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Integral Psychology

Paul Herman

Editorial note: This is a reprint of an archived paper. Minor edits have been made for APA style; any grammatical inconsistencies are in the original.

Integral Psychology is an emergent East-West study of the human psyche. It draws upon the findings of both Western depth psychology, and ancient Eastern teachings and yogas, to express a whole, unfragmented view of human nature which does not remain merely theoretical, but also functions to resolve human conflicts and open the way toward activating high levels of potential. The spectrum of consciousness of concern to it includes the whole range from protohuman awareness to expansive transcendent experience.

When I first taught a class entitled “Integral Psychology” at the California Institute of Asian Studies (as it was then called), in winter 1970, I conceived of its subject matter along the lines given above. Later I discovered that the same term had been used in a seminar given by Dr. Indra Sen in the late 1950s at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, South India. Apparently Sri Aurobindo, the twentieth century Hindu philosopher and sage, did not employ the term “integral psychology,” although he used similar expressions, such as “integral philosophy” and “integral yoga.” Following my introduction of the term in my class, Haridas Chaudhuri, founding president of the Institute, adopted it and wrote a preliminary paper on the subject. He taught a number of classes having that title during the last years of his life, but he did not leave behind a finished definition of the term “integral psychology.”

The English word “integral” was used by Sri Aurobindo as equivalent to the Sanskrit word *purna*, which means holistic or full. The integral view of the world advanced by Aurobindo has the unique distinction of being considered in India a modern orthodox (*astika*) school of traditional Vedanta; it is called *purna* advaita Vedanta (integral nondual Vedanta). Yet at the same time it claims to be universal doctrine relevant to the critical concerns

of the whole planet, and therefore beyond any particular religious tradition, including Hinduism itself. Aurobindo felt that the day of separative religions is passing; in the 20th century they are becoming an outgrown phase of human evolution.

However, although Aurobindo felt his evolutionary system of thought was oriented toward the future, he did not come forth in a vacuum. In many ways he was typical of the basic thrust of the Indian cultural renaissance during the period from 1875 to 1958. Other significant persons and movements within that renaissance include: H. S. Olcott, H. P. Blavatsky, Annie Besant and the Theosophical Society; Sri Ramakrishna Paramahasma and Swami Vivekananda; Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Sri Ramana Maharshi, and S. Radhakrishnan. In particular, there are striking common elements between the teachings of the theosophical movement, the Ramakrishna movement, and the writings of Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo. These elements include: a universal perspective, an evolutionary outlook, concern for social integration and justice, and a multidimensional view of human consciousness and cosmic structure.

It is also notable that during the same period similar versions of modern gnosticism developed in the Western world. For example, the philosophies of Edward Carpenter, Thomas Troward, Rudolf Steiner, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin included many of the same gnostic and spiritual-evolutionary views expressed by the leaders of the Indian cultural renaissance.

Chaudhuri used the word “integral” to encompass the contributions of all significant members of the Indian cultural renaissance, as well as Western thinkers; therefore, as he makes clear in the introduction to his book *Integral Yoga* (Chaudhuri, 1965a), he did not limit his presentation of the integral world view to the exact terms used

by Aurobindo. According to Chaudhuri integral psychology is not a Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Christian or Jewish psychology, although it is broad enough to hold within itself each of those significant and valid traditions. Integral psychology should be open-ended, flexible, able to transform itself according to the demands of the fast-paced evolution of contemporary culture. In expression it must also remain as global as possible, avoiding overidentification with Indian metaphysical modes of discourse. Chaudhuri was greatly influenced by Jungian psychology, existentialism, and other Western outlooks; so his version of Integral Yoga might indeed be called a type of "existential Vedanta." He had hoped to restate the integral world view, and its related psychology, in purely phenomenological terms; but he did not live to complete the task.

Defining Integral Psychology

Integral psychology concerns itself with all phases of human existence, in its multidimensional fullness, which includes physical, emotional, instinctual, mental, moral, social and spiritual aspects. It looks upon all of these components as real and significant, although the spiritual is the primary aspect of human nature from which all other sides of the life experience derive. Thus the scope of integral psychology is much more comprehensive than that of most modern academic psychologies.

Integral psychology takes into account the fact that a person's experience of the world, of other people, and of oneself is a function of the distinctive encounters with life that each individual has. Because no two people have the same experiences, no two individuals have just the same identity and consciousness.

