

**THE SEARCH FOR SYNTHESIS:  
Transpersonal Psychology and the  
Meeting of East and West, Psychology and  
Religion, Personal and Transpersonal**



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**Summary**

The article outlines reasons why the field of transpersonal psychology arose and some of its current theoretical and experimental frontiers. These frontiers include full-spectrum models of development that encompass transconventional stages, possible integrations among different psychological schools, new understandings of contemplative practices and altered states of consciousness, and research on meditation. Finally, some of the current limitations and problems of transpersonal psychology are examined.

The field of transpersonal psychology has received increasing attention in recent years. There appears to be growing professional and popular interest in the field and certain of the topics it addresses, such as meditation, yoga, peak experiences, near-death experiences, and lucid dreaming.

Despite this interest there still exist significant ignorance and misunderstandings of transpersonal psychology. This article there-

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fore attempts to provide an introduction and overview of the topic and some of its current theoretical and experimental frontiers.

## THE HISTORY OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

### *Limitations of Mainstream Psychology*

Transpersonal psychology arose out of an interest in what Abraham Maslow (1971) called "the farther reaches of human nature" that conventional psychology was not adequately addressing. This regrettable limitation of conventional research and theory was due to a number of factors that can be considered under the headings of beliefs, focus, research orientation, and theoretical orientation.

### *Limiting Beliefs*

A number of questionable beliefs guided and limited psychological research in the 1960s when humanistic and transpersonal psychologies arose, and to some extent they are still operative within mainstream psychology.

The first of these beliefs is that psychological development largely ceases once biological adulthood is reached. Most developmental research has therefore focused on childhood and adolescence and only comparatively recently have researchers examined adult maturation. Some of the best-known studies are those of Erikson and Levinson. Erikson (1950) pointed to the adult stages of generativity versus stagnation and ego integrity versus despair, and his model has received some experimental support. Likewise Levinson (1978) found evidence for surprisingly well-demarcated, but still controversial, developmental stages in American adults.

The second questionable belief was that the nature of psychological health can be deduced from the study of pathology. A moment's thought shows how questionable this belief is, yet it guided thinking and research for many decades. Psychological health was therefore considered as nothing more than "not sick" (Walsh & Shapiro, 1983).

A third limiting belief, now clearly shown to be erroneous, was that transpersonal or mystical experiences are insignificant at best or pathological at worst. Indeed, mystical experiences have been

interpreted as everything from regression to interuterine stages to artificial catatonia. Yet careful comparisons reveal major differences between pathological ego dissolution or pre-egoic regression on the one hand and transegoic disidentification on the other. Thus for example Wilber (1980) points out that schizophrenic or infantile fusion "is pre subject/object differentiation, which means that 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." Wilber (1980, 1983a) has provided sophisticated analyses of the various forms of this "pre-trans fallacy" as he calls it, and in light of these studies it is now apparent that "pre and trans can be seriously equated only by those whose intellectual inquiry goes no further than superficial impressions" (Wilber, 1980).

### *Limiting Orientations*

The research orientation of traditional psychology was, as Maslow (1969) pointed out, "means oriented" rather than "problem oriented." That is, researchers tended to develop research programs on the basis of the means (techniques or tools) that they had available rather than on the basis of what questions were most important. This orientation has tended to shape not only research programs but theories, values, and even the general zeitgeist or worldview of psychology as a whole. For as Maslow said, if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail. Because transpersonal phenomena often do not lend themselves to traditional research tools, they were largely ignored (where they were not misinterpreted and pathologized).

Several theoretical orientations also hindered transpersonal research. This quite understandable but limiting orientation was exacerbated by a strong scientism that largely continues to the present day. Scientism and its philosophical analogue, logical positivism, argue that science is the best or only means for obtaining valid knowledge. Physicalism and scientism effectively exclude from consideration topics such as meaning, purpose, consciousness, and transpersonal experiences as well as the epistemological modes that are designed to access them, such as hermeneutics and contemplation.

In addition, an emphasis on reductionism tended to interpret (away) such things as subjective experience, meaning, purpose, and contemplative insights in terms of lower order physiological and chemical processes and pathologies. This is a type of interpretation that William James (1958) long ago scorned as "medical materialism."

Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate. George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon. (p. 29)

Unfortunately, these biases largely continue.

The type of graduate training, the publication policies of journals, the criteria for research funding, and the contemporary scientific ethos that one should work with objectively and precisely manageable topics conspire to lock most researchers into a highly reductionistic way of defining what is a significant issue to explore. Scientism is crowding out spirit, substance and significance. (Heath, 1983, p. 153)

### *The Birth of Transpersonal Psychology*

Humanistic psychology arose in part as a reaction to these problems. It was one of the first schools, along with psychosynthesis, to emphasize and explore psychological health. This emphasis derived in no small part from the force of one of the school's father figures, Abraham Maslow, who was particularly interested in psychological well-being and argued that "to oversimplify the matter somewhat, it is as if Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half" (Maslow, 1968, p. 5).

