

Psychology And Spirituality: One Path Or Two?

There is great debate, and in many cases a sharp divide, between practitioners of psychology and those of spirituality. On one end of the spectrum, most of mainstream psychology does not concern itself with issues of consciousness and spirit and rejects what is not scientifically quantifiable. On the other end, many contemporary spiritual traditions view the psyche as an unreal construct and believe that psychological work is an indulgent reinforcement of the story of the false self.

In between these poles lies a variety of approaches that take into account both the personal and impersonal aspects of our experience, validating that some aspects of our experience can be empirically confirmed while others remain mysterious but equally "real." Meanwhile, many mainstream psychotherapists and their clients continue to miss out on the benefits of spiritual wisdom, and many teachers and students of Western spirituality make grave errors by rejecting the psychological domain, and thus not cultivating skills and practices to work with it effectively.

Ultimately, psychology and spirituality do not need to be distinct, but it can be helpful to make distinctions between them in order to understand the primary function of each in relation to the other. We can then discover how these approaches complement and support one another, together forming a more complete approach to human understanding than either one alone can provide.

Spiritual understanding comes from a direct perception of a greater intelligence, force or power. Some people call it non-duality; others call it Christ, Allah, spirit or God. Spiritual technologies help us access an experience of consciousness itself, and sustained spiritual practice supports us in learning to anchor ourselves in a more abiding sense of that greater reality. Meanwhile, psychological work helps unravel the complex strands that constitute our personal psyche -- patterns and wounds that, if not tended to, can impede our growth and block our perception of spiritual realities.

In 1994 I lived and studied in India for a year, and during that time I rented a room from a European man, who we will call Hans. As a child during World War II, Hans spent several years imprisoned in Japanese concentration camps, during which he experienced extreme trauma produced by torture and separation from his family. As a young adult he set out for India, and by the time I met him he had lived there for more than five decades.

By intellectual standards, Hans was a genius. Highly intelligent by nature, he had also become a great scholar of Hindu religion. He was a warrior practitioner, engaging demanding spiritual disciplines and austerities over sustained periods of time, and he had experienced repeated high states of mysticism.

When I met Hans, near the end of his life, he carried with him a deep sorrow at his failure to realize his spiritual aspirations, accompanied by an unspoken sense of having been betrayed by God because he had given everything to the spiritual path but had not accomplished his goals.

From the outside, however, it was quickly apparent to those who knew him well that he was a man who had been unable to face and digest the impact of his childhood trauma. He continually attempted to suffocate his pain by increasing the intensity of his spiritual practices and austerities, resulting in severe narcissism and pathological spiritual bypassing. While he dazzled those around him with esoteric rituals and encyclopedic knowledge of Vedic ritual and Hindu mythology, I longed to take him into my arms and let the child within him cry until the ocean of tears wore down the stone walls that kept his tender heart from letting human and divine love penetrate him.

It is very important to understand that our psychological blocks can actually impede our capacity to open to spiritual understanding and experience. Trauma and a sense of betrayal in childhood, which many have experienced to some degree, can result in a failure to trust the divine and life itself and in great difficulty in surrendering to the unknown. We learned from a very young age that the world was not a safe place, and that whatever "God" existed was not a god who would protect us from child abuse.

Feelings of abandonment and isolation in childhood can make it much more challenging to encounter and open to the experience of spaciousness that meditation offers, as it can be difficult to distinguish between non-dual emptiness and the experience of profound lack and psychological emptiness. Disappointment in childhood authorities, teachers and religious leaders can make it very difficult to trust spiritual teachers, teachings and even the divine itself. Undigested emotions from our past profoundly color our relationship to spiritual concepts, practices and experiences.

On the other hand, we can get so wrapped up in psychological processing that it becomes a kind of narcissistic self-involvement, leaving us trapped in a cul-de-sac that neither brings about the powerful capacity for compassion and wisdom that can be discovered through spiritual practice, nor produces the sense of social responsibility that Hillman claims the field of psychology has failed to pay attention to.

Many schools of mainstream psychology have routinely failed to take into account a broader spiritual perspective, frequently reducing profound spiritual insights to neurotic fantasies, infantile regressions and idealized projections. For example, I once consulted with a psychologist in her late 30s who was experiencing tremendous confusion about her spiritual life because her therapist had convinced her that her relationship with her spiritual teacher was purely a romanticized projection based on unmet childhood needs and a failure to individuate from her father.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and I am convinced that most spiritual scandals, as well as disillusionment among spiritual seekers and practitioners, are the result of spiritual teachers who have significant areas of psychological blindness. They assume their great spiritual insight has taken care of their psychological wounds when it has not. We are not weak, but courageous, when we dare to again face the things that we would rather not see and confront but in the end continue to blind us to the wholeness of all that we are.