The one undeniable factor in consciousness is the person's self-identity, the certainty that "I now am, I now exist." Self-existence is indubitable, even when past existence and future persistence are uncertain. In fact, consciousness seems to be based upon awareness of self-existence, which is then clothed in identifications which are wrapped around that self-existence. The historical and social vestments which condition consciousness seem to accumulate more rapidly as one's life progresses.

The convictions one holds about what reality is make a great difference. Certain convictions are shared widely throughout the society, and so they tend to become "unconscious." The modern Western world unconsciously assumes that existence is manifold, a collection of discrete entities or things which coexist in competition with one another. However, the mystics in all ages and cultures seem to have had quite a different experience of the world—at least while in the mystical state: experience of the basic oneness of all things, or more precisely, experience of nonduality.

Integral psychology is based upon a recognition of the centrality of the nondual experience of the enlightened sage. The "liberated," "realized" man or woman, who has experienced the basic oneness of all things, seems to have removed the layers of conditioned identification from consciousness. On the other hand, persons who have not yet achieved nondual consciousness remain concerned to safeguard, extend, and perpetuate their individual selfhoods. At the same time they are impelled to discover, in one way or another, consciously or symbolically, a basic rootedness in a sustaining reality which has power to make their life experience significant. This bipolarity of the modern consciousness was described well by the depth psychologist Otto Rank, who wrote that while people want to be recognized as uniquely valuable by society, they want at the same time to experience genuine rootedness in some cosmic, transcendent, or persisting realm of being.

Integral psychology seeks to be practical and applicable to the problems of daily life, yet at the same time to lead forward those individuals who are ready, to transpersonal dimensions of being where experiences of deep integration, meaningfulness, and fulfillment are possible. On the basis of their own lives sages agree that all persons are connected intimately with deep levels of integration, in the personal realm as well as in cosmic, transcendent dimensions. Their experience seems to indicate that such genuine satisfaction with life can only be found within, as a function of a clarified vision and consciousness. Therefore integral psychology recognizes that activity and relating to the outer

world should be based upon and balanced with inner expansion of awareness.

Chaudhuri (1974), in his book *Being, Evolution, and Immortality*, presented the essential teachings of integral psychology which bear upon the process of transformation. He stated that, as particular personalities, we are genuinely unique, focalized expressions of the whole universe. We present special and peculiar combinations of talents and limitations, possibilities and dispositions. Yet we are always in relationship to the whole of reality; the spirit of the whole is dynamically present at the center of our being; and sooner or later we are drawn toward making ourselves completely whole by harmonizing the diverse elements of our nature with each other, and ultimately with the greater whole. Our individual psyches are characteristically integrative; they tend to be self-healing and whole-making. The indwelling presence of the whole within us also generates a self-transcending urge. Consequently we are always reaching out for something higher and greater than ourselves, and when we truly experience our rootedness in the cosmic whole we become integrated persons. In that experience lies the essence of our enlightenment and freedom. But since the world is the diversified expression of a cosmic whole, the experience of enlightenment necessarily brings a vivid sense of oneness with all, producing in us the spirit of universal love. To the extent that we embody such wisdom and love we function more effectively as helpers in the process of cosmic transformation, freed from the shackles of the defensive ego and its attendant fears, anxieties, doubts, and despair. We also become more creative, mobilizing the resources of our personalities to shape authentic new values, both of meaningful self-expression and of service to others.

Integral Meditation

In *Integral Yoga* (Chaudhuri, 1965a), *Philosophy of Meditation* (Chaudhuri, 1965b), and other writings, Chaudhuri discussed meditation as a psychological approach to the authentic values of one's life. Meditation is an exploration of the whole psyche in order to amplify self-understanding. On one level meditation can serve as a process

of mental house cleaning, removing clutter and debris to allow the light of Being to be reflected inside. More importantly, by inquiring into the essence of our selfhood we gain insight into the mystery of universal *Being*.

Chaudhuri advances three fundamental tenets for a psychology of meditation. First, that the world which we know is largely a reflection of our inner self; therefore the purer the self the better our perception of the world. Second, that true happiness is a function of inner harmony, therefore we attain genuine self-fulfillment when we come to live in direct touch with the center of our being. Third, that our inner self is our point of direct contact with the whole of reality; therefore to the degree that we are estranged from our own unique selfhood we are also disconnected from the ground of our being and from our supply of effective energy. Suffering, fear, and anxiety are expressions of lack of contact with the depths within ourselves; we begin to assume control of our experiences when we harmonize ourselves with the depths of our being, and we rise to the height of our full potentiality only by probing the depths of our consciousness.