Now it must be acknowledged that there are some fundamental flaws in Maslow's work, and some people regard it as having even inhibited subsequent research on psychological health (Heath, 1983). The main problems are that his research was extremely subjective—Maslow alone selected his examples of well-being—and the healthy qualities he identified were abstract. This abstractness made it difficult to develop psychological tests to assess these qualities, and it was many years before one widely used but still limited test, the Personality Orientation Inventory, was created.

However, one of Maslow's findings that was to have significant impact was his discovery that some of the people he regarded as particularly healthy had what he called peak experiences. These people, whom Maslow (1968) called "peakers" or "transcenders," regarded these peak experiences as among the most important experiences of their lives. Maslow came to regard these experiences as influential and beneficial, and subsequent research has supported his conclusions (Livingston, 1975).

Peak experiences were subsequently recognized as occurring in other cultures and times and under other names and circumstances. Throughout history they have been known as religious mystical experiences. Subsequently, it was found that various Eastern philosophies, psychologies, and religions described not just peak experiences but whole families of peak experiences and claimed, contrary to Maslow's self-transcenders for whom these experiences were usually spontaneous, to be able to induce them at will (Tart, 1983a, 1983b; Vaughan, 1986).

Transpersonal psychology began in large part with a focus on these peak experiences: their characteristics, effects, significance, and the means for inducing them. The field takes its name in part from some of the characteristics of these experiences, which are accompanied by a sense of an expansion of identity beyond (trans) what Alan Watts called "the skin encapsulated ego" of persona and personality. Such experiences have been found to occur under a number of conditions either spontaneously or induced by such activities as meditation, hypnosis, psychotherapy, psychedelics, intense physical exertion, or immersion in nature.

Of course, this interest in peak experiences is by no means the only interest of transpersonal psychology, which aims to be broadly inclusive. It aims not to displace earlier schools but rather to expand them by incorporating their theory, data, and research within an expanded view of human nature and potential (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980, in press).

This inclusive integrative nature of transpersonal psychology is based on the recognition that all models, theories, and hence psychologies, are necessarily partial, limited perspectives. No theory or school, including the transpersonal, is *the truth*. Therefore transpersonal psychology aims to be inclusive and integrative, recognizing that each school has something to offer.

Some dimensions of this inclusive integration are developmental, integrative, and epistemological. That is, transpersonal psy-

chology acknowledges and is interested in the full range of psychological development from infancy through to transconventional levels of development. It is also interested in the integration of apparently disparate schools and in an expanded epistemology that includes sensory, mental, and contemplative modes of acquiring knowledge. These dimensions lead us into a discussion of some current frontiers of transpersonal psychology.

## POTENTIAL INTEGRATIONS AND SYNTHESSES WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY

### *Development*

In recent years, there has been considerable development of developmental psychology. There is increased recognition of the importance of the developmental perspective, increased precision in mapping early developmental stages, increased recognition that psychological development may continue into adulthood, and increased acknowledgment that conventional or usual adult development may not represent the potential ceiling.

In addition, there has been a gradual linkage of these higher developmental stages with experiences traditionally thought of as religious. These include Maslow's metamotives and metapathologies, Kohlberg's (1981) postconventional moral thinking and Wilber's postformal operational cognition (Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986). These higher stages tend to be associated with experiences in which the self-sense extends beyond (trans) the usual egoic personality sense and leads us directly into the area of transpersonal psychology.

We have, therefore, developmental maps from three different sources: child development, normal adult development, and spiritual development. Recently Ken Wilber (1980; Wilber et al., 1986) has provided the first "full spectrum" psychological model of development. This model links these childhood, adult, and spiritual stages into a single continuum and suggests that the upper stages of conventional, personal, egoic, rational, and psychological development may merge into the lower transconventional, transpersonal, transegoic, transrational, and spiritual stages.

Of course, numerous questions must be answered about this model, and considerable research will be necessary before it can be

fully accepted (Rothberg, 1986). However, at the very least it points to a number of stimulating implications. It is impossible to deal with all of these here, and the reader is referred to Wilber's works for a fuller discussion of them. However, to focus on some of them and to carry Wilber's thinking forward slightly further, it might be useful to begin by considering the implications of this model for "normality."

What a full spectrum model suggests is that what we have thought of as normality may be a form of arrested development. Of course this idea is not new. It is rather a more precise formulation of Abraham Maslow's (1968) comment that "what we call normal in psychology is really a psychopathology of the average, so undramatic and so widely spread that we don't even notice it" (p. 16).

But if normality is a form of arrested development, then, of course, a critical question is, Why does it arrest? There is a concept here introduced by Raymond Cattell that may be useful. Cattell observed a phenomenon that he called "coercion to the biosocial mean" in which social forces tend to compensate for genetic extremes. Thus, for example, a person with a strong genetic tendency toward dominance is likely to receive social encouragement for restraint whereas the submissive person will be encouraged towards self-assertion. Society in other words exerts powerful influences to pull people toward social means.

The question therefore arises as to whether this same principal may also operate on the vertical-developmental dimension. In other words might society encourage development up to, but hinder development beyond, societal norms. Examples of this kind of process might perhaps include the frustration and behavioral acting out of gifted children placed in normal, but to them boring, schools. Likewise, it might explain the fate of many of the great saints and sages who throughout human history have all too often ended up drinking hemlock, being crucified, or being burned.

