

Indian Spiritual Knowledge and the Psychology Curriculum

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Psychological knowledge and know-how have been for many centuries the central focus of the Indian civilization. In this article it is argued that there is much in the various Indian knowledge systems that deserves to be included in the psychology curriculum. To support this idea, three closely related aspects of the study of consciousness are discussed in which the basic presumptions of the Indian tradition seem to have been more conducive to the production of valid and relevant knowledge and know-how than those of traditional western psychology. The first of these is the relation between subject and object, the second is the multi-dimensional nature of consciousness, and the third is yoga as a "technology of consciousness." In the final section an indication is given of how a beginning could be made towards the systematic and institutionalized integration of the psychological knowledge from the major spiritual traditions with western psychology.

1 Introduction

There is a growing body of literature on the psychological theories and practices that are part of the different spiritual traditions, but the majority of students at our universities are still taught psychology as if all that is worth knowing about the inner life of man was discovered within the confines of 20th century academic psychology. It is to an extent understandable why psychology as a science wants to steer clear of the perhaps less rational, more implicit knowledge systems that are part of literature, art and religion, but it is more difficult to appreciate why it should ignore the vast repository of systematic psychological knowledge available in the great spiritual traditions. Inner knowledge and the mastery over psychological processes have been for many centuries the central focus of, for example, the Indian civilization, and the Indian subcontinent has produced an almost continuous stream of highly interesting work in this field from long before the rise of the Greek civilization right into the present time. Much of this is in the form of perfectly rational and systematic treatises that are now available in English.

Considering the complementary nature of the two knowledge systems, it is quite likely that psychology would progress faster, and perhaps in more fruitful directions, if some basic understanding of the spiritual traditions could become more common amongst psychologists. To support this idea I shall briefly discuss, as examples, three closely related aspects of the study of consciousness in which the basic presumptions of the In-

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dian tradition seem to have been more conducive to the production of valid and relevant knowledge and know-how than those of traditional western psychology. The first of these is the relation between subject and object in the Indian and the western tradition, the second is the multi-dimensional nature of consciousness, and the third is what could be called “the technology of consciousness.” In a final section I shall try to give an indication of how a beginning could be made towards the systematic and institutionalized integration of the psychological knowledge from the major spiritual traditions with western psychology.

I must apologize that in the following discussion I have had to simplify some things more than I would have liked to do. The issues at stake touch the very heart of two in many ways quite different cultures and they have complex ramifications throughout the intricate fabric of vast and subtle worlds of thoughts and values. It has not been possible to give here a comprehensive description of these issues. I have brought them in only as pointers to a line of enquiry that I think could be of tremendous interest for the future of psychology. I have also not been able to do justice to all the work that has already been done in this field. The aim of this paper is only to contribute a few more arguments for a closer integration of these two radically different approaches to psychology that if brought together could play a crucial role in the further development of the world’s common civilization.

2 Self and nature

A first example of an area where western psychology could have made good use of the Indian spiritual tradition is the distinction between subject and object, between what we experience as our “self” and what we see as “other.”

To make this distinction is probably an inalienable given of our ordinary waking consciousness. Even though mystics all over the world have claimed that the distinction between self and other is not absolute and that it is possible to rise above it, it is undeniable that for the vast majority of ordinary human beings the distinction is very much there, and that it forms an intrinsic element of our normal human experience. In India, where the issue was studied systematically, it was found however that with sufficient mental training it is possible to shift at will the exact location of the borderline between what is experienced as “self” and what as “other.” It became clear that the natural human condition, in which one identifies with the body and with those vital and mental processes that are bound to the body, is far from optimal and that much can be gained by shifting the borderline further inwards. The influential philosophical school of the Sāṅkhyas stressed in fact that the line of demarcation between self and world should be shifted as far inside as possible. They regarded the true Self (*puruṣa*) as structureless and immutable, while they considered everything that is structured and changing as part of external Nature (*prakṛti*). In their theoretical framework conscious thinking and perception are seen as a border-area between self and nature in the sense that thoughts and sensations (both considered part of external nature) are experienced as reflected in the still mirror of the self, or in an inverse image, as lit up by the light of the self (Kuppuswamy, 1990). One of the most interesting results of this shift, as far as

psychology is concerned, is that all mental processes thus land on the side of nature and outside the self.¹

