Keynote Address

The Meeting of East and West: Yoga and Psychotherapy

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I want to first thank the Yoga and Psychotherapy Association of India for convening this extraordinary gathering, and especially Ganesh Shankar for inviting me to speak at this event.

As someone who has been a beginning student of yoga for the past 35 years, and as a clinical psychologist who has been studying, practicing, and teaching depth psychotherapy for over 25 years, my interest in this area is in how people actually change – how they heal, grow, and transform. I believe that the coming together of these two inner disciplines from east and west – yoga and psychotherapy – is a way toward a truly global psychology and a psycho-spiritual understanding of therapy.

In looking at how psychology has developed in the east and in the west, it seems that east and west have produced two very different streams of psychology. Each of these streams has made profound discoveries about the nature of the psyche and the possibilities for wholeness, but they’ve traveled from two different directions and developed very different areas of knowledge.

To put this into broad terms, psychology in the west looks from the outside in, whereas psychology in the east looks from the inside out. These two perspectives give two very different views of psychology. By looking from the outside in western psychology has developed very detailed, precise maps of the outer being, the body-heart-mind organism and the self; whereas eastern psychology’s view from the inside out has generated very detailed maps of our inner being and the spiritual foundation of consciousness. Each approach has essential knowledge about human consciousness, yet each focuses on only half of our total being. Each requires the other to complete it, and only in bringing them together does an integral view of psychology emerge.

Western psychology ascribes our lack of wholeness and fragmentation to the universal
experience of psychological wounding. We do not know the fullness of who we are because our wounding makes us unconscious of it. While some people are wounded more severely and some less, we all are wounded. To be born into this world is to be emotionally hurt and scarred growing up. Our response to this wounding is to push it down, contract, and develop a defensive structure in which large portions of our self become unconscious. We become lost and cut off from our own deeper self. Western psychotherapy is an attempt to understand and repair this fragmented wholeness.

Eastern psychology, on the other hand, sees a different cause for our fragmentation and suffering, namely that: we are cut off from the spiritual ground of our being. We identify with the surface life of our body and ego – our desires, feelings, sensations, thoughts – and so are unconscious of our spiritual source. Yoga and eastern psychological practices aim at bringing peace to the mind so we may go inside to find the true fulfillment intrinsic to our spiritual core.

The human predicament, then, is characterized by a double fragmentation. It is a dual diagnosis we suffer from – a psycho-spiritual fracture – and dual therefore must be the path to wholeness.

Further, a postmodern perspective raises the question: what becomes “knowledge” in psychology? Historically what constitutes psychological knowledge has been narrowly western and excluded eastern cultures whose depth of psychological insight surpasses the west in significant ways. From a global perspective, a strictly western definition of psychology that excludes the east’s profound discoveries appears to be a rather parochial view of psychology. My own sense is that the west will come to appreciate yoga and eastern spirituality more fully through psychotherapy, and that it will be through yoga and spirituality that India will “get” psychology.

If our deepest identity is a joyous, loving, luminous center of peace, why do we not experience this? Why in fact do we so often experience the very opposite? The different schools of yoga are unanimous in declaring that our deeper identity is veiled by the activity of the ego. When we look within, we don’t see the atman or soul, we find the ego. This activity of the ego or self kicks up so much dust that it clouds the inner light. Until this ego activity is quieted and “purified”, the light can’t get through, or at best can only be seen in rare flashes, and spiritual practices are methods to quiet and
purify the self. However, the sad truth is that spiritual practice is not very efficient or effective and works extremely slowly for most everyone. For a tiny few, spiritual practice works brilliantly, but we need to admit that the world’s religious traditions have been notably unsuccessful in bringing about a spiritual transformation in the larger society.

Why is this? Why have purely spiritual means failed to change the world? The reasons for this become clear as we bring depth psychology to bear on this issue. An integral perspective reveals two different aspects to the self’s “impurity”:

Dense, heavy, “gross,” or opaque consciousness
Fragmentation or lack of integration of the ego

The problem with a purely spiritual approach is that attempting to purify a fragmented ego is a bit like trying to fill a sieve with water. A fragmented ego works against itself even in its spiritual practice. Spirituality works to refine the density or opacity of consciousness but it’s not equipped to deal with unconscious defenses and the ego’s fragmentation, since it was never designed for this. Psychotherapy, on the other hand, was designed to integrate the fragmented ego, but it does not attempt to spiritualize or refine the consciousness, nor does it have the theoretical understanding by which to even understand such an effort.

From the time we’re babies our senses pull us outward. We quickly become attached – to people, to emotional satisfactions, to mother’s love and fear of disapproval, to physical pleasure like nursing, eating, walking, moving, exploring, and soon develop an ego that organizes our actions. As the ego grows, desires and attachments multiply, drawing us further out into the world. We come to identify with our surface body-heart-mind and desires as we lose contact with our deeper nature.