The net result of this process may be that many latent capacities, developmental stages, and geniuses may not be developed and expressed but rather may be covertly suppressed. The developmental level of a society may thus set developmental limits for its individuals no matter how gifted they may be. A classic example of this phenomena was presented by Aldous Huxley, who asked the question, "What could a Cro-Magnon genius look like?" Now Cro-Magnon people had cranial capacities equal to, or perhaps even

slightly greater than, contemporary *Homo sapiens*. Thus they presumably possessed our potential for psychological, intellectual, and religious development. Yet, as Huxley pointed out, a Cro-Magnon genius would probably have been a pretty good hunter and gatherer and not much more.

The interesting question then is, What unrecognized capacities lie unstimulated within us? What currently unfathomable abilities lie dormant and undreamed of, and what can we do to speed their appearance? These are humbling questions that help remind us that for all we know our potentials may exceed our wildest dreams. As one wag quipped, "They've found the missing link between the ape and civilized humans: it's us."

A further implication of Wilber's model concerns the great saints and sages. These people have often been regarded as a unique species, forever set off from the rest of us by a God-given division. However, from a developmental perspective it may be that they are simply more developmentally advanced.

### *Integrations Among Psychological Schools*

Transpersonal psychology is also interested in the nonexclusive integration of different schools. Human beings are, if nothing else, remarkably complex, and there is no reason to assume that one single theory, therapy, or psychology can encompass all this complexity any more than there may be one fundamental comprehensive formula or theory in physics (Bohm, 1973). Psychologists of different schools may be like the blind men and the elephant, each with a valuable but partial perspective on human nature, potential, pathology, and therapy.

Rather than fighting for the exclusive dominance of one perspective over others, transpersonal psychology suggests that apparently conflicting schools may perhaps address different perspectives, dimensions, and stages and may therefore be partly complementary. For example, Freudian psychology and object relations theory may address important issues of early development, and existential psychology and therapy may speak particularly to universal issues confronting mature adults. Behavior therapy may point to the importance of identifying specific environmental reinforcers that maintain appropriate and inappropriate behavior and cognitive therapies may help us appreciate the power of unrecognized thoughts and beliefs. Likewise, multidimensional schools such as

Jungian psychology and psychosynthesis point to, among other things, the possibility of transpersonal development and the therapeutic power of images and symbols. Asian systems such as Buddhist, Yogic, and Vedantic psychologies may complement Western approaches by, for example, pointing out the therapeutic and transpersonal developmental power of ethics, meditation, and attentional training.

### *Epistemological Integration*

A third possible dimension of integration is epistemological. For several centuries science has been one of the major arbiters of truth in Western culture. Science is an empirical (sensory) analytic enterprise that emphasizes sensory observation, measurement, and analysis. It is a technique of great power for understanding the physical world but, unfortunately, it can say very little about subjective phenomena such as meaning and purpose.

Unfortunately, *science*, an immensely powerful and valuable tool, has frequently degenerated into the pseudophilosophy of *scientism*. Scientism and its philosophical analogue, logical positivism, argue that only sensory data and science are capable of yielding valid knowledge. The result has been that phenomena incapable of sensory observation and scientific analysis have all too often been devalued and denied validity. Two important realms of denied knowledge have been the subjective realm of mind, meaning, and purpose and the transcendental experiences revealed by contemplation.

However, in spite of their widespread acceptance in some scientific and psychological circles, scientism and logical positivism are scientifically and philosophically untenable. To the request, "You claim that science is the only means of acquiring valid knowledge, so please show us your scientific proof of this claim," the believer in scientism remains silent. There is, of course, no such scientific proof (Wilber, 1983a). Without going into a lengthy philosophical analysis it can simply be said that although logical positivism has a few good points it is, as *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes "dead, or as dead as a philosophical movement ever becomes" (Passmore, 1967, p. 57).

Wilber (1983a) has argued for an expanded epistemology and psychology using all three types of knowledge: sensory, mental-phenomenological, and contemplative. In his argument he draws

on the Christian philosopher St. Bonaventure and his scheme of three eyes: the eye of flesh, the eye of reason, and the eye of contemplation. These three eyes, or epistemological modes, correspond to sensory input, mental-phenomenological observation, and contemplative observation-inquiry. Each of the eyes yields a particular type of knowledge or what St. Bonaventure called "illumination." These are for the eyes of flesh, reason, and contemplation, respectively, the *lumen exterius et inferius*, *lumen interius*, and *lumen superius* that Bonaventure thought revealed respectively a *vestigium*, an *imago*, and a direct realization of God.

These three eyes have been emphasized by different psychologies and therapies. For example, classical behavior therapies have attempted to limit themselves to data that can be observed and measured with the senses. In particular, radical or Skinnerian behavior therapy has avoided postulating empirically unobservable mental variables such as motives, images, or other mental phenomena. However, as philosophers have pointed out, Skinner's logical argument for avoiding talk of mental events is inadequate and "Skinner himself has to smuggle in mentalistic assumptions in order to make sense of the simplest experiments" (Flanagan, 1991, p. 116).

