Indic Influences on Modern Psychology  
by Don Salmon, PhD

Indic Influences on Modern Psychology

This is only the beginning of an outline which I hope others on the YogaPsychology list will help to flesh out. I am basing the information here primarily on two sources: J.J., Clarke’s "Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought" and Eugene Taylor’s introduction to "The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation: A Review of Contemporary Research with a Comprehensive Bibliography, 1931 - 1996. The outline begins with some distinctions between psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry. Then there is a quick and extremely brief overview of the basic historical trends in psychology. Finally, there is a list with brief descriptions of some of the major individuals who have brought Indic influences to bear on psychology. (If you are interested in a much more detailed history of psychology along with an investigation of the role of introspection in psychological research, I wrote an essay on these topics which can be found at http://www.jps.net/virtreal/introspect.html)

I. Psychology, Psychotherapy and Psychiatry

"Psychology", as taught in universities throughout the world, refers to an academic discipline, and a science which was established in the late 19th century. Several times on the YogaPsychology list, there has been reference to "science" as if the only real science is that which deals with physics and the brain. However, the research methodology of psychology has been dealing with human experience for over 120 years, even if often or mostly in a reductionist fashion. Psychological science includes a wide variety of disciplines, including developmental psychology, personality psychology, social psychology, comparative or evolutionary psychology, and among the applied psychological disciplines, educational, sports and neuropsychology. Typically, at least in the United States, a psychologist has a Ph.D. (Doctorate)

"Psychiatry" is a subspecialty of the medical profession. A practicing psychiatrist usually has at least an M.D., though sometimes a Ph.D. as well. Psychiatrists are primarily focused on psychopathology, treating mental illness. Historically (until approximately 50 years ago) this meant serious mental illness - the psychoses, manic-depression, major depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, etc. With the increasing monetarization of the profession, there has been an widening array of so-called disorders which have increased to the extent that virtually nobody may be said to be free of mental illness.

"Psychotherapy" refers to a healing practice whose beginnings are associated for the most part with the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, who was by training a neurologist, not a psychologist. For the first 50 years of the 20th century, most practitioners of psychotherapy were psychiatrists, which means their training was in the field of medicine. By the 1970s, psychoanalysis had begun to fall out of favor, and the biological approach (drugs, essentially, though electro-convulsive therapy has had a resurgence as well) has gradually come to predominate, not in a small way because of the influence of the pharmaceutical companies. Psychiatrists receive very little training in psychology. Psychologists make use of psychoanalytic ideas and practices, though
there are uniquely psychological contributions to therapy such as behavioral therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy and humanistic therapy, to name the most widely used approaches.

II. Historical Overview

The psychologist Cyril Burtt once summarized the modern history of psychological science in this way: "Psychology first lost its soul, then it lost its mind, until it was finally in danger of losing consciousness altogether". The official beginning of the science of psychology is 1879, when Wilhelm Wundt established the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig, Germany. The first formal school of psychology was the introspectionist school. Previously, psychology had been the domain of the philosophers. In an attempt to separate philosophy and science, psychologists no longer referred to the "soul". The "introspection" of this early school of psychology was an extremely superficial and reductionist cataloguing of sensory experience. There was little progress made during the 30 or 40 years this school was in existence. (Though William James wrote his famous *Principles of Psychology* during this period, he failed to establish a separate school or approach to psychology).

The second psychological school represented a radical break from the Introspectionists, and was initiated in 1913 by John Watson, the first behaviorist. He called for the elimination of all references to internal experience (this is what Burtt was referring to as psychology "losing its mind"). B. F. Skinner, several decades later, took this a step further, referring to the brain as a "black box", and refusing acknowledgment of any sort of consciousness at all.

In the late 1950s, the cognitive "revolution" was initiated, often considered to be officially begun with George Miller's article, "The Magic Number 7, plus or minus 2" (this refers to the amount of "bits of information" which the average human being can carry in their memory - the reference to the ancient magic number "7" was made consciously, though the idea that mystical associations were to be taken seriously was strenuously avoided. You might say that psychological science was finally beginning to regain consciousness at this time!

Since the 1950s, there have no longer been separate competing "schools" of psychology, a problem which has plagued the field of psychotherapy, which has over 400 separate and non-integrated theories of how therapy works. The above-mentioned divisions of psychology - developmental, personality, social, etc - are considered specialty areas of one discipline, not competing schools of thought, much like nuclear physics and astrophysics, as opposed to the conflicting theories of cognitive therapy and psychoanalysis.