In our normal state we tend to identify with our thinking. Even when we look at ourselves, what typically happens is that one part of our mind looks at and comments upon another part of our mind. There are two difficulties with this “naive” type of introspection. The first is that it can only discern what is accessible to our ordinary surface consciousness and this is very little compared to what can be observed by a more refined inner sensitivity. The other defect of this naive form of introspection is an inherent conflict of interests that arises as long as one identifies with one small and generally ego-related part of one’s nature while one looks at another part of oneself. This is a serious problem because in the fluid inner worlds the processes that are under observation can actually be influenced by even small and subliminal biases in the observer. Ordinary introspection of this type is thus a most unreliable instrument for self-observation, and it is doubtful that even the “trained introspection” used by the early introspectionist schools could completely escape these defects. That this method of introspection was discarded seems thus well justified.²

But the self-observation by the pure witness-consciousness (*sākṣī*) developed in the Indian tradition is a completely different matter. When one stands back and separates one’s center of identification from the mind as a whole, one arrives at a state of relaxed concentration from which one can watch one’s inner psychological processes with complete freedom and detachment. One can in fact arrive at a level of disinterestedness that is not inferior to the level of objectivity that is cultivated by the hard sciences for the study of the physical world.³ The ensuing stillness of consciousness free from all intervening thoughts allows moreover subtleties of perception that are not possible to the ordinary mind that is engrossed in the wild play of its own thinkings: a rough sea can only reflect large-scale events like clouds or the sun, but it is only the absolutely still water of a pond that can reflect the finer branches of a tree or the stars at night. It may be clear how useful such a more refined and unbiased observation of mental processes could be for the development of the subjective side of the science of consciousness.

The complementary nature of objective and subjective approaches to psychological processes⁴ may be illustrated with a short look at the research of Benjamin Libet (Libet,

¹ In the Yoga school of philosophy, this separation between self and nature (*puruṣa* and *prakṛti*) is not regarded as the absolute and final truth, but rather as an essential contrivance, necessary on the way, to arrive eventually at the still higher truth of oneness between the Self and the All (*atman* and *brahman*) (Sri Aurobindo, 1999, p. 408).

² This is not to say that more sophisticated forms of introspection were not developed even within the scientific tradition. For an overview one could consult Vermersch (1999) and for an interesting and well worked-out case-study, Petitmengin-Peugeot (1999).

³ For the present purpose we do not need to go into the question whether a completely unbiased, “pure” observation is possible or only a progressive approximation to it. For some reflections on this topic see Forman (1990).

⁴ For an interesting discussion of the epistemological issues involved in the complementary character of these two approaches see Velmans (1990).

1999). Experiments by Libet and others seem to indicate that we become aware of our decisions only some time after our decisions have been implemented by the brain. Libet showed with the help of a cleverly designed time-measuring device that, if people are asked to perform a simple flick or flexion of the wrist after a random interval, they indicate the moment of their decision as occurring some time after the first appearance of an arousal potential in their motor cortex. Libet's experiments caused considerable excitement in academia as they seemed to contradict our fundamental human sense of free-will. His basic observations would not have been, however, any surprise for people well versed in the practice of witnessing silently what happens in their own mind. If one does so, one immediately realizes that our normal sense of agency is a mistake and that our thoughts and actions are simply the end-result of various interacting forces of which few, if any, are under our direct conscious control. If one learns by systematic exercise to disengage oneself from one's thoughts, when one stands back and watches as a pure witness what happens inside, then one can observe how sensations, emotions, thoughts and impulses arise and fade away with an embarrassing independence. One can even see how some feelings and thoughts enter our conscious space from outside, sometimes ready-made, sometimes as un verbalized ideas that get only subsequently clad in words in our internal "thought factory." In other words our ordinary "self," or what passes for it, is driven like a slave by a variety of often unconscious influences, and can hardly be called an independent agent.

