them ourselves. Of course, this is not the *only* means of testing these Eastern claims, but we may not be able to evaluate them solely on the basis of our a priori assumptions based only on our usual-state experiences (Tart 1975a, 1975b). For the Asian claim is that our usual-state experiences, perspectives, and world views may be radically reevaluated or recontextualized from the perspective of alternate states. This state-specific reinterpreting is known in Vedanta as "subrationing." A good discussion of subrationing and its philosophical implications is available in Deutsch (1969). To the extent these claims are accurate, Asian psychologies and philosophies may provide valuable metaperspectives on our Western perspectives and assumptions.

SOCIAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

The Asian psychologies may also provide novel insights into a wide range of social phenomena. It is no secret that our species and planet are in grave danger. Each year, the problems and threats of ecological imbalance, nuclear warfare, starvation, resource depletion, and more appear to worsen (Brown, 1988). Twenty billion tons of TNT explosive power, a world population doubling every 40 years, 20 million dying of malnutrition every year, 600 million malnourished, ozone depletion, greenhouse warming, and more; the figures are truly staggering to anyone willing to appreciate their reality and implications. Even the more optimistic models and analyses of future trends such as *The Global 2000 Report to the President* (Council on Environmental Quality and the Department of State, 1980) predict problems of unprecedented scope and complexity within the next two or three decades unless major shifts in individual, cultural, national, and global priorities occur.

The unique feature of these threats to our collective well-being and survival is that they are all human caused. Indeed, what we think of as global problems are perhaps better thought of as global symptoms—symptoms of our individual and shared mind states (Walsh, 1984). "World is said to totter on brink of madness" cried the headline of an American Psychological Association (1983) publication reporting the conclusions of the World Congress on Mental Health. The Eastern psychologies would agree and would suggest that the recognition of this insanity is essential for its cure. Indeed, the horrendous condition of the world seems incomprehensible if we try to analyze it from the assumption that we are fully sane, but it becomes readily understandable in terms of the Asian claim that "normality" is no less than a psychosis fueled by the "three poisons" of greed, hatred, and delusion. Therefore, the insanity of the world reflects our individual and shared insanity, and from this perspective our culture can be seen as a form of collective psychosis.

This idea is hardly unique to Asia and has appeared in many forms. For Willis Harman (1962), culture is a shared hypnosis; for Ernest Becker (1973) and Otto Rank (1958), it is an immortality project supporting death denial; for Charles Tart (1986) it is a consensus trance; and for Ken Wilber (1980, 1981), it is an expression of "the Atman project," the ego's self-defeating attempt to regain for itself the unitive transcendent consciousness or atonement (at-one-ment) from which it is separated by its very nature. One of the strongest statements is that of Ernest Becker (1973): "If we had to offer the briefest explanation of all the evil that men have wreaked upon themselves and upon their world since the beginning of time, it would be simply in *the toll that his pretense of sanity takes as he tries to deny his true condition*" (p. 24).

We are now at a new stage in human development. Whereas formerly our illusions and psychoses may well have caused vast suffering and premature death to untold numbers of individuals, now they threaten our entire species and planet. Our collective insanity appears to have produced a situation that threatens its own existence. The aim of the Buddhist and Hindu psychologies, philosophies, and religions has always been to awaken people from our collective trance, *maya* or *samsara*. Traditionally, this has occurred to only a very small minority, but it may be that we have established a condition in which large numbers of us will either begin to awaken together or die together, grow up together or blow up together. For we are perhaps at a stage where the palliative military and political responses that have been the norm until now are inadequate and where nothing less than radical reductions of the root causes of greed, hatred, and delusion may suffice to ensure our survival. We appear to have established an exquisite experiment in which we will mature and awaken at unprecedented rates or we will fall victims of our own disease. In either case, our psychological disorder appears to be self-limiting. Psychologists of both East and West may have much to offer here. They may be able to help us understand and correct the psychological roots of our contemporary crises and play an important role in ensuring human survival. Through integrating the insights of both East and West, they may be able to create a comprehensive and invaluable "psychology of human survival" (Walsh, 1984).

INTEGRATORS OF EAST AND WEST AS GNOSTIC INTERMEDIARIES

What are appropriate strategies for those of us seeking to understand and communicate the wisdom and relevance of Asian psychologies to Western psychology, culture, and individuals? The Asian psychologies are rich with suggestions, but to obtain them will demand that we familiarize ourselves with them deeply, both theoretically and experientially. There is a great need for good scholarship if the full depth, richness, and implications of these systems are to be appreciated and communicated to significant numbers of Westerners. Moreover, if they are to find widespread acceptance within the psychological community, then they must be translated, where possible, into Western language and concepts, and their claims must be subjected to experimental testing. For example, there is a crying need for more research to examine the effects of intensive meditation and the characteristics of advanced practitioners. Not that such laboratory evidence is necessarily important to Buddhist or Hindu practitioners, but it is important to Western psychologists.

Curiously enough, personal practice of Asian disciplines (e.g., meditation) may be just as important as scholarship and laboratory research for understanding Asian psychologies and philosophies. Whereas Western psychology aims primarily for objective knowledge (what we have), Asian psychologies aim for the cultivation of wisdom (what we are). For centuries, Asian practitioners have argued that their traditions—either religious, philosophical, or psychological—cannot be adequately understood, assessed, or communicated without personal experience; attempts to do so result in category error, misunderstanding, and pathologizing interpretations. In the words of Bhikku Vimalo, (1974), a contemporary Buddhist monk,

> Without practice, without contemplation, a merely intellectual, theoretical, and philosophical approach to Buddhism is quite inadequate. . . . Mystical insights . . . cannot be judged by unenlightened people from the worm's eye view of book-learning, and a little book knowledge does not really entitle anyone to pass judgment on mystical experiences. (p. 000)

Several Western psychologists have offered support for this claim from their own experience. They reported that their understanding of Asian psychologies deepened significantly as they undertook the corresponding contemplative practices such as meditation or yoga (Hendlin, 1979; Ram Dass, 1975; Shapiro, 1980; Walsh, 1977, 1978). Such claims are now comprehensible to Western psychology in light of the findings that state-specific learning places limits on our capacity to understand insights and information obtained in alternate states of consciousness (Tart 1975a, 1975b; Wolman & Ulman, 1986). Without personal practice and experience, we lack "adequatio" and are not fully adequate to the task of understanding, incorporating, or communicating the subtle insights that constitute the core of Asian wisdom.

To be optimal translators, scholars, and communicators of Eastern psychologies may require no less than that we become what Carl Jung termed "gnostic intermediaries." Gnostic intermediaries are people who imbibe a discipline or teaching so deeply that they can communicate and express it directly from their own experience into the language and conceptual network of the people to whom they are communicating. This role demands both contemplative practice and wisdom as well as a knowledge of Eastern and Western psychologies that is sophisticated enough for us to be able to understand both and build conceptual bridges between them. This is no small demand. Indeed, it requires a deeper commitment to wisdom and breadth of scholarship and understanding than almost any other tasks that a psychologist might face.

Never before in human history have those of us in the West had such access to Eastern psychologies nor possessed the psychological tools for understanding them. And never before has the need for practicing and understanding them been so great. The unique combination of these opportunities opens new frontiers to us, new possibilities of understanding and insight, new tools and techniques, new ways of viewing the world, our minds, and ourselves, and new methods of contributing. These opportunities are open to those willing to prepare themselves adequately for the task. There is exciting and important work to be done, and we are privileged to have the opportunity to do it.

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