Generally speaking, university departments of psychology hold the purely scientific disciplines in much higher esteem than the applied disciplines of psychotherapy, educational psychology, etc. The names "Freud" and "Jung" are rarely even mentioned past the introductory courses of psychology. Many people who are familiar with popular versions of psychology have heard of the "four forces of psychology" (psychoanalysis, behavior therapy, humanistic therapy, transpersonal therapy). Technically, these are 4 divisions of psychotherapy, and have little connection with the world of scientific psychology. Even within the world of mainstream psychotherapy, the field of transpersonal psychotherapy is considered a fringe discipline. This should be kept in mind for the rest of this outline, as it is in the area of transpersonal theory that the Indic traditions have had the most direct influence.
III. Indic Influences on Modern Psychology

Gustav Fechner:

(I'm writing this partly from memory, and will try to find more in the future. I invite anyone who has more knowledge of Fechner's work to send corrections and additional information).

Fechner was a physiologist with interests in mystical traditions. I believe his interests included Indian philosophy, but I'm not positive. Here is an interesting quotation which shows a surprisingly modern - or even post-modern - approach to science:

"That gravitation extends throughout the whole world is a matter of faith; that laws which are traceable in our limited realm extend limitlessly in space and time is a matter of faith; that there are atoms and lightwaves is a matter of faith; the beginning and the goal of history are matters of faith; even in geometry there are things we take upon faith, such as the number of the dimensions of space and the definition of parallel lines. Indeed, strictly speaking everything is a matter of faith which is not directly experienced... Ultimately the best faith is that which is least contradictory in itself and to all knowledge and to our practical interest.

Franz Brentano:

Brentano was a philosopher among whose students was Sigmund Freud. Brentano’s student Carl Stumpf, was a psychologist who taught Brentano's ideas to the phenomenological philosopher Edmund Husserl. (Again, I'm stating this from memory, so please if you are interested or know more about this, send me information.) I believe that Brentano was familiar with Indian philosophy, though I'm not positive. Certainly, he must have been familiar with the Romantic ideas of the "Unconscious", which according to J.J.Clarke were definitely inspired by readings of various Indian texts. It is extremely important, I believe, in revising our understanding of the history of psychotherapy, to recognize the extent to which the idea of the Unconscious, popularized by Freud, can be traced by to its Indic roots. Clarke notes that Carus and von Hartmann, two pre-Freudian popularizers of the notion of the Unconscious, were influenced by Vedanta.

Brentano was a phenomenologist, and believed that observation rather than experimentation should be the method of scientific psychology. "The proper subject of psychology is mental activity, for example, the mental act of seeing rather than the mental content (that which is seen)" [cited in Schultz' "History of Psychology", 1987, p. 102].

William James:

James was familiar with Vedanta and other branches of Indian philosophy. According to Clarke, he had something of a 'love/hate" relationship with Vedantic ideas, though he accorded them a partially sympathetic hearing in brief sections of his famous "Varieties of Religious Experience". Members of the forum with more knowledge of Indic influences on James are encouraged to send in this information.

Roberto Assagioli:
Assagioli, a psychiatrist an the founder of the psychotherapeutic technique known as "Psychosynthesis", made an assiduous study of the Upanisads, the Yoga Sutras, and various Buddhist texts. He openly acknowledges his debt to these writings. Although a contemporary of Freud and Jung, he did not attain widespread recognition until the 1960s. This recognition came primarily from the fringes of the psychotherapy world, particularly among those already interested in Indian religion and philosophy.

In the 1920s, J.H.Schultz, a psychiatrist, developed his "Autogenic training", a fairly widely used system of visualization and relaxation. Although it is largely derived from Yogic practices, most contemporary practitioners are unaware of its Indic roots. This would be an especially fruitful area to bring out, as Autogenic training is an accepted practice among mainstream therapists.

1914: Caroline Rhys Davids: published Buddhist Psychology, declaring that "Buddhist thought is very largely an inquiry into mind and its activities" and has much to teach the West.

1918: Friedrich Heiler, an orientalist said that Zen meditation should be seen as a mental health technique

**Carl Jung:**

There are many studies of Eastern influences on Jung, among the most notable are Coward's "Jung and Eastern Thought". Jung engaged in extensive studies of Taoism, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, as well as Vedanta and the Yoga-Sutras. His ambivalence toward these teachings is well-known. He emphatically denied the possibility of experiencing a "universal consciousness", or anything resembling what is known in Vedanta as "the Self". This was not from a sophisticated Buddhist position, but rather from the perspective of European philosophy.