We’re also emotionally wounded in the process of development, and our attempts to cope with our wounding result in the growth of a dense underbrush of unconscious defenses against our emotional pain. Western psychology breaks new ground with its in-depth investigation of psychological wounding. *The core wounding of our time is a rip in the very fabric of the self.* In our family of origin there are failures to attune to the emotional state of the infant and young child, there are
accidents, there are traumas, there is inevitable emotional pain growing up. The parents, who due to their own emotional wounding can only respond empathically to some of the child’s emotions and self, and they tune out what is emotionally threatening. To cope with this and to maintain the vital bond with the parents, the child holds down this pain, represses certain impulses, disavows certain feelings, and after a period of time this all becomes automatic and unconscious. The child internalizes the parental prohibitions and develops a coping strategy that adapts to the family system, but in so doing adopts a false self that is alienated from the authentic self buried within. Large portions of the authentic self become unconscious, and this creates deficits in the self structure in which large areas of feeling and impulse become unconscious, the child dissociates from the body in the process and moves into the head, into a mind space, so portions of physical awareness also fade away.

Getting through these unconscious defenses is something very, very few people can do on their own through spiritual practice, because we can’t see our own unconscious defenses. That’s the nature of the unconscious – by definition it’s what we’re not aware of. Most everyone needs someone else who is trained to work with defenses to point out our blind spots. Therapy is also an intense relationship. Our wounding happened in relationship, and it is only in relationship that healing can occur.

Our defenses work against inner deepening. The ego has hidden from itself and becomes a victim of its own defensive maneuvers. Trapped in a web of its own making, it becomes hard to see very far below the surface, and the ego has little chance of penetrating the still deeper veils that cover our spiritual core. Whether spiritual practice aims at opening the heart or greater discrimination and mindfulness, the ego is confined to a small circle, tied to unconscious defenses that prevent it from deepening into its own interior spaces.

Depth psychotherapy is the first methodical investigation into all of this in human history and the only process designed to work through and heal these early wounds and contractions of the self. Other things can help the self grow here or there, but nothing can replace a full psychotherapeutic working through. Spiritual practice isn’t designed for this and can’t do it. Ignoring it does not make it go away. Once these structures are internalized, they persist throughout a lifetime without
psychological work. There is nothing else aside from depth psychotherapy that has been invented that can work through and heal the early wounds, bring the healthy self back into the growth process, strengthen and firm self structure so it becomes more cohesive, and promote the growth of the authentic self toward its greater potentials. As therapy has expanded it has become clear that it is too good just to be limited to sick people. It is with normal, healthy neurotics like thee and me where it has its greatest potential.

The first impression by the spiritual community that psychotherapy works against spiritual growth because it make the ego stronger, whereas spiritual practice is designed to reduce and eliminate the ego, has by now been shown to be untrue. Actually the opposite is the case. A weak self, a self that is neurotic, contracted, undeveloped, and tied into rigid defenses has very little room to move. When large portions of the self are off limits, inflexible and well-defended, spiritual practice progresses very slowly, for it will be moving in many directions at once without even realizing it. A fragmented self can hardly move at all, for it is so focused on restoring its own cohesion, pulling itself together, managing it self-image and interpersonal issues that its main activities are restricted to the surface. Neurosis makes for much more rigidity and contraction, and spiritual practice becomes routinized, mechanized, repetitious, for it is always unconsciously defending against the new. Whereas the mature self that emerges from psychotherapeutic work is more integrated, coherent, and stronger, for this strength allows for greater flexibility, fluidity, the capacity to let go of control and to surrender to its deeper nature. Perhaps this surrender is a preliminary practice the helps the ego surrender itself to the Divine more fully.

There are clear hazards if we ignore our psychology. In my experience, spiritual practice becomes blocked or slowed down for most people without significant psychological work. Although there are the rare spiritual geniuses like Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and Sri Ramana Maharshi who were able to cut through the ego and connect directly to the spiritual depths, for most everyone else in this modern era, some psychological awareness appears to be helpful and important. We ignore the power of psychotherapy at our own peril, for then it becomes difficult to avoid what transpersonal
psychology calls spiritual by-passing. Spiritual by-passing is using spiritual ideas and practices to avoid our own neurotic conflicts and feelings, and the result is usually simply a new version of our old neurosis rather than real spiritual growth.

