

Bridging West and East through the Transpersonal Approach of Psychotherapy

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Abstract:

This study considers the division between Western and Eastern views on mind. In particular, it shows how it is possible to bring together Eastern dharma teachings and Western psychology to help and inspire others, as well as to understand aspects of human consciousness. Also, it shows the difference in understanding of consciousness between Western transpersonal psychology and spiritual Eastern views, especially from the Vedic tradition.

A brief summary of views on mind and an outline of Consciousness is given, including a Vedic perspective. There is much confusion in the West between brain, mind and consciousness. Until clarity is achieved, there is little hope for a bridge to be made between East and West. Rather, the best hope for achieving this is through what is already held in common: love. Transpersonal psychology has to move beyond theory and bring about transformation.

Keywords: Consciousness, mind, transpersonal, vedanta.

Introduction

If by bringing West and East together means integrating them then it is vital to understand the difference that separates them in the first place. It may be a commonly held view that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (Kipling, 1889), but this is not entirely true. If the East and West are taken as two pillars, they can be joined by putting a roof, or bridge, between them. As stated in ancient scripture, existence consists of contradictions – it consists of polar opposites. They appear to be opposites to the logical mind, but they are complementary deep down in reality; they exist together in a kind of simultaneity. To understand its subtle nature, maybe we can compare it to how a certain part of our brain works.

While scientific research has made some useful discoveries about the brain, it has very little understanding of mind. It is, however, mind behind both hemispheres that inspires and motivates them to work towards a common cause. Science is capable of reading the words, but seems to be missing the paper upon which they appear. Without paper, of course, no writing is possible. Only what is gross is taken as evidence and the subtle is ignored, because the latter cannot be captured through the gross mechanics of science. If I point a finger to the sky, but you keep on looking at my hand and counting my fingers, you will miss the real message: that I was showing you the moon, sun and cosmos. This is what science does – getting too busy analysing fingers and missing the subtle message of direction. It is not necessary to study scripture or consult scientists to understand the universe. All that is needed is

to take a deep look at ourselves; we are replicas of the universe. The problems in the world today are because somewhere each of us is failing to take full responsibility for ourselves. If we all wish peace in this world then we must learn how to be peaceful within ourselves. As the small universe (microcosm), we have the power to tilt the balance of the Universe (macrocosm), in the same way that an imbalance in both hemispheres can rock our lives. They must both work together in harmony for a peaceful life. The same goes for bridging the gap between East and West.

As the West becomes increasingly interested in the subtle aspects of reality, the basic assumptions of both philosophies are becoming less divergent. The Vedantic philosophy of all-pervading consciousness and modern Western science are now beginning to come to the same conclusion. Quantum field theory and the theory of relativity both point towards the essential unity of all things. The Western world is in search of an intellectually satisfying explanation of the nature of reality in exploring the wisdom of the Eastern worldview. Western psychology has also been actively engaged in the exploration into the nature of reality. New branches of psychology have emerged to find solutions to mental problems on deeper levels, such as transpersonal psychology, the psychology of consciousness and parapsychology, which investigates subtleties of life beyond mind. To understand *what truth is*, more Westerners are investigating the Eastern approach as well as the Western approach. Psychotherapy, however, being limited by professional and monetary constraints, is unable to integrate such high levels of spiritual understanding.

A psychotherapist, who has no such background of deep philosophical understanding of the spiritual nature of Eastern culture and language, can run the risk of confusing the two. The Eastern teachings assume that a person already has a healthy self-structure. But under modern society's

crumbling family structures, traditional and community systems, these assumptions are challenged and under threat.

It seems that the totally unfamiliar nature of Eastern philosophy could be quite perplexing for a Western scholar who is trying to study this different orientation. This is understandable because only a few Western philosophers (such as Plato, Augustine and Berkeley) have come close to such idealistic frameworks as found in Eastern philosophy. Perhaps it is the immense depth and limitlessness of Vedantic knowledge that is feared by the West. It appears that some Westerners interested in Buddhism find it more approachable because they are attracted to its richness in the realms of logical reasoning and meditation. They find Buddhism safe due to its logical structure, which is very much in line with Western ways of thinking and their extrovert attitude. This may be the reason that most transpersonal work in the West is developed by followers of Buddhism. Vedic spirituality studies pure Consciousness, which is way beyond mind. Perhaps a confused understanding about mind in the West, therefore, could be the reason for the transpersonal to be largely limited to Buddhism.