D.T. Suzuki is an interesting example of influences from the other direction According to Clarke, he was influenced by William James' pragmatism, emphasis on experience and phenomenological analysis of mysticism

1930s - 1940s: Gordon Allport, a personality psychologist at Harvard, met regularly with Swami Akhilananda of the Vedanta Society of Boston to discuss the Upanishads, Yoga Sutras and other Indian texts.

1950s: Michael Murphy visits the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, is deeply inspired, and returns to California to start Esalen, where many of the ideas for the humanistic and transpersonal psychology movements were developed. It was also during the 1950s that D.T. Suzsuki came from Japan to California, which led to a dramatic increase in American interest in Zen Buddhism.

1951: Christman Humphreys, the leader of the Buddhist Society of England (I'm not sure that name is correct) said that "the West has more to learn from Buddhism on psychology than it yet knows".

1955: Hubert Benoit, a French psychiatrist, wrote on psychoanalysis and Zen.

The 1960s: Due in no small part to the influence of "mind-expanding" drugs, many individuals became interested in Asian spirituality. A significant number of them traveled East and later brought the fruits of their searches back to the United States. At
the same time, a large number of Asian teachers were becoming popular in the West, including Swami Satchitananda, Kirpal Singh, Nahanaponika Thera, Swami Rama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Chogyam Trungpa, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Muktananda, Pir Vilayat Kahn, the Karmapa, and many others. Of course, it was Richard Alpert, now known as Ram Das, who along with Timothy Leary was responsible for the widespread use of LSD. Alpert, a psychologist teaching at Harvard, studied with Neem Karoli Baba, a North Indian Guru, along with Jeffrey Miller, who is now known as Surya Das, a widely-respected teacher of the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Some of the other American individuals who are now recognized as qualified roshis, swamis and tulkus include Sivananda Radha, Jiyu Kennett Roshi, Jack Kornfield, Robert Frager, Richard Baker Roshi, and others.

1960: Erich Fromm writes on psychoanalysis and Zen

1965: Medard Boss, a psychiatrist interested in phenomenological and existential thought, visits India to study Yoga, is deeply impressed, and on his return to Europe writes on Yoga and psychotherapy

Karen Horney: a psychiatrist who was a leading psychoanalyst had with personal interest in Zen, and visited Japan near the end of her life to study with a teacher, but didn’t incorporate it in her psychotherapy practice

Leaders of humanistic psychology in 1960s:

Carl Rogers, Rollo May and Abraham Maslow - All were indirectly influenced by Eastern thought and practices: According to Rollo May: "Eastern thought never suffered the radical split between subject and object that has characterized Western thought". Maslow referred often to Vedanta in his writings on "Being" vs doing. Rogers was influenced by Taoism in the development of his notion of a natural, "organism" process of self-actualization.

1969: The beginning of the transpersonal psychology movement

Although there had been Indic influences on psychology, psychiatry and psychotherapy since the late 1800s, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a virtual explosion of interest in meditation and Eastern spirituality in general. This was true in the popular culture (sorry for being Americo-centric here, but it is the area I know best - if you have information regarding other countries, please send it in) but spread into the sciences as well. Many young people who went to India, Burma, Thailand and other Asian countries in the 1960s returned in the 1970s to receive first-rate scientific training in psychology. One of the major sources of scientific research was the Maharishi Mahesh International University (MIU) founded by individuals who had studied Transcendental Meditation (TM) with the Maharishi. Over 508 research studies have been conducted on Tm over 2 decades. Some of the more well-known researchers include David Orme Johnson, Richard Wallace, and Charles Alexander. They have done excellent work, and have received over $2,500,000 in research grants from the National Institutes of Health.

I should mention that there is a strong Buddhist influence in transpersonal psychology. Several years ago, I took a quick look at the major authors who have appeared in the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, and I would estimate that close to 65% are students of Buddhist meditation (some names include Jack Kornfield, Ken Wilber, Daniel Goleman, John Welwood, Claudio Naranjo, Jack Engler, Roger Walsh, Deane Shapiro, Mark Epstein, all students of Zen, Vipassana or Tibetan Buddhism).
Some of the other major figures in transpersonal psychology include:

Charles Tart, an academic psychologist, who published "Altered States of Consciousness" in 1969, which contained an attempt to bring together systems thinking and ideas from teachings on Hindu and Buddhist meditation.

Claudio Naranjo, a psychistrist, began writing in the late 1960s on: Gestalt therapy and Buddhist meditation.

Robert Ornstein, a psychologist, in 1971 published "The Psychology of Consciousness", which incorporates ideas from Sufism, Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism.