Psychologies and therapies that have emphasized the eye of reason or observation of mind include the introspective psychologies, phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis, and various dynamic psychologies. On the other hand, the eye of contemplation, which focuses on transcendental phenomena and yields transcendental insights known variously as *gnosis* and *prajna*, has been the focus of meditative, contemplative, and yogic systems.

Psychological schools that focus on one of these three eyes (or epistemological modes) and realms of knowledge often deny the importance or even validity of others. However, all three modes may be necessary for a psychology seeking to encompass the full spectrum of human experience, nature, potential, and development (Wilber, 1983a).

## TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

The ideas presented above point to several new understandings of religion, especially mystical religion. Some of these new understandings are as follows.

The developmental perspective suggest that the upper levels of psychological development may merge into the earlier phases of contemplative development and that we may be able to identify cross-cultural cross-disciplinary phases of spiritual development. In Wilber's model the major stages identified to date are three and have been labeled subtle, causal, and absolute (Wilber et al., 1986). The subtle stage is marked by the emergence of experiences that are precisely as the name describes: subtle. As the usual raucous activity of the untrained mind quiets in contemplation, prayer, or yoga, more gentle, subtle images, affects, and sensations emerge into awareness. Beyond the subtle stage lies the causal, in which all objects of experience dissolve, and there is left only pure consciousness. This is the nirvana of Buddhism, the *nirvikalpa samadhi* of Vedanta. Finally there may emerge a stage in which objects reappear but are recognized as purely modifications of consciousness. This is *sahaj samadhi* or the absolute (Da Free John, 1985; Wilber et al., 1986).

Wilber (1983b) has suggested that it may be possible to map religious practices on two dimensions that have usually been confused. The first of these is a dimension that he calls *authenticity*. The authenticity of a discipline is an index of the developmental level (i.e., subtle, causal, or absolute) for which the discipline aims. The second dimension of spiritual practices that Wilber identifies is their *legitimacy*. Legitimacy he defines as a measure of the extent to which the practices meet the psychological needs of their practitioners at the practitioner's current level.

This dimension of legitimacy might be further refined by considering the "type of legitimacy," the specific psychological needs that a religion meets and the psychological level of development of the people involved. For example, a particular religion (e.g., Confucianism) might be particularly effective in meeting social belongingness needs (high social need legitimacy) but not so effective in countering fear of death (low death fear legitimacy).

To these two dimensions of authenticity and legitimacy might be added a third of *effective authenticity*. Effective authenticity would provide a measure of the effectiveness with which practices are actually able to effect transformation to the higher levels for which they aim. In other words, authenticity indicates the level of transcendence for which a discipline aims, effective authenticity indicates its effectiveness in inducing this transcendence, and legitimacy indicates its effectiveness in meeting psychological

needs at the practitioner's current level. Mystical religions may now be seen, in part, as roadmaps for training the mind to induce transcendent states of consciousness. Not surprisingly, effective authentic disciplines seem to include common elements of training. Four of the most common central elements comprise training in ethics, concentration, emotional transformation, and wisdom (Novak, 1987; Walsh, 1990).

The idea that mystical religions function (at least ideally) to induce transcendent states of consciousness, together with recent research on states of consciousness, may throw light on a number of perennial religious conundrums. For example, the effectiveness of certain capacities may depend on a person's state of consciousness. State-specific learning and state-specific communication suggest that what is learned in one state of consciousness may not be fully understandable in another state or communicable to someone else not in the original state. State-dependent communication may be particularly limited if the receiver of the communication has never experienced the state from which the communication is coming (Tart, 1983a).

These phenomena may provide one, but only one, explanation of why the teachings of the great religious saints and sages have been such a source of confusion and debate. For these sages may have been communicating from exceptional transcendent states. Therefore, those of us who have never experienced these states may be limited by state-specific understanding and communication in our capacity to appreciate the full profundity (or what is technically known as "grades of significance") of their messages (Schumacher, 1977; Walsh, 1989a). Because most of us have very limited experience of the more exceptional transcendent states, we will presumably hear the message less profoundly (i.e., at a lower grade of significance) than the grade of significance at which it was given. The result will be a progressive loss of profundity or grades of significance of the original founder's message, a process that might be described as the *exotericization of a religion*. The loss of profundity might occur especially in cases of oral traditions, in which the precise words of the founder are not preserved. State-specific understanding and communication may also impose significant limits on the ability of scholars, philosophers, and psychologists who have not undertaken contemplative training to grasp the higher grades of significance of philosophies and psychologies that address transpersonal insights such as, for example, Buddhist

*abhidharmic* psychology and Vedanta and Madhyamika philosophies (Walsh, 1989a).

A further implication of these ideas may be that contemplative practice may be essential for understanding and preserving the original profundity of a spiritual tradition. For if contemplative practices, perhaps as described by the founder, are capable of inducing states of consciousness identical or close to those of the founder (e.g., Zen's direct transmission of mind) then presumably the message will be more fully comprehended. In other words, the profundity of the original message may be better heard, and the exotericization of the tradition reduced, when those hearing the message have themselves undertaken effective authentic practices.