In the Indian tradition the ability to stand back and watch the internal scene dispassionately is however considered only a first stage of subjective discipline. The second stage is the realization that all these inner processes are in fact dependent on a certain inner sanction which in our ordinary state is more or less implicitly and automatically given. Only if one takes one's inner stand high enough, is it possible to refuse this sanction and veto the further development, or even the very first initiation of thoughts and impulses (Sri Aurobindo, 1982, pp. 351–55, 525). There is here an interesting parallel with the somewhat more crude possibility of refusing the sanction for external actions that Libet noted in his research during the short period between the becoming aware of one's decision and the actual execution. But real, creative freedom according to the Indian system is possible only to the extent that one disidentifies with one's outer nature and to the extent that one realizes one's identity with the innermost Self which is one with the Absolute. What is possible on the way to this complete identification is not more than a general, more or less diffuse push in the direction indicated by one's inner faith or *śraddhā* (Sri Aurobindo, 1999, p. 771).

The high level of refinement in one's subjective experience that can be achieved by the progressive quieting of the mind and detachment of the observing self from all mental processes has often been noted in the scientific literature (Varela, 1991; Pickering, 1999), but it may be difficult to imagine for those who have not tried at least some steps in this direction. For most people it is not easy to quieten their mind or to achieve this separation of their thoughts from their consciousness. It seems quite plausible that the persisting conflation in the science of consciousness with mental processes is due to the simple fact that most scientists do identify with their thoughts. But even if this is so, this could hardly be held against the utility of a more sophisticated variety of self-observation or against the validity of results acquired by such processes. Unbiased ob-

ervation is in any field possible only to the extent that one dissociates oneself from all partial involvements and attachments, and in psychology this is exactly what is achieved by the progressive separation of the observing self from nature. Yoga provides thus the practical means to enter, experientially, into the “universe of absolute freedom of prejudice” that Husserl speculated about (Rao, 1998).

There is an in itself quite understandable scepticism in the world of science against the use of a type of introspection that is only open to a few or after considerable training. We have more faith in things that everybody can see, even if this involves lots of complicated machinery and statistical inferences. But it is interesting to realize that we do not have this same squeamishness about the statements of mathematics or theoretical physics, although there also the finer details of proofs are only open to an exceedingly small elite. It is conceivable that if we would overcome this hesitation and if more of our intellectually gifted “elite” would get involved in the systematic, in-depth study of the inner realms — as seems to have been the case for example in traditional India and Tibet — we would soon get more solid data about the higher powers of consciousness. The value such knowledge would have for the harmonious development of individuals as well as for society as a whole can hardly be overestimated. One needs to think only of the benefits that a better understanding of intuition would give, or the harmonizing effect of the ability to empathize with others, or the peace that would come from the ability to fathom the depths of our own motives or the inner sources of joy and grief. In the end it can lead to a constructive reintegration of the infinite and illimitable into personal and collective experience.

3 Res extensa, res cogitans, and the self

It is instructive to compare this rich and flexible conceptualization of the division between self and world, of which we have sketched only a few salient landmarks, with the work of Descartes, who posited the self simply as a *res cogitans* in opposition to the *res extensa* of material nature. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* Descartes writes: “But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.” (Descartes, 1641/1996) This uncritical acceptance of himself as a “thing” and of his thinking and feeling as an inalienable part of himself closed the door to the systematic exploration of higher states of consciousness that are independent of these mental processes. It also excluded all psychological processes from the category of “res extensa” which he considered as the only legitimate area for scientific enquiry. Because Descartes had such an extraordinary influence at the time when science and religion were dividing their territories, his rigid division of reality pushed thus the whole territory of psychology into the realm of religion and philosophy, and made it effectively out of bounds for science. As science won the protracted civil war with religion, the inner and higher experiences of healthy individuals thus virtually disappeared as a subject of systematic research and were left to religion, philosophy, art and literature, the frills of our more and more science and technology-driven society.