While investigating the introvert nature of the East and extrovert nature of the West, linking it to the materialism of the West and the inner reflectiveness of the East, one can say that the Western world is not so much wrong in exploiting its material resources, but in the process of doing so it forgets to exploit its spiritual resources. Similarly, in its self-reflective preoccupation, the East also missed exploiting its material resources. It appears both East and West have something of value to give to each other. As the majority of ancient scripture teachings inform us that the union between body and spirit is the ultimate salvation from conflict and suffering, and that it is possible, this gives us hope for the possibility of a *bridge* to be created between

the East and the West. Perhaps, we may ask ourselves, “Is there an imbalance between the West and East, or a difference in the way of thinking?” When we talk about bridging Eastern dharma to the West then we must be mindful that dharma has nothing to do with religion; it is a direct expression of consciousness. Reliance on religious and theological concepts of God is discouraged in Vedanta, which views religious contemplation as a set pattern of thinking based on mere belief. Through reading Western authors, it is realised that there is a subtle gap in receiving and giving that has nothing much to do with language or translation. While studying psychology, my use of the word “mind” was different from others and I constantly experienced this misunderstanding. It was frightening to realise that it seemed as if I alone felt like that until I self-explored this idea (i.e., different from others) about mind.

Theosophy speaks of *manas* as a vehicle of consciousness. Consciousness is energy in constant flow. Consciousness never changes; it is mind where change takes place. Mind is the transformer that makes transformation possible from gross nature to the subtle nature of our being. This is the reason Vedanta compares mind to the moon. The moon does not have an identity of its own, but just reflects the sun. In the spiritual journey, we come to learn that we identify with the mind, so never connect to our own nature. The emphasis, therefore, is placed on developing virtues to reach the subtlest nature of the mind where, alchemically speaking, your ultimate potential (gold) is reached and mind is dissolved (transcended) and a further stage of development occurs: to its soul nature. Thus, the mind is both a receiver and a transformer. When the mind is in its gross state, it cannot receive pure consciousness. Therefore, mind control and purification of mind is most important in our spiritual growth. Mind needs to be softened, so that when it reaches the *sattva* stage (there are three stages of transformation: *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*) and

these three stages, as a trinity, operate at every stage of evolution.

According to Panpsychism, mind pervades the universe. Friedrich von Schelling wrote that mind sleeps in the stone, dreams in the plant, awakes in the animal, and becomes conscious in man; it was a view whose origins were in Hindu thought. This metaphysical philosophy was supported by Gustav Fechner, who was regarded as the father of experimental psychology. The mind can receive the very fine energies of Consciousness, but only by attaining the *sattva* stage does it become capable of receiving higher consciousness. St. Francis of Assisi said: “it is in giving that we receive”. This is so true in the case of mind. It is also a Hindu saying that knowledge increases by giving it. Mind works on that principle. Continuous emptying (dissolving) is necessary for receiving new and higher knowledge. When the mind dissolves and is aligned with Consciousness then *samadhi* is attained. So, a person becomes in touch with their True Nature (where duality ends), with no ego or small self. Duality is the gap between gross and subtle. It is possible to see this in various saints and prophets who, without ego, only do what is true for them. Clearly, in subjective terms, they do not care what others say of them. What is different about them is absence of fear, which is a learnt response of mind. They have learnt to unlearn that experience and once again have become child-like (innocent). In Sanskrit, this is known as *dwijas*.

As it is hard for a person from the East to survive without discipline in life, similarly it is hard for a Westerner to live with a disciplined mind. It is obvious that structure is required for security, and people seek security when they feel un-safe, which means there is fear. So the East has the fear of free living, due to its very strong culture and conditioning, and the West has a fear of free thinking due to its confusion with matters of mind. As Westerners have a resistance for going into

Eastern Vedantic depths and try to satisfy themselves by alternative means, which do not actually serve the purpose of fulfilment of their need to realise their full potential, similarly the East, completely absorbed in its inner depths, has faced difficulties in developing its external potential. What is needed is balance.