These ideas may point to the importance of gnostic intermediaries for religious preservation, realization, and implementation. The term *gnostic intermediary* was originally introduced by Carl Jung in his discussion of Wilhelm's translation of the *I Ching*. Jung felt that Wilhelm had imbibed the wisdom of the *I Ching* so deeply that he was able to communicate it directly from his own experience into the language and concepts of Western civilization. Hence gnostic intermediaries are people who personally incorporate the wisdom of a tradition and can then speak directly from their own experience and translate this experience and understanding into the language and concepts of the culture to which they wish to communicate.

Becoming an effective gnostic intermediary may therefore require three processes. The first is the imbibing of wisdom, or becoming wise. Wisdom, which is something transformative that we can only be, must be distinguished from knowledge, which is something that we have and which does not necessarily transform us. The second part of becoming a gnostic intermediary is learning the language and conceptual system of the culture to which one wishes to communicate. The third aspect is one of translation. That is, translating one's understanding into the language and concepts of the new culture so as to create an "aha" experience.

At the heart of the great religions lies a common core of transcendental wisdom known by such names as the *perennial wisdom*, *perennial philosophy*, *the transcendent unity of religions*, or *the consciousness disciplines* (H. Smith, 1976; Wilber, 1977). This perennial wisdom seems to require restatement and reinterpretation in the language and concepts of each culture and time if it is to be adequately understood, practiced, and realized. Only by such

a process can religious traditions be renewed and made meaningful for each culture and time. In our own time, one of the predominant concept systems of Western culture, and one of the most relevant for discussing transpersonal development, is psychology. Some contemporary gnostic intermediaries may therefore translate their insights to the West in part through psychology. Indeed, Chogyam Trungpa is reputed to have said that Buddhism will come to the West as a psychology. In other words, contemporary psychology, and especially those schools such as psychosynthesis and transpersonal psychology (which research transpersonal states and stages), may therefore offer an avenue by which the perennial wisdom may reenter, infuse, and perhaps transform Western culture.

### MEDITATION RESEARCH

Meditation is one of humankind's oldest therapies. Its origins are lost in antiquity, but 4,000-year-old Indian carvings show images of people sitting in meditative postures. Within the last few decades meditation has gained a firm foothold in the West, and surveys suggest that more than 6 million Americans have tried it. Many subsequently give it up, but some continue for months or years. Indeed, it is now possible to find practitioners of most of the major meditative traditions throughout much of the Western world.

Significant research on meditation began in the 1960s and a large body of literature now exists. This literature comprises translations of classic meditative texts, theoretical discussions, and experimental research. Several hundred research studies have been published, a number that is probably second only to behavior modification and biofeedback and many times more than studies of most psychotherapies (Alexander, Rainforth, & Gelderloos, 1991; Eppley, Abrams, & Shear, 1989; Murphy & Donovan, 1989; Shapiro, 1980; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; West, 1987).

These research studies cover a wide range of psychological, physiological, and chemical variables. To mention just a few, meditation practice has been found to have psychological benefits that include reduced anxiety and drug use and increased perceptual sensitivity, empathy, self-actualization, and pain tolerance. Phys-

iological changes include reduced blood pressure and modification of the EEG. Chemically, a number of hormonal changes have been noted, including changes in both adrenaline and cortisol, hormones directly related to the stress response. Not surprisingly, meditation has been used successfully for a large number of clinical problems, including insomnia, hypertension, anxiety, phobia, asthma, chronic pain, and cardiac arrhythmia, and has been claimed to reduce medical care use (Orme-Johnson, 1987) and criminal recidivism (Bleick & Abrams, 1987). However, as yet, it is unclear whether meditation is necessarily more effective for disorders than other relaxation and self-management programs such as simple relaxation or self-hypnosis (Shapiro, 1980; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984).

Here I would like to describe briefly two especially interesting recent studies, both performed by Harvard University researchers. The first is a study by Ellen Langer who examined the effects of meditation on geriatric nursing home patients (Alexander, Langer, Newman, Chandler, & Davis, 1989b). Langer and her colleagues divided her patients into three groups, one of whom was taught transcendental meditation; the other two groups were used as controls. On follow-up the meditators scored better on 11 of 12 subjective and objective measures of psychological well-being. However, what was most striking was that at 2 years follow-up one third of the control subjects had died while none of the meditators had.

This is a startling finding, but it is consistent with both classical claims and other research. Yogis have long claimed that meditation and yoga enhance longevity, a claim that now has to be taken seriously. In addition, physiological measures of aging suggest that meditators may score below their expected age range. A third line of support is the finding by researchers studying focusing ability in geriatric populations. *Focusing* is the name given by Eugene Gendlin (1981) and others to the capacity to become aware of and identify one's emotional *felt sense* at a given moment. This felt sense is, as the name suggests, a sense of how and what one is feeling in a particular moment. Gendlin (1981) cites a report that found that focusing ability was correlated with survival rates in a geriatric population.