After a long period of banishment, subjective experience is in recent times again taken up as a legitimate field of study within the realm of science. The main force behind this sudden reacceptance is this time probably linked to the arrival of computers. The pos-

sibility of implementing increasingly sophisticated algorithms in electronic devices is creating a growing demand for artificial intelligence and thus also for insight in our human ways of “information-processing.” Computers have thus brought about a clear shift in our understanding of the nature of mental processes. Mental processes that were in Descartes’ time still considered an inalienable part of man’s subjective reality, are now routinely executed by computers which are obviously part of external nature. In the early days of computing the question arose whether computers would be able to think. Since computers have proven to be capable of imitating at least some of the mental processes required for intelligent behavior, the emotional issue has shifted further inwards: the loaded question has now become what it is that differentiates human thought from artificial intelligence. Consciousness, as one of the most promising contenders for this difference, has thus staged a comeback and finds itself suddenly again on center stage.

But for a culture that identified consciousness with thought for so many centuries, consciousness as distinct from thought is not an easy subject to tackle. It has taken a long time and many detours before it was generally accepted that many of our mental processes do not require consciousness. The reverse, that consciousness can exist independent of mental processes (and thus, maybe, God forbid, even independent of the brain) is still a minority view (Baruss and Moore, 1998). The issue of consciousness raises deep questions about the fundamental nature of reality and this will bring us to the second example of an area where the basic premises of the spiritual traditions seem to hold a greater promise for the future development of psychology than those used by mainstream western science so far.

4 Is consciousness zero-dimensional?

If we look once more at the prestigious *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, we find that the received conceptualization of consciousness takes it as a simple, almost digital phenomenon, which is either there or not. Typical examples with which the existence of consciousness is illustrated are the “qualia” involved in the simple sensations of color and pain. Consciousness is looked at as some kind of bonus (or curse) added as an epiphenomenon to physiological processes in the brain.⁵ There is something to be said in favor of starting with the most common forms of the ordinary sensory awareness, but if our notion of consciousness would get stuck at this most elementary level we would miss out on almost everything that makes life worthwhile. It would be as if we limited our study of physics to the study of solid matter, or better still, rocks, arguing that fluids and gases are not material enough to study. Of course, humanistic and transpersonal psychologists have argued for a more comprehensive view of consciousness for a long time, but their influence is still largely limited to psychotherapy and related areas. But the advantage of a more sophisticated concept of consciousness is not limited to psychotherapy or the pursuit of our human or transpersonal potential.

⁵ Even where the dynamic role of consciousness is accepted, it is still tends to be seen as a fairly trivial late addition to an otherwise non-conscious universe. Carpenter, for example, suggested that consciousness might add a biologically advantageous unpredictability to our behavior (1999).

A typical example of the difficulties one can get into because of a too simplistic, human-centered view of consciousness is Chalmers' "hard problem" — how an intrinsically subjective consciousness can arise out of intrinsically objective physiological processes in the brain (Chalmers, 1996). This question would never have arisen in this intractable form if the more comprehensive conceptualization of consciousness common to most esoteric traditions had been more widely understood in academia. The sudden appearance of mental awareness in *homo sapiens* is a hard-to-understand anomaly only if we think that our human mentality is the only form of consciousness that exists.⁶ It becomes much less mysterious if we conceptualize consciousness in the manner in which Indian Vedānta and most other spiritual traditions conceive it, that is, as something that is pervasive throughout the creation. In matter, consciousness manifests itself as the basic forms of things and the laws they obey. Material forms and the tendency to obey laws are both regarded as engrained habits, and thus as primitive, subdued forms of dynamic consciousness. In plants and animals consciousness shows itself with a somewhat greater independence in the will to live, in instincts and self-assertiveness. In man consciousness is still further emancipated in our ability to think independent of our immediate circumstances. It manifests not only in our instrumental, utilitarian thinking, but also in our abstract ideas, our dreams and intuitions, our sense of truth and beauty. Of the forms consciousness can take beyond our present human level we can have at present only the first faint intimations. But all these levels of consciousness belong to what we as human beings can be aware of and thus belong as well to the legitimate field of enquiry for psychology. It is not only specialized areas like parapsychology that will remain enigmatic if we stick to a too limited materialistic view of reality (Radin, 1997). Even mainstream areas like child development, cognition, and motivation will not reveal all their secrets unless we expand our basic concept of consciousness. If psychology could rise above its morbid preoccupation with pathology, with animal behavior and data-processing, and if it would allow itself to embrace the entire range that is open to human experience, it could become the driving force for a whole new stage of human development.⁷