The East thinks through the heart whereas the West thinks through the head, and that is the fundamental difference. Love and affection, in the West, is very much understood in a conditional way, giving rise to nuclear families and all kind of materialism. Without proper understanding of mind, depth of love cannot be acquired. Eastern wisdom means thinking through the heart. This may be why the Dalai Lama says that, from a scientist's viewpoint, it is not clear whether affection and compassion are real or illusionary. He also emphasises that whether consciousness is understood or not, we must still produce warm-hearted persons. This may be because for the first 300 years after the Scientific Revolution, there was no science of mind in the West whereas, in the East, the Patanjali Yoga sutra was written more than 3,000 years ago. According to Patanjali, yoga is the control of the modifications of the mind. He realised that it is the mind that leads a person to bondage or to liberation; that most human problems are mental and that the only remedy to solve is mental discipline. The mind is also the link between consciousness and the physical body. This is the reason that Patanjali places great emphasis on the study of the mind, and provides all possible means to control its modifications and unfold its great power for higher attainment. Also, for the first 100 years in the development of psychology, the nature, origin and causal efficacy of consciousness was largely ignored (the few exceptions include, for example, William James). As James (1950) comments, those phenomena to which a person attends closely are regarded as real, while those that are disregarded are felt to

be imaginary and illusionary, and finally equivalent to nothing at all.

When there is talk of bringing Eastern dharma teachings to the West, it should be remembered that even Buddhism places greater emphasis on controlling one's own mind than on controlling one's environment. Eastern psychology and philosophy demonstrates a striking difference between the concepts of mind and consciousness, unlike in the West, where there is great confusion. The Vedas proclaim that the mind is an amazing force that is innate in the Self. That which rises in this body as "I" is the mind. Essentially, therefore, a person is not the mind, but the Self or Atman. The Atman is ever free, infinite and eternal. It is pure consciousness. Hence, the free agent is not the mind, but the Self. Mind is, as it were, an instrument in the Self's hands, through which the Self apprehends and responds to the external world. This instrument with which the Self comes into contact with the external world is itself constantly changing. When this vacillating instrument is made motionless, it can reflect the Atman.

It is argued that the transpersonal, as it is understood within the tradition of transpersonal psychology, is limited. This is because it does not transcend the subjective, but remains within the personal or ego. Take, for example, the idea of dharma. This can be translated from the Sanskrit as "duty", but also my mission in life, which depends on my current consciousness and unfolding of my spiritual journey. Also, how I understand my mission according to my moral and ethical values, and principles. This can differ from social and cultural norms regarding, for example, religion and/or spirituality. If the teaching of duty is the experience of the individual, it is not possible to bring together Western psychology and Eastern dharma teaching because the former is in gross mind and the other is in subtle mind. When *manas* is "freed from the ego-creating function of the

intellect, it can turn from the objects of the physical world inward, toward its primordial ground, which then leads it to enlightenment” (Almaas, 2004, p. 509). The difficulty remains, therefore, how to bring Eastern dharma teaching and Western psychology together. It should be made clear that Eastern dharma teaching is a *sattvic* place for grown-up adults, not infants and children. Western psychology still has not reached its adult stage and the transpersonal appears to be showing its adolescent syndrome. St. Paul says: “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child: now that I am become a man, I have put away childish things” (I Corinthians 13: 11). One often wonders if the teachings of old scriptures are the message which Christ or Buddha were trying to convey to us or just a compromise; for example, their understanding that language can convey so many different meanings at different levels, dependent on the recipient’s ability to internalise. Hence, to understand Jesus or Buddha, it is necessary to be at their level of consciousness. Otherwise, all that is asked are silly questions, muddled around confused ideas of brain and mind.

According to Churchland (1999), scientists argue that consciousness is not independent of the brain. Memories then are just a function of the way that the brain organises itself. Perception is dependent on the way parts of the brain are organised and interact. The mind, therefore, is understood as the brain functioning in a certain way. The brain, however, may be likened to a pot, which is capable of containing whatever is put in it, whether water, milk or urine. Similarly, people can choose what to keep and cultivate in their minds. The brain stays much the same, but the mind is more subtle and changes. The more subtle its nature, the more it can contain. The West confuses the pot with what is put into it. In particular, it should be understood that the most important thing is not what we have, but what we do with what we have. Eastern, especially Vedantic, psychology is considered