This study must be accepted with caution because it is apparently only an unpublished report. However, if verified, the finding is of interest because focusing is an introspective skill that may be related to the introspective skills developed by some forms of

meditation. All of these findings lend support to the increasingly accepted idea that aging and longevity may be significantly determined by psychological factors (Langer, 1989a, 1989b).

The second group of recent studies are those performed by Daniel Brown and his colleagues (1987) on the effects of meditation practice on perceptual sensitivity and processing. Earlier, I mentioned that one of the problems with research has been a tendency toward *means-oriented* rather than a *problem-oriented* approach. Brown and his colleagues are notable exceptions to this problem. In their reading of the classic meditative literature, they observed that a major emphasis of meditation was on the training of perception, and hence they have oriented their research toward an investigation of perception. They have used two major approaches. The first of these is measurement of perceptual sensitivity and speed using a tachistoscope, an instrument used to flash images on a screen for extremely brief periods of time. Their second approach has been to use Rorschach tests.

The tachistoscope, or T-scope, has been used to study two measures of perceptual sensitivity and processing speed: detection threshold and discrimination thresholds. Detection threshold is the minimal threshold or duration of a very brief flash of light that can be recognized. To measure the discrimination threshold, two successive flashes of light are projected onto a screen and the interval between the flashes is varied. The subject is then asked to report whether he or she saw one or two flashes. When the two successive flashes are presented at very close intervals they tend to be seen as a single flash. The minimal interval at which two discrete flashes can be recognized is the discrimination threshold.

Meditation practices have sometimes been divided into two major classes (Goleman, 1988). The first class is that of concentration practices in which awareness is focused fixedly on a single object, often to the exclusion of others. The second group of practices are sometimes called *awareness* practices, and here attention is allowed to shift between and explore different objects. In the studies conducted by Brown and his colleagues, most of his subjects were practitioners of Buddhist Vipassana (insight) meditation, which is a type of awareness practice. Their subjects ranged from beginners through to highly advanced experts, including some who were reputed to have reached various stages of enlightenment. In the classical Theravadin Buddhist tradition, there are four stages of enlightenment representing successively deeper meditative in-

sights (Tin, 1975; Goleman, 1988). Several of Brown's subjects had reached the first and second stages, and a few were reputed to have attained the third or fourth.

The study of expert subjects constitutes one of the strengths of Brown's work because much meditation research has focused on subjects who have done a few months or at best a few years of practice of not more than an hour or so per day. By classical standards, such meditators would be considered little more than beginners. Yet it is the advanced practitioners who have traditionally been said to exhibit the most dramatic changes in perception. This idea of a developmental sequence of perceptual changes has, in fact, been supported by Brown's studies.

To summarize the tachistoscopic studies, it was found that meditators did indeed differ from nonmeditators. Meditators showed enduring improvements in visual sensitivity (detection threshold) whether they were currently engaging in intensive meditation or not. They also showed heightened discrimination ability (reduced discrimination threshold) while engaged in intensive meditation practice but not otherwise (Brown, Forte, & Dysart, 1984a, 1984b). Advanced meditators proved so sensitive that they gave remarkable reports about their experience of observing two light flashes. Whereas nonmeditators reported seeing merely two flashes, the advanced meditators reported seeing the moment of a rising of the first flash, its brief duration, the moment when it disappeared, the gap between the two flashes, the moment of arising of the second flash, its brief duration, and finally its disappearance. All of these observations usually occurred in less than one tenth of a second. Moreover the advanced meditators described a shift in perspective such that the flash of light did not seem to occur as an external event on the visual screen but rather as an event in the mind, that is, as a subtle change in the internally perceived stream of consciousness. These reports, of course, suggest that advanced meditators are aware of perceptual events and processes that are below threshold for those of us who have not been trained in these ways (Brown, 1987). Moreover, these findings are consistent with claims that have been made in the classical meditative literature for some 2,000 years (Tin, 1975).

Equally interesting findings were reported from studies of meditators responses to Rorschach cards. In this study, subjects were divided into categories depending on their meditative skill. This

skill was determined by teacher reports, responses to a profile of meditative experiences questionnaire, and the Rorschach test responses.

The first group was called the beginners group and consisted of those people who showed little signs of meditative progress even after 3 months of intensive retreat practice. These people showed Rorschach test responses that did not differ significantly from normal control subjects.

The next group consisted of subjects who had made some progress in insight meditation and had developed some ability to concentrate. These subjects gave Rorschach reports quite unlike any other group that has ever been reported. Most normal subjects report a number of images such as animals, people, parts of the body, and so on. However, the meditators at this stage of practice tended to see very few of these and instead reported mainly simple patterns of light and dark. In other words, they simply saw the shapes of black ink on the white paper and had little tendency to elaborate these configurations into organized images. This finding is consistent with the classical claim that skill in meditative concentration focuses the mind and reduces the number of associations, thoughts, images, and so on that arise.