5 The need for inner technologies

There is one more issue, already touched upon in the two previous examples, that may still be worth highlighting separately. Even when western psychology tries to study subjective experience, the raw data that it has used so far consists largely of very simple, "naive" self-observations. It is as if one would like to develop astronomy by asking people on the street to look up at the sky and then collate their reports into a coherent picture of the heavenly bodies. No level of sophistication in one's analysis can make up for poor data, and science has not proceeded in this manner. Modern astronomy came off the ground when Galileo and others made telescopes to refine their observations. One of the reasons science is developing so fast is that there is a very productive feed-

⁶ It seems to be this inability to conceive of other forms of consciousness that drives McGinn (1995) to his conclusion that Chalmers' problem is intrinsically insoluble.

⁷ For an inspired vision of the role of psychology in the future of science see Charles Taylor (1999).

back loop between science and technology. The latest theories of science are used to develop new instruments. The new instruments provide science with both new data and new challenges. Science then refines and expands its theories, which makes it again possible to design new instruments, and so on.

So far nothing of this sort has happened in the science of consciousness. In the subjective field there has been no equivalent of the technology that has made such phenomenal progress possible in the physical sciences. If we go through the wealth of books and articles that have been published during recent years on the relationship between the physical brain and subjective consciousness, we are struck by the difference in the level of sophistication on the objective and the subjective side. The recent advances in our knowledge of the brain, of its chemical and physiological processes are extremely impressive. But on the side of consciousness there is no sophistication and hardly any progress. With a few notable exceptions these studies do not reach any further than the spontaneous capacity to see red or feel pain, perceptions that belong to the small, natural range of our outer sense mind.

If we want to develop a true science of consciousness then we have to go much further: we need to develop an effective technology of consciousness. To study consciousness we must be able to manipulate consciousness, we must learn how to change it, how to refine it, how to turn it into something more cohesive, more powerful than our ordinary, undeveloped awareness of ourselves and things. If we do not do this, the science of consciousness will forever remain at the stage where physics was in the beginning of the 15th century: we will pit one abstract theory against another and move in circles forever.

The major spiritual traditions have developed different aspects of such a technology of consciousness. Together they provide a solid, well-tested body of knowledge on the means and methods required to refine, purify, concentrate, and intensify consciousness. If psychology wants to move beyond the obvious and the trivial, if it wants to fulfill the central role it should rightfully play in society, then it will have to embrace this extension of its field. The specific schools or techniques it initially adopts do not matter that much. In the course of time the most appropriate and effective theories and techniques will be found. But in whatever form, the essence of Yoga — the systematic use of psycho-spiritual knowledge for the attainment of higher and wider forms of consciousness — must become part and parcel of psychological training and practice.

6 How to implement the introduction of spiritual knowledge systems into the psychology curriculum?

If we concede on the basis of these few examples or otherwise that it would be useful to integrate at least some psychological knowledge and practices from the spiritual traditions with modern psychology, the next question that arises, is how to do it. One could attack the problem on three parallel lines.

First of all there is a need for a broad overview of what the different spiritual traditions can contribute to psychology. Psychology would gain if all psychologists would acquire as part of their education at least some basic understanding of the psychological foundations of Vedānta, Sāṃkhya and Yoga (Jñāna, Karma, Bhakti, Purna, Hatha, Rāja and

other systems of yoga), Tantra, Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, Zen, Taoism, Cabalistic, Christian and Muslim mysticism, Shamanism, etc. This could be provided in the form of a course that looks at these traditions as much as possible on their own terms, but focuses on aspects that are of interest to modern psychology in its widest sense: cognition and perception, motivation, development, methods of dealing with psychological problems, personal and spiritual growth, human potential, etc. This course could be given as a general introductory course for undergraduates in the first or second year of their studies.