to be a science because it has through proper investigation and verification devised methods for the absolute control of the mind, leading to the attainment of perfection or the absolute. It considers mind as a finer body within the outer gross body. The physical body is, as it were, only the outer crust of the mind. The mind being the finer part of the body, the one affects the other. It is for this reason that physical illness frequently affects the mind, and mental illness or tension often impinges on the body. Behind the mind is the Atman, the real Self of humans. Body and mind are material; Atman is pure spirit. Mind is not the Atman, but distinct from the Atman. To use an analogy from science, the difference between matter and mind is only in the rate of vibration. Mind at a low level of vibration is called matter; matter at a high rate of vibration is known as mind. The same laws of time, space and causation, however, govern both matter and mind.

The transpersonal approach to counselling, psychotherapy and psychology admits that there is more to the person than body, mind and emotions. Beyond the gross personal aspect of being, there is the subtle nature of soul; a part of us that seems largely unfamiliar, but without which we remain unfulfilled even despite worldly riches. Although admitting the existence of the divine may seem to be a matter of religion, the study of Consciousness (or the transpersonal) is beyond organised faiths. There are, in this world, a host of esoteric and mystical traditions to guide the holistic unfolding of people as they attempt to follow the path of self-discovery, or individuation, by inquiring into “Who am I?” This is the first part of the journey to individuation: discovering who you are as a whole being. Unfortunately, there is a danger of remaining in being. The study of the transpersonal explicitly admits the possibility of spiritual growth towards Consciousness, and through heightened awareness or mindfulness (i.e., becoming more subtle, with an increased capacity to recognise and receive

grace) guides seekers to claim the fullest human potentials and to be free from the “disease” of constant suffering.

This is how far it is possible to develop with the transpersonal, but it is not the end as the real spiritual work starts when it is admitted: “I am that!” A journey has three stages: beginning (gross), middle (intermediate field of experience where struggle between duality takes place), and end (where duality ends and the ultimate or absolute is achieved). Similarly, the body is gross, mind is subtler, but soul is subtlest. The next step is to own your divine nature. An experience of transcendence, therefore, takes people beyond their minds. There is, at present, no middle ground here between West and East. Maybe the Buddha was not understood when he talked about the Middle Path. Perhaps a symbol drawn from my Trinity Model may help. Imagine two short horizontal lines drawn on a baseline, with a gap between them. Both lines can be extended towards each other, but perhaps it is not easy for them to meet in the middle to make a long straight line, or to jump across the divide. A meeting point, however, may yet be formed above the middle ground. Now, an equilateral triangle can be constructed. The left base corner of the triangle represents Body, the right base corner represents Mind, and the apex of the triangle is Soul. It is only when body and mind are in balance that a relationship with soul is possible. When all three are in balance, spirit or Higher Consciousness can enter and duality is at an end.

Modern Western thought is still heavily indebted to the ancient Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, even though their respective examinations of consciousness were contradictory. In the 17th century, Descartes did little to clarify matters. He arrived at the idea that thought exists and was also a Dualist, distinguishing between mental states and the physical brain. Over the centuries, the notion of mind has been considered by religious

figures, philosophers, neuroscientists and psychologists. As such, it is impossible to give a full account of their debate in this short space. It is worth noting, however, that in the early 20th century Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious mind suggests that human beings are only aware of a small fraction of their total mental activity. So, although he believes that the mind is a function of the brain, still the mind operates largely beyond the control or knowledge of the person. For Freud, the “royal road” to this unconscious, where repressed urges dwell, was through the interpretation of dreams and psychoanalysis. In the Vedantic sense, however, the unconscious is a storehouse of wisdom. Here lies both God and the Devil, with the latter having to be weakened to allow the divine to be revealed. To promote spirituality, mind needs to be transformed in the educational system of the West. Similarly, the Church needs to teach about the role of the Devil along with God, like in the *Rāmāyan*, which tells the story of Ram, whose wife Sita is abducted by the demon king *Rākshas*. This suggests that when you miss the Devil, you cannot cross the bridge. Reading Eastern scripture with a Western mind will not give true understanding. As the aphorism attributed to Anaïs Nin says: “We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.” To understand Buddha or Christ, therefore, the same consciousness must first be attained.