The third and more skilled group were called the insight group. These were subjects who had begun to develop some of the classical stages of Vipassana meditation insight. These Rorschach reports yielded results almost exactly opposite to those of the concentration group described earlier. These Rorschach reports were characterized by highly increased productivity and richness of associations. Whereas normal nonmeditating subjects tend to produce 1 or 2 responses per card, these subjects consistently gave 10 or more and claimed that they could keep on giving further responses if requested.

A further difference showed up when the test was readministered. Repeated administration of the Rorschach test days or even years later tends to yield many of the same responses for normal subjects. However, many of the meditation subjects produced mainly new responses when given the Rorschach again. Meditators at this stage, in other words, appear especially open to the flow of internal associations and produce an unusually rich repertoire of responses (Brown, 1986; Brown & Engler, 1986).

The fourth group comprised subjects in the so-called initial enlightenment group. These were subjects who had reached the

first of the four stages of enlightenment described in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition.

At first glance, the Rorschach reports of this group were not obviously different from those of nonmeditators. However, several differences did emerge. Some 5% to 20% of the total responses on each Rorschach card concerned the interaction of form and energy or form and space. These subjects tended to view the internal imagery that resulted from viewing the ink blots as merely manifestations or emanations of energy and space within their own mind. They were also able to be aware of the moment-to-moment process by which their stream of consciousness became organized into forms and images in response to the ink blots.

Interestingly enough, these initially enlightened subjects were not without intrapsychic conflict. The Holt scoring system for drive-dominated content and defenses showed an *increase* in drive manifestations but a *decrease* in defensive operations. That is, these expert meditators were by no means free of normal psychological conflicts around such issues as dependency, sexuality, and aggression. However, on the other hand they showed little defensiveness and reactivity to these conflicts (Brown & Engler, 1986).

The final group of subjects comprised those few meditators who were alleged to have reached at least the third or fourth stages of enlightenment. The reports from these subjects were strikingly similar and strikingly different from normal Rorschach reports. There were four major characteristics unique to the responses of these subjects.

The first of these unique features concerned the perceived nature of the Rorschach card and ink blot. Normal subjects accept without question the physical reality of the ink blot but may recognize that they project the images they see onto it. However, these meditation masters saw not only the images but the ink blot itself as a projection of the mind.

The second unique finding was that the Rorschach responses of these meditators showed no evidence of the psychological conflicts that the rest of us usually take to be an inherent and inescapable part of human existence. This finding is consistent with the classical literature that claims psychological suffering can be completely eradicated in the final stages of meditation. Also consistent with classic claims is the observation by the researchers that all of these meditation masters were unfailingly kind and considerate throughout the testing procedure (Brown, 1987).

The third unique feature of these Rorschach responses was the integrative style of response. Usually, subjects respond to each of the 10 Rorschach cards independently and rarely refer back to previous cards. However, the masters were quite different. Not only did they refer to other cards, but they systematically linked all 10 cards into a systematic integrated response on a single theme.

This integrated-theme response constitutes the fourth unique feature of these test responses. Each of the masters integrated the responses to the 10 cards into a single systematic discourse about the nature of suffering, ultimate reality, and the means by which human suffering could be alleviated. In other words, they turned the tables on the testers and transformed the Rorschach test situation into a teaching for the testers (Brown & Engler, 1986).

#### EDUCATIONAL APPLICATIONS OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Education today in the West is primarily intellectual and geared toward children and early adults. There is however a movement—the so-called lifelong learning movement—toward the recognition that formal education can be useful throughout the life span (Boucouvalas, 1983). Indeed, as long ago as 1956 Lewis Mumford predicted that soon “education will constitute the principle business of life” (p. 241).

One of the crucial questions of our time may therefore be, To what extent can formal education be made effective not only for preadult intellectual development but also for other domains—such as the emotional, introspective, and moral—and for other levels, including adult and transpersonal levels? The question therefore arises as to whether we can adopt transpersonal psychological and psychotherapeutic tools and techniques for the classroom.

My own experiences suggest that we can. For 4 years, I ran classes of 3 to 6 months duration consisting of lectures and experiential exercises on transpersonal topics for undergraduates at the University of California. The classes were designed to give participants both theoretical and practical experience of transpersonal ideas and techniques. There were, for example, lectures on the nature of belief systems, motivation, identity, addiction, and

death. There were also corresponding experiential exercises involving such things as visualization, discussion, identifying beliefs, frustrating addictions, observing thoughts, practicing forgiveness, and so on.

The results were surprisingly positive. Although there was an initial period of several weeks during which many students felt confused, by the end of the quarter, a majority of students claimed that the courses were helpful to their lives, and approximately 10% evaluated them as the most important educational experience that they had ever had.

These results seemed particularly important because there appears to have been a tendency within transpersonal psychology to stick to more traditional didactic, theoretical formats (Davis & Wright, 1987). Of course there are notable and fine exceptions to this, and some classes and schools explicitly aim to integrate theory and practice (Roberts, 1975). Because the classes described above were presented to students with no prior transpersonal experiences, or even knowledge that this was what they were going to get in the class, it suggests that the implementation of transpersonal ideas and techniques in education may be a particularly fruitful and important avenue for future research.

#### PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Like all schools, transpersonal psychology has its problems and limitations. Most of these can be traced to its relative youth; hopefully, the field will mature beyond these problems and limitations in the future.

One of the major problems is that some thinking in the field seems to be rather sloppy and intellectually unsophisticated, perhaps not more so than in some other branches of psychology, but sloppy nonetheless. It seems important that the initial enthusiasm that birthed the field be wedded to rigorous thinking, scholarship, and research. This thinking will need to be both deeper and more wide-ranging. The greater depth will need to involve more conceptually precise and experientially informed analyses of key concepts, such as consciousness (Baruss, 1990), and of underlying presuppositions and philosophical assumptions (Rothberg, 1986).

Scholarship will also need to be more wide-ranging and integrative. This is important if we are to overcome the current isolation of transpersonal psychology from both the psychological mainstream and potentially related disciplines, such as philosophy, phenomenology, and comparative religion. As yet, few transpersonal articles have appeared in mainstream psychological journals. In addition, few attempts have been made to link transpersonal concepts to mainstream work such as early development, cognitive psychology, or behavior modification.

More research is also necessary. Although several hundred studies of meditation have been published, there have been relatively few in other transpersonal areas. If the field is to establish its validity, then its theoretical claims will need to be backed up by adequate research.

There have been four noteworthy critiques of transpersonal psychology. Two of these (Ellis, 1986; May, 1986) appear to reflect idiosyncratic personal misunderstandings of the field and have been strongly rebutted in a large number of letters to the editor and in three article-length responses (Walsh, 1989b; Wilber, 1989a, 1989b). Wilber's response to Ellis may be one of the most amusing rejoinders ever to appear in an academic journal and is worth reading for its entertainment value as well as for its information.

Particularly curious has been the astounding tendency by Ellis and Brewster Smith to equate transpersonal psychology with religion because of its discussion of aspects of religion. It is widely agreed that in fact Ellis's attacks are actually aimed, not at transpersonal psychology, but at fundamentalist and fringe religions, although Dr. Ellis does not seem to be aware of the differences between them. Interestingly, transpersonally oriented scholars share his concerns about these religious movements and have been on the forefront of research assessing their dangers (Anthony, Ecker, & Wilber, 1987; Deikman, 1990; Feuerstein, 1991). For a superb text on the psychology of religion per se see Wulff (1991). Brewster Smith (1990) described transpersonal psychology as a "latter-day religion" but offered no evidence to support this claim, and it is hard to see how the field would remotely fit any academically accepted definition of religion.

What is most striking is the lack of knowledge and understanding of transpersonal psychology displayed by these critics, especially because each is an eminent and highly competent practitioner in his own field of expertise. Perhaps this is not really so

surprising because a close examination of the history of internecine warfare between schools of psychology shows that antagonists often attack, not so much other schools, but rather their own misunderstandings and misinformation about the other schools. Perhaps the crucial lesson here is that all of us need to study other schools more carefully and deeply before critiquing them. For a good example of an informed critique by someone who has obviously studied transpersonal psychology carefully before critiquing it, see Wiedmann (1985).

A recurrent and important theme of these criticisms of transpersonal psychology is that, in its focus on human potential, it has not adequately addressed the negative side of human nature: suffering, existential constraints, the shadow, and evil. This may reflect both humanistic and transpersonal psychology's reaction against the emphasis on pathology of mainstream psychology and psychiatry. Certainly, the Asian psychologies and philosophies from which transpersonal psychology has derived a great deal (e.g., Buddhist, Yogic, and Vedantic systems) are more than explicit about the suffering and existential limits inherent in life and even point to types of existential suffering as yet unrecognized by Western psychology or philosophy (Walsh, 1988). As Thomas Hardy said, "If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst." Hopefully, future research will bring transpersonal insights to bear on both human potential and suffering, and, indeed, publications focusing on contemporary global crises are beginning to appear (Fox, 1990; Grof, 1988; Walsh, 1984).

Another problem for transpersonal psychology is the two-edged sword of popularity. Since its beginning in 1969 with a small group of people, the field has grown significantly, and increasing numbers of people with varying degrees of expertise are now calling themselves "transpersonal." The question of how optimal intellectual, professional, clinical, and scholarly standards can be maintained, or even if they can be maintained, has not yet been adequately addressed.

Transpersonal psychology makes several unique demands on its practitioners. One of these is the need for some sort of psychological or contemplative practice that will provide the practitioner with direct experience of transpersonal phenomena. Without such experience, transpersonal concepts will be what Emmanuel Kant called "empty" that is, void of experiential grounding. Likewise, the psychologist without adequate experience will lack the neces-

sary background with which to grasp the full significance, depth, and grades of significance of transpersonal phenomena and ideas (Walsh, 1989a).

Indeed, transpersonal psychology is probably one of the most demanding areas of psychology because it requires the cultivation and integration of all three eyes. The sensory eye of observation, measurement, and empathy must be cultivated, as must the eyes of reason and contemplation, and all three must be integrated for optimal transpersonal understanding, theorizing, and therapy. This is no small task. Indeed, of course, it is more an ongoing direction, ideal, and process than it is a goal to be brought to completion.

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