Besides this general overview there is also a need for in-depth study of each of the traditional paths. Good work in this field has already been done by transpersonal psychology but there is infinitely more still to be done. Use can also be made of work done within the framework of comparative religion and cultural anthropology, though the interest and the line of approach of psychology are of course different. In the context of psychology as a science, one should again focus on subjects related to psychology and highlight those areas in which each tradition has made an especially interesting contribution. It is neither possible nor necessary that all universities would cover the whole territory. This is typically an area in which universities can specialize. Together these studies will provide in due time more and more accurate material for the general overview. As an in-depth course for students it could be optional either in the last year before or the first year after graduation.

Both courses should contain not only theoretical knowledge but also the beginning of an experiential base. Typical exercises that can be introduced for the first general overview can be culled from the preliminary exercises of the different paths. One could think of introducing mindfulness exercises during everyday life, concentration in the heart, the purifications of Patanjali's Eightfold Path, visualizations, some simple *āsanas* and *prānāyāma* exercises, etc. For the in-depth courses the experiential material will obviously depend on the school being studied. Great care must be taken to keep these exercises simple and clean and to provide sufficient philosophical and cultural background. It is also essential to organize support groups to deal with experiences as they develop, and capable resource people in case of spiritual emergencies.

Besides these two, there should be a third course, and a whole field of study, that tries to get at the essence of the psychological knowledge that the different paths have produced, integrating it in a new form that is suitable for our present situation. What is needed is after all not just an overview of the past but a new synthesis, based on a deep understanding of the old paths, but geared towards the future.

There are two major reasons why going back to the existing traditions is necessary but not enough. The first is that every human expression, however high and exalted, is a mixture of truth and error, or at least of something essential and eternal, and something time-bound and ephemeral. I have no doubt that we, as people living in our present culture, do well to get at the experiential essence on which the old theories are based, but we have to integrate this experience into a theoretical framework of our own. We have the unprecedented advantage of excellent access to a wealth of written records from many traditions and even to a wide variety of oral traditions and living masters. Our difficulty is that this breadth of exposure easily leads to superficiality. The

Indian sage Ramakrishna warned that if you want water it is of no use to dig a hundred wells that are one foot deep. You should choose one place and dig and dig and dig, all in one and the same spot, right till you reach water (Ramakrishna, 1992). We might refine his statement a bit by admitting that it may help to first make a study of different locations and types of wells, but it remains true that if your interest is not merely “academic” and your need of water is genuine, you have to make your choice and get started. In the case of psychological insight, it seems to me that the antinomy between the need for depth and breadth of experience will only be resolved when collectively we find new methods that are based on the best that the past can provide and that are at the same time also in harmony with the wider and more encompassing understanding that is now possible.

The other, related, reason why even an in-depth study of the old paths is not enough is that consciousness itself is not static. Even if there is an Absolute that doesn’t change, the manifested world is a world in evolution. It is at least conceivable that even on the spiritual path there are heights and breadths of experience available to us now that previous generations could not even dream of. Just as a narrow materialistic science cannot provide the human soul with all it demands from life, traditional spirituality also may not be the final word. As Sri Aurobindo wrote:

The traditions of the past are very great in their own place, in the past, but I do not see why we should merely repeat them and not go farther. In the spiritual development of consciousness on earth a great past ought to be followed by an ever greater future. (Sri Aurobindo, 1971, p. 88)

This might sound blasphemous or at least frivolous to many of those who love and respect one of the old traditions, and if it had come from someone of lesser stature would probably have been so. But Sri Aurobindo actually did work out in great detail what the next step would be.

In any case, whether we personally have an *a priori* belief in possibilities beyond the great spiritual achievements of the past or not, there can be no doubt that this new synthesis would be one of the most interesting areas of psychological research. Personally I believe that the thorough study of this area is in fact the greatest challenge for a new, integral psychology, and maybe the greatest hope for a more harmonious future of mankind.

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