Allan Weinstock, a psychologist, (named "Swami Ajaya by the Indian Yoga teacher Swami Rama) wrote in 1976 "The Evolution of Consciousness and Psychotherapy". This book is particularl notable as it was published before Ken Wilber's first book, and includes the idea, derived independently from Wilber, of a spectrum of consciousness. However, the ideas in the book are much more closely drawn from Yoga and Vedanta, with the latter being fully acknowledged. Indian "psychology" is depicted as far more subtle and sophisticated than the work of Freud or Jung. Also, unusual in transpersonal writings, Indian psychology is taken to deal with virtually all of the areas which many modern writings feel are better handled by Freud and Jung.

Daniel Goleman, a psychologist and former chief editor of the periodical "Psychology Today", wrote "The Varieties of Meditative Experience" in 1977. Goleman is worth dwelling on for a bit. A friend of Richard Alpert, he went to India to study Hindu and Buddhist meditation. He returned to study psychology at Harvard. He wrote his dissertation studying under Herbert Benson. I'm not absolutely sure of this, but if my memory is correct, it was Goleman who, in what I think was a spark of inspiration with decidedly mixed results, suggested that meditation could be presented in a palatable form to modern secularized individuals as a form of "stress management". He took ideas developed in the 1920s by the physiologist Walter Cannon and later refined by Hans Selye in the 1950s as the "stress cycle" (dealing with the continual arousal of the autonomic nervous system leading to nervous exhaustion). He then suggested that the technique of meditation primarily served to deactivate this stress cycle. At the time, I thought this was a brilliant way of bringing meditation into the mainstream. However, over the years, I've come to see that the result is that meditation has been reduced to something negligible compared to its original purpose. Goleman, for example, defines meditation in "Varieties" as "an attitude of attentional manipulation". Anyone with any meditative experience knows that bringing this sort of attitude to the practice of meditation is likely to lead to headaches and irritability rather than a transformation of consciousness! In any case, the whole development of stress management and the wider disciplines of health psychology, behavioral medicine and complementary medicine, needs a whole study. Each of these fields has been deeply impacted by Indian practices and ideas, and many of the new centers for alternative and complementary medicine are making big efforts to hide this connection.

One notable exception to this trend is Jon Kabat Zinn. He has been using Buddhist meditation to treat pain patients for over 20 years at the Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester Massachusetts. He has seen over 10,000 individuals, most of who were referred because conventional medical treatments had been ineffective. He has published several excellent research studies in top-rated journals.

In 1977, biofeedback pioneers Elmer and Alyce Green published "Beyond Biofeedback", in which they described their ground-breaking studies of Swami Rama's ability to control parts of his nervous system which physiologists had previously believed to be beyond the control of the mind. Though they considered themselves Christians, the Greens quite openly acknowledged their life-long interest in and debt-of-gratitude to Indian philosophy and meditative practices.

Kenneth Pelletier, who in 1983 published an excellent book entitled "Toward a Science of Consciousness". I don't know if the Tucson conferences took their name from this book, but it remains a good collection of ideas that have yet to be worked out regarding the integration of Indian ideas and modern science, including not just psychology, but neuroscience, quantum physics, and other disciplines.

Jeremy Hayward, now the president of the late Chogyam Trungpa's "Naropa Institute", published an 1983 an excellent book called "Perceiving Ordinary Magic". A brilliant scientist who trained as a nuclear physicist and worked in molecular biology research with arch-materialist Francis Crick, he brings together ideas from Tibetan Buddhism, phenomenology and Whitehead's process philosophy to propose truly original and inspired solutions to dilemmas in the fields of physics, evolutionary biology, neuroscience and psychology, with some particularly interesting ideas for the psychology of perception.

In 1986, Guy Claxton, a British psychologist, publishes a book (sorry, i don't have the title available) on the impact of spiritual traditions of the East on psychology and psychotherapy. Claxton is one of the minority of writers on East/West psychology, along with Charles Tart, who incorporates ideas from cognitive science with meditation.

In 1990, Crook and Fontana published an excellent book on Buddhism influences on modern psychology.

In 1991, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch publish "The Embodied Mind". Varela is a cognitive scientist, as well versed in neuroscience as in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and practice. Evan Thompson, the son of William Irwin Thompson, is a philosopher, and Eleanor Rosch is a cognitive scientist at the University of California at Berkeley. "The Embodied Mind", a highly original book, brings together phenomenological philosophy, cognitive science and Tibetan Buddhism.

