

THE CONSCIOUSNESS DISCIPLINES

ROGER WALSH

As I look around and find myself less and less able to repress, deny, and ignore the incomprehensible enormity of preventable human suffering; the malnutrition, the violence, the oppression, the disease, the despair, it becomes harder and harder to justify writing unless I feel that doing so will make some contribution, however small, to the relief of that suffering. And more and more that translates out for me as meaning that one of the major motives for my writing is to encourage the practice of the consciousness disciplines (perennial psychologies, perennial wisdom, spiritual practices) and to legitimate such practice in the culture at large. These practices include aspects of mediation, yoga, and contemplation derived from diverse systems such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, contemplative Christianity, Taoism, and others.

These motives stem from a deepening acceptance of the perennial psychologies' millenia-old claims regarding the nature, cause, and cure of human suffering. To put them simply, these claims might be characterized as including the statements that:

- (1) The source of all pleasure and suffering is the mind.
- (2) The untrained mind is vastly less under our voluntary control than we imagine. In fact, it is so out of control that we do not recognize it is out of control.
- (3) Because the mind is out of control, our awareness is constricted and distorted to the extent that we are unaware of our true nature, identity, and potential, and are unaware that we are unaware. From this ignorance comes all the ultimately self-defeating behavior that result in suffering.
- (4) It is possible to bring the mind under greater voluntary control, and thereby to reduce suffering, and discover our true nature and identity.
- (5) The consciousness disciplines provide guidelines for training the mind and bringing it under greater voluntary control.
- (6) Bringing the mind under greater voluntary control may be the optimal means for enhancing our well-being and for enabling us to contribute effectively to the well-being of others.

If these claims are correct, then probably the most useful thing that could be said with regard to the consciousness disciplines is simply to DO THEM! However, since I am unlikely to get anything, including this

article, published by such approaches, I will therefore attempt to make such a suggestion appear more plausible, logical, subtle, and less high-handed by linking it to accepted concepts in Western and especially transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal psychology appears to have a unique potential in Western psychology for understanding, explaining, and legitimating the practice of the consciousness disciplines. By and large, our Western cultural models, beliefs, languages, and faiths are scientific, or even scientismic. The consciousness disciplines have therefore been largely dismissed because, in their traditional languages and forms, they have not fitted these cultural norms and criteria for acceptability. Transpersonal psychology, almost alone among Western psychologies, has been interested enough to look below the traditional appearances of the consciousness disciplines to recognize their psychological nature and their implications for understanding and training minds. Indeed, one might say that one aspect of the transpersonal is that it is the psychology of the consciousness disciplines. Since it employs accepted psychological concepts and language, it therefore has the opportunity of providing an entry point into the Western cultural and psychological "mind net," providing legitimizing links between the accepted and the novel.

Transpersonally oriented psychologists therefore have the opportunity, both individually and collectively, of being gnostic intermediaries for this translation process. Carl Jung described a gnostic intermediary as one who so deeply imbibes and incorporates a thought system or culture as to be able to translate and communicate it to another culture as a direct expression of his or her own being. What will this require of us?

In almost no other area is one's intellectual understanding so dependent on an adequate experiential base as in the consciousness disciplines. Both history and modern psychology are replete with countless examples of misunderstandings, dismissals, and pathologizing interpretations of these disciplines by those without personal experience and training in them. What we are talking about here is not just knowledge (what we have), but a combination of knowledge and wisdom (what we are), and for this our personal experience and practice of these disciplines are the determining factors.

But even deep, direct personal experience may not be enough for the task of the gnostic intermediary. Before we are able to communicate our perspectives in ways which are understandable to members of the nontranspersonal psychological and scientific community, to those who do not share our beliefs, models, and presuppositions, we must know not

ony their language, but also their concepts, models, data, and the paradigms into which we are attempting to introduce these perspectives. an effective gnostic intermediary must not only know what he or she is attempting to communicate, but must also know the conceptual environment into which it is being introduced, and to know this well enough to be able to link the two in a skillful legitimizing way that will produce an "aha" reaction from the receiver. The crying need, if this field is to have significant impact, is therefore for individuals who are both deeply immersed in the practice of the consciousness disciplines and are also competent scholars of traditional disciplines such as psychology and philosophy. This is *no small task*, but is, I suspect, a necessary one! The impact of transpersonal psychology and the consciousness disciplines may well be determined to a large extent by the number of such people.

Much of this discussion has been at the rather grand level of scientific and cultural impact. Yet, the motivation for practicing these disciplines may of course be far more personal. With an understanding of their nature and effect, psychologists may be motivated to practice by basic desires for personal well-being and understanding, freedom from suffering, and enhanced ability to contribute to the welfare of others. Therefore, matter what level one views them from, perhaps the most important thing that can be said about the consciousness disciplines is simply: **DO THEM!**

Reprint request: Roger Walsh, Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, University of California, Irvine, CA 92717.