Varieties of Liberated Consciousness

Throughout the ages, in many different settings, a few individuals have experienced heightened, more-centered states of consciousness than those the average person has in typical waking life. Some of these exceptional persons have reported a state of awareness in which the usual boundaries have collapsed or become transparent, so that the person is immersed in infinity, indefinability, transcendence of all limitation; yet this experience is combined with a conviction that essential Being is full and supremely real, although devoid of the barriers encountered in the ordinary, egocentric human state. Such an experience of full awareness shatters all particular identifications, and it can become very disruptive of one's outer life, leading to a tendency to withdraw from social interactions, to drop out of the world, even to embrace physical or emotional death. However, some persons who have experienced infinite consciousness have integrated the state with waking consciousness. In

the East they are called “liberated” or “enlightened” beings, and often they have become capable of leading others toward similar experiences of this state.

Another deep, central state of consciousness has sometimes been called “cosmic consciousness.” Through this experience the person becomes conscious of his complete continuity with the whole cosmos. He experiences his essential identity with the cosmic whole, no longer identifying himself as a separate ego, but now as a “new being” whose interests and functioning have lost their former defensiveness and selfishness. He experiences the universe as a multiform unity, with everything and everybody interrelated and inseparable. All limited sociocultural views and personal exclusions have become transmuted for him. The cosmocentric person has become “in the world but not of it,” and also “the light of the world.”

The coming of cosmic consciousness, or even the expansion of personality through ego-attenuation, does not destroy individuality. A liberated consciousness brings experience of self-identity as a microcosmic representation of the whole of reality, but with a particular *dharma*, or unique life meaning, to enact in the cosmic drama. The person who has transformed selfhood from egocentricity to cosmocentricity experiences a vast increase of psychic energy which is now available to use for unique self-creation. The *dharma* discovered within leads to both greater self-integration and social integration. For this reason integral psychology values unique individual consciousness as an aspect of other varieties of liberated consciousness.

The Evolution of Consciousness

Integral psychology, as a science of the psyche or soul, concerns itself with the whole potential of human consciousness. Thus it looks forward to a full transformation of the manifest cosmos, including humankind, in the evolutionary future. All human beings may assist in cosmic evolution, as well as help resolve personal, social, national and international conflicts, by centering consciousness at the innermost core of the being until its guidance and energy are activated. The transformative process may develop from this innermost center

because it is the locus within the human being of balance, harmony, release of psychic energy, joy, and intuitive wisdom.

Egocentric individuals identify with their bodies or minds, self-images, social roles and cumulative psychological conditioning, which are phenomena of the periphery of their being. Such identification makes them susceptible to frequent “falls off-center.” Most people suffer from what Frank Haronian has described as “repression of the sublime.” They refuse to own the urges to high-level accomplishment which unenlightened but developing persons experience as emerging in symbolic form from the very center of themselves. This drive for creative self-unfoldment is not really a contradiction of the deep need for relatedness and immortalization which integral psychology also posits as inherent within human beings; both have a place in the scheme for a full transformation of the manifest cosmos, including humankind.

The Nature of Integral Psychotherapy

By gaining full self-knowledge human beings can come to direct experience of all levels of their consciousness, or being. Such self-knowledge can be accumulated along many lines: through self-observation, meditation, practice of spiritual disciplines, participation in facilitative relationships such as counseling and psychotherapy.

As serving this goal, integral psychotherapy is concerned with resolving personal and social conflicts which impede self-development, as well as with liberating the flow of creative energy and potential for centeredness present within all beings. Reaching out for a broad synthesis, it draws upon a wide range of specific therapies, believing them to be effective means of facilitating stages in the process of change and rebirth. Integral psychotherapists may make special use of the practices of meditation and of disidentifying from, but not disowning, limiting parts of the total psyche.

Integral psychotherapy can be applied to the transformative process taking place within persons from a wide variety of backgrounds, helping them to achieve awareness of larger dimensions of their being, and to experience greater centeredness and creative self-unfoldment. It affirms the basic

self-worth of all persons, however destructive or worthless they may seem in outward appearance and behavior.

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