In spiritual by-passing, spiritual practice becomes a new form of repression where we take spiritual ideals and try to enforce them on our self. The super-ego or inner judge very easily takes our spiritual aspirations and twists them into new and improved spiritual shoulds that are just as psychologically destructive as the original shoulds that we got from our family of origin. Some form of spiritual by-passing may be inevitable in our aspiration for a higher life, for our defenses and neurosis will wrap themselves around anything we encounter, including our spiritual practice. There are many people who are drawn to yoga with the hope they can just transcend their psychological issues and use yoga practice as a way to avoid their psychological work. But what happens of course is that we all take our psychological baggage with us. It’s hard to get around our psychology. We go beyond by going through.

A few examples may illustrate this. I was running a process group and one of the men said he did not want to tell anyone in the group he was angry because of the principle of ahimsa – non-violence. He believed if he shared his feelings of anger honestly that it would hurt others and set his spiritual practice back. As the group gave him feedback, he was surprised to learn that others experienced his anger anyway, in the form of biting sarcasm and a cold, aloofness from the group, a kind of angry withdrawal. These responses opened up the opportunity for him to experiment expressing his anger clearly, authentically, and non-destructively for the first time in his life, for he had always withheld his anger, first in his family and later in his spiritual practice with a new, spiritual should that was a form of spiritual by-passing.

A new client with a Christian spiritual practice I was seeing told me she wanted to forgive her mother for all the terrible things she had done to her in her childhood. She said she didn’t want to go into the past since it couldn’t be changed but wanted to live in the present, to forgive her mother and move on. Now obviously forgiveness is a good thing, spiritually and psychologically. But when
forgiveness comes as a top-down should and is imposed on the person, it is not true forgiveness but a form of spiritual by-passing. We can’t change the past, but we can change our relationship to the past so it is no longer so charged. The past is not really past but is present, here and now, in the form of held back hurt and anger. When the original anger and hurt can be re-experienced and fully worked through, then the past loses its charge and forgiveness comes, naturally and easily.

Spiritual practice heads into the light. Psychotherapy heads into the shadow and darkness first. Trying to by-pass the darkness does not generally lead to the light, for we become stuck avoiding the shadow. When yoga and psychotherapy are integrated, then both movements can happen, owning the darkness and moving into the light.

Neurosis is avoidance, an escape from reality, a defense against what is. All of us have this split within us, one part that seeks reality, truth, while the other part is an escapist, trying to avoid reality with our defenses and unconscious blocking. Until we resolve this split within ourselves psychologically, we’ll carry it into our spiritual practice, our relationships, and everything else we do.

We can see psychotherapy at one level as a form of behavior change or karma yoga. All therapy tries to get the person to act differently, more skillfully, and Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita says to Arjuna that yoga is skill in action. Put in psychological terms, we can say that yoga is skillful behavior. Neurosis is unskillful behavior, and psychotherapy tries to change this so that in becoming psychologically healthy, the person is capable of skillful behavior.

We can also see psychotherapy as a process of opening the heart or bhakti yoga. Psychotherapy and spirituality can be seen to have the same goal: opening the heart. Both seek to expand the heart’s capacity for feeling and love, but they proceed in very different ways. Spiritual traditions work to open the heart directly – through devotion, love, bhakti, positive emotions, and dis-identifying with negative emotions. Psychotherapy, on the other hand, works to open the heart by seeing how it is closed – by exploring the defenses against feelings and by re-owning painful, negative emotions, the avoidance of which so limits the heart’s emotional range. We can only go as high as we can go low; when we repress our lower or negative feelings we also restrict our capacity for higher, positive feelings. When
we explore our so-called “negative” or “lower” feelings, we discover that deep in that darkness lies jewels of light that enrich our life. An integrated approach to psychotherapy allows both to occur, opening the higher and the lower unconscious.

Another way to understand psychotherapy is by seeing it as a practice of discriminative awareness or raja yoga. In my workshop earlier I explored this more fully, but essentially this is the practice of bringing deep insight into psychotherapy. This harkens back to Freud’s view of making the unconscious conscious through insight, but unfortunately Freud’s method involved mental insight, which we now know is not effective. As someone once said, we don’t want to add insight to injury. For insight to be effective, it must be inner sight, a full seeing that involves mind, heart, and body.

This touches on one of the great mysteries of western psychology, namely why do feelings involve the body? Wilhelm Reich’s breakthrough discovery was that feelings are rooted in the body. When we feel our feelings, we sense them in the center part of our body, the humanistic-existential schools of psychotherapy focus on this in their therapies. For example, if you think of someone who you really hate or detest, take a moment and sense how you experience this feeling in your body. Now think of someone you really love and feel great warmth for, and sense how you feel that in your body. Can you feel the difference and sense how differently your body reacts to these feelings?