1991: Robert Thurman, along with the Dalai Lama and scientists from several disciplines, including neuroscience, psychology, biology, among others, convene the first of several "MindScience" conferences at Harvard.

I'd like to close with a few quotations that point out the limitations, and to some extent the dangers, of the current largely secularized approach to the integration of meditative practices and psychology. First, this lovely passage from the philosopher Jacob Needleman:

"What part of the mind then is being activated when one is thinking from these particular concepts? ["new paradigm concepts such as are found in quantum
physics]... What would be the role of an idea, like a holographic idea, in actually activating a different way of life? When Buddha came with the idea, or Christ came with the Christian formulation of the idea that the personality or the ego is not ultimately real, it didn't seem that more than a few people were able to bring that idea into their own tissues, their own blood, their feelings, and their life. [underlining added; D.S.] The problem is not having the right idea...but how to incarnate that idea in my actual life so that I am transformed in the light of that idea...We have never lacked great theory. What we suffer from, as the traditions tell us, is that the good, that I would, that I do not; and that which I do, that I would not... Simply holding a new paradigm is far from being that which can help me. It sometimes is the most dangerous of all things because this is where the danger of the mind is approached. It's not that the mind is wrong; it's just that all the power of attention gets sucked into the mind. Then one is under the illusion that because something is understood with the mind, one can be what is understood." (J. Needleman, cited in Welwood, 1978, p. 101).

Here is an excerpt from a letter of Sri Aurobindo on the limitations of the attitude of modern science:

The more you go inward or upward, the more the view of things changes and the outer knowledge science organizes takes its real and very limited place. Science, like most mental and external knowledge, gives you only truth of process. I would add that it cannot give you even the whole truth of process; for you seize some of the ponderables, but miss the all-important imponderables; you get, hardly even the how, but the conditions under which things happen in Nature. After all the triumphs and marvels of Science, the explaining principle, the rationale, the significance of the whole is left as dark, as mysterious and even more mysterious than ever. The scheme it has built up of the evolution not only of this rich and vast variegated material world, but of life and consciousness and mind and their workings out of a brute mass of electrons, identical and varied only in arrangement and number is an irrational magic more baffling than any the most mystic imagination could conceive. Science in the end lands us in a paradox effectuated, an organized and rigidly determined accident, an impossibility that has somehow happened; it has shown us a new, a material Maya,... very clever at bringing about the impossible, a miracle that cannot logically be and yet somehow is there - actual, irresistibly organized, but still irrational and inexplicable. And this is evidently because science has missed something essential: it has seen and scrutinised what has happened and, in a way, how it has happened, but it has shut its eyes to something that made this impossible possible, something it is there to express. There is no fundamental significance in things if you miss the Divine Reality; for you remain embedded in a huge surface crust, of manageable and utilisable appearance. It is the magic of the Magician you are trying to analyze, but only when you enter into the consciousness of the Magician himself can you begin to experience the true origination, significance of the Lila (Divine Play). I say "begin" because, as you suggest, the Divine Reality is not so simple that at the first touch you can know all of it or put it into a single formula; it is Infinite and opens before you an infinite knowledge to which all science put together is a bagatelle. But still you do touch the essential, the eternal behind things and in the light of That all begins to be profoundly luminous, intimately intelligible...

And finally, a positive note from Sri Aurobindo's "The Human Cycle" - This passage provides a spiritual context for the development of science which I personally find is all
too rare amongst those who are attempting to bring the influence of the various Indic traditions to bear on modern thought:

"...a society which was even initially spiritualized, would make the revealing and finding of the divine Self in man the whole first aim of all its activities, its education, its knowledge, its science, its ethics, its art, its economical and political structure.... It might easily develop a Science which would bring the powers of the physical world into a real and not only a contingent and mechanical subjection and open perhaps the doors of other worlds.... It might discover (Nature's) secret, yet undreamed-of mind-powers and life-powers and use them for a freer liberation of man from the limitations of his shackled bodily life. It might arrive at new psychic relations, a more sovereign power of the idea to realize itself in the act, inner means of overcoming obstacles of distance and division which would cast into insignificance even the last miraculous achievements of material Science.... There will be new unexpected departures of science or at least of research, - since to such a turn in its most fruitful seekings the orthodox still deny the name of science. Discoveries will be made that thin the walls between soul and matter; attempts there will be to extend exact knowledge into the psychological and psychic realms with a realization of the truth that these have laws of their own which are other than physical, but not the less laws because they escape the external senses and are infinitely plastic and subtle.(Sri Aurobindo, The Human Cycle: The Psychology of Social Evolution, pp. 317-323).