

Extract from John Welwood's book "Towards a Psychology of Awakening"
(pages 196-199)

In the traditional cultures of Asia, it was a viable option for a yogi to live purely as the impersonal universal, to pursue spiritual development without having much of a personal life or transforming the structures of that life. These older cultures provided a religious context that honoured and supported spiritual retreat and placed little or no emphasis on the development of the individual.² As a result, spiritual attainment could often remain divorced from worldly life and personal development. In Asia, yogis and sadhus could live an otherworldly life, have little personal contact with people, or engage in highly eccentric behaviour and still be supported and venerated by the community at large.

Many Westerners have tried to take up this model, pursuing impersonal realization while neglecting their personal life, but have found in the end that this was like wearing a suit of clothes that didn't quite fit. Such attempts at premature transcendence—taking refuge in the impersonal absolute as a way to avoid dealing with one's personal psychology, one's personal issues, feelings, or calling — leads to inner denial. And this can create monstrous shadow elements that have devastating consequences, as we have seen in many American spiritual communities in recent years. For whatever reasons, for better or for worse, it has become problematic in our culture to pursue spiritual development that is not fully integrated into the fabric of one's personal experience and interpersonal relationships.

Here is where psychological work might serve as an ally to spiritual practice—by helping to shine the light of awareness into all the hidden nooks and crannies of our conditioned personality, so that it becomes more porous, more permeable to the larger being that is its ground. Of course, what I am describing here is a special kind of psychological self-inquiry, which requires a larger framework, understanding, and aim than conventional psychotherapy. I am hesitant to call this psychotherapy at all, for the word therapy has connotations of pathology and cure that place it in a medical, rather than a transformative, context. Moreover, conventional therapy often involves only talk, failing to recognize ways in which the body holds defensive patterns and also manifests the energies of awakening. Truly transformative psychological work must also help us unlock the body's contractions and gain access to its larger energies.

(Jim's note here - Gestalt Psychotherapy is not about medicalised symptom relief it is about exploring the meaning that comes from awareness of all aspects of our experience, head, heart and body. Working to realise how our body holds our defences in tension is an essential part of this approach)

Of course, spiritual work has a much larger aim than psychological work: liberation from narrow identification with the self-structure altogether and awakening into the expansive reality of primordial being. And it does seem possible to glimpse and perhaps even fully realize this kind of awakening, whether or not one is happy, healthy, psychologically integrated, individuated, or interpersonally sensitive and attuned. Yet after centuries of divorce between the spiritual and the worldly life, the increasingly desperate situation of a planet that human beings are rapidly destroying cries out for a new kind of psycho-spiritual integration, which has only rarely existed before: namely, an integration between liberation—the capacity to step beyond the individual psyche into the larger, nonpersonal space of pure awareness—and personal transformation—the capacity to bring that larger awareness to bear on all one's conditioned psychological structures, so that they become fully metabolized, freeing the energy and intelligence frozen inside them, thereby fuelling the development of a fuller, richer human presence that could fulfil the still unrealized potential of life on this earth.

For most of my career I have explored what the Eastern contemplative traditions have to offer Western psychology—an inquiry that has been extremely fruitful. I have only the greatest respect and gratitude for the spiritual teachings I have received and for the Asian teachers who have so generously shared them with me. Yet in recent years I have become equally interested in a different set of questions. How might Western psychological understandings and methods serve a sacred purpose, by furthering our capacity to embody our larger awakenings in a more personally integrated way? Is our individuality a hindrance on the path of awakening, as some spiritual teachings would claim, or can true individuation (as opposed to compulsive individualism) serve as a bridge between the spiritual path and ordinary life?

The Challenge of Psycho-spiritual Integration

The question of how psychological self-inquiry could serve spiritual development forces us to consider the complex issue of the relationship between the psychological and the spiritual altogether. Confusions about this are rampant. Conventional therapists often look askance at spiritual practice, just as many spiritual teachers often disapprove of psychotherapy. At the extremes, each camp tends to see the other as avoiding and denying the real issues.

For the most part, psychological and spiritual work address different levels of human existence. Psychological inquiry addresses relative truth, personal meaning—the human realm, which is characterized by interpersonal relations and the issues arising out of them. At its best, it also reveals and helps deconstruct the conditioned structures, forms, and identifications in which our consciousness becomes trapped. Spiritual practice, especially of the mystical bent, looks beyond our conditioned structures, identifications, and ordinary human concerns toward the trans-human - the direct realization of the ultimate. It sees what is timeless, unconditioned, and absolutely true, beyond all form, revealing the vast open-endedness, or emptiness, at the root and core of human existence. Yet must these two approaches to human suffering work in different directions? Or could they be compatible, even powerful allies?

If the domain of psychological work is form, the domain of spiritual work is emptiness—that unspeakable reality which lies beyond all contingent forms. **Yet just as form and emptiness cannot be truly separated, so these two types of inner work cannot be kept entirely separate, but have important areas of overlap. Psychological work can lead to spiritual insight and depth, while spiritual work, in its movement toward embodiment, transformation, and service, calls on us to come to grips with the conditioned personality patterns that block integration.** (I've used bold here for emphasis)

The question of whether and how psychological work might further spiritual development calls for a new type of inquiry that leads back and forth across the boundary of absolute and relative truth, taking us beyond orthodoxy and tradition into uncharted territory. If, instead of leaping to facile or definitive conclusions, we start by honouring the question itself in a spirit of open inquiry, it takes us right to the heart of the issue of how spirituality in general, and Eastern transplants such as Western Buddhism in particular, need to develop if they are truly to take hold in, and transform, the modern world.