Some feelings we express in other places, like sadness, for example, we express through tears in the eyes. But we generally experience sadness in the torso, usually as a heaviness in the chest area. This discovery is now being confirmed by neuroscience, which shows that feeling primary emotion always involves the bodily sensing of it. It turns out that the right and left hemispheres of the brain process emotion very differently. The left brain processes emotion verbally, in terms of narrative coherence. The right hemisphere processes emotion as bodily sensed feelings. The left brain can only create a narrative of what it knows, and it needs the left brain’s bodily experience of primary emotion to understand verbally what is being felt. So both hemispheres are needed.

Research done at the University of Chicago shows you can predict which clients will benefit from psychotherapy one or two years later, based on the first session or two of therapy. It turns out that
those clients who access their bodily sensed feelings change in therapy and those that don’t fail to change. Increasingly all schools of depth therapy are coming to see the importance of including the body in explorating feelings. When we ignore the body’s experience of feelings we endanger the therapy.

But it’s a mystery why feelings emerge from the body. Here yoga comes to our rescue, for yoga has an intimate understanding of body awareness and a deeper understanding of the subtle body. Kundalini yoga and Tantra have mapped out the chakras as the energetic foundation of the body, heart, and mind.

No doubt you are all familiar with the chakras and their importance in states of consciousness. To briefly review, the first chakra is involved in the health of the physical body. If you’ve ever been around a professional athlete, his first chakra is OK, just humming along. The second chakra is involved in sex and aggression. Freud is often considered a second chakra psychologist because of his focus on sexuality and aggression. The third chakra is focused on eating and power. We live in a third chakra world, where power dominates politics and most relationships and eating disorders are rampant. Object relations psychology is a third chakra psychology, with its focus on who is up and who is down in our relational world. The fourth or heart chakra is where love is centered and when the fourth chakra begins to open the person experiences an opening to spirituality. Kohut’s self psychology, Carl Rogers’ focus on love and unconditional positive regard, and Carl Jung’s psychology represent fourth chakra psychologies. The evolution from the third chakra to the fourth chakra may be one of the most pressing issues facing the world today, and psychotherapy can help by allowing us to own and master the energies of sexuality, aggression, and power so that we can develop naturally toward love and spirituality without by-passing or just trying to transcend our shadow side. The fifth chakra involves the externalizing mind, the sixth chakra the occult third eye, and the seventh chakra opens to the liberation of atman.

So, the base of the spine is concerned with the physical body, from the throat on up are forms of mental consciousness, and between the base of the spine and the throat is where we process emotion.
And this is exactly where we tend to experience our feelings. It may well be that our physical body resonates to the subtle physical energies of the chakras to produce the experience of bodily sensed feelings that are the focus of psychotherapy.

A yoga-informed approach to psychology begins with the ancient Vedantic conception of the koshas, which provides an integrating framework for the many schools of western psychology. On the surface these consist of body, heart, and mind (annamayakosha, pranamayakosha, manomayakosha) that form the human organism. Organizing the various schools into the different levels of consciousness they specialize in leads to the following simplified view:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Psychology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental level</td>
<td>The Mental self</td>
<td>Cognitive psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher emotional</td>
<td>The Imaginal self</td>
<td>Jungian psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central emotional</td>
<td>The Relational self</td>
<td>Contemporary psychoanalysis, self psychology, object relations, Intersubjectivity, family systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower emotional</td>
<td>The Instinctual self</td>
<td>Classical psychoanalysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>The Embodied self</td>
<td>Humanistic/existential schools</td>
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Only recently has psychology opened the door to the inner realms through the transpersonal school. Yoga provides important clinical data that can no longer be ignored but must be accounted for by any psychology that tries to be comprehensive. Integral yoga psychology delineates three other realms that form the foundation for the frontal ego: the inner being, the true being, and the central being. The first realm is the inner being, sometimes called the occult or astral plane. This is a very mixed dimension of experience, and when it erupts into consciousness it can precipitate different forms of what is called spiritual emergency. The third realm, called the true being, corresponds to Jung’s “Self” and Ali’s “essence.”

The fourth, inmost being is the central being. The great yogi Sri Aurobindo elucidates how the central being is differentiated into the atman and the psychic being (or evolving soul.) The atman is the
silent Self that is our universal identity with the Divine (Brahman), eternal and standing outside the evolution. Here within the evolution is our spiritual individuality, antaratman or psychic center, called in the Upanishads the chaitya purusha, our immortal, evolving soul. Atman and antaratman, the two aspects of our deepest spiritual nature that correspond to the Impersonal Divine and the Personal Divine, spirit and soul.

Western psychology lacks an integrating framework and meaningful context by which to understand its extraordinary discoveries. Eastern psychology lacks a way to overcome the dense unconsciousness of the ego’s defensive structures, which pull ever downward. Only by enlarging psychology to include the inmost depths can we construct a true psychology of wholeness. This is the meeting of east and west, a union of the west’s outer, empirical science of psychology with the east’s inner, spiritual science of consciousness.