The mind, composed of subtle matter, transparent and closest to the Self, is the inner instrument (*antahkarana*) of this knowing Self. It is not the source of light. There is no consciousness inherent in the mind. The mind receives the radiance of consciousness from the knowing Self (whose inner instrument it is) and illuminates all things, including physical light. Though having no light of its own, the mind appears to be luminous. Though it seems to cognise, the mind is not the cogniser, but only an instrument of cognition. Shining as it does with the borrowed light of consciousness;

the mind is an effective instrument of knowledge. The hope is that the West and East can be brought together, but this will only happen when Western psychology has learnt to understand and integrate the true nature of the transpersonal. At the very least, a degree of preparation is required, but the West is not even prepared yet. There is a long way still to go. Eastern dharma teachings are mature, having evolved over millennia. The journey from infant to adult, however, takes time. There is no shortcut, but all must go through the entire process. The West is very interested in growing, but is confused and anxious to be adult immediately. There is a demand for quick answers, instant gratification, but spiritual growth requires that every step of the journey must be taken. There are no shortcuts, or other ways, as New Age spirituality in the West seems to offer.

The West does not have a proper understanding of mind, but is itself very much *in* mind. The West is struggling with mind to balance materialism and spirituality. Western authors using Western mind to read Eastern scripture need to develop their own minds. Then they can understand Eastern philosophy. It is argued, therefore, that dharma teachings cannot simply be transferred, as it is not possible to bring the infinite into the finite. *It is necessary to step out of mind to understand it* (and it is difficult to step out of anything when you are in fear). It should not be a question of how to bring Eastern dharma teaching to the West, because of the gulf in history and culture between them. Rather, there is a need to transcend the *fear* that remains in the mind. If it is possible to integrate transpersonal studies into the educational system, it would be possible to help new generations to develop the quality of unconditional love and attain higher Consciousness. Then the world could be a peaceful place in which to live. *Truth is what you experience in the moment*. You may not know the subject or topic, but you will connect with my intentions and know if they come out

of love (i.e. pure) or are selfish (impure). Jesus said that the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5: 8). Pure intention comes from a person who has learnt to love unconditionally, connected to his or her soul nature, and thus has the capacity to reach other people's soul nature. In Western psychology, Carl Rogers's core condition of unconditional love also has just remained a concept and hardly an experience of the therapist.

Reading about stages of Consciousness is not going to change anything. There is a common expression in India, which says that two and a half words of love make you a scholar, not the reading of books. Today, there is so much transpersonal literature, but it does not seem to have had much effect on the social environment, violence or terrorism. There is still so much fear in the world and it must be asked why the transpersonal is still just a source of information and not able to bring about any transformation. Evolution of mind evolution of humanity. As mind evolves, differences also dissolve; you understand your connection with the universe (compare C. G. Jung's concept of the Universal mind) and the sense of unity with all is realised. To help others, it is necessary to bring "unity within diversity". Humanity is evolving and Consciousness belongs neither to the East nor the West. Indeed, it does not belong to anyone in particular, and has no geographic, political or economic boundaries. The help that can be offered is to assist others to understand human consciousness. First, it is necessary to understand the mind, and get over the confusion between brain, mind and consciousness. Clarity and focused understanding about these is paramount. A bit of Western psychology thrown in with a bit of Eastern philosophy will not do. A gap like that cannot be bridged.

Conclusion:

In this age and time, it is not necessary to read the scriptures whole and become confused by

the subtle nuances of the underlying cultural, social, religious and linguistic background that would take a lifetime to absorb. Anything less than total immersion would lead to distortion in understanding. Rather, it is possible to go to the source, or essence, which is unconditional love. This is not present now because people's minds are in fear, which is due to a lack of understanding of mind. The world as we know it and all the relationships we took as given, are undergoing profound rethinking and reconstruction. Imagination, innovation, vision and creativity are required. International partnerships and interaction is an essential ingredient for creativity in problem-solving, a

quality that requires willingness to frame-hold questions instead of depending on conventional answers. It means an open mind, an open heart and a readiness to seek fresh definitions, reconcile old opposites and help draw new mental maps. Ultimately, it will be the honesty of introspection that will lead to compassion for the other's experience, and it will be compassion that will lead us to a future in which the pursuit of individual freedom will be balanced with a need for common well-being, and in which our agenda will include empathy and respect for the entire spectrum of human difference.

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