

INTRODUCTION

The day-to-day life of our distant ancestors remained essentially unchanged for more than a hundred thousand years. In the past hundred years, we have experienced a dizzying acceleration in the pace of change fueled by a seemingly never-ending cascade of new technologies—from the airplane and the automobile to the cell phone and the Internet.

Advances in transportation and communication have woven the world together. While the increased contact with cultures in far-flung parts of the world has been enriching, the clash of differing world-views has challenged the core of our identity. To the extent our identities have been wrapped up in the rapidly receding past, our sense of ourselves has been fractured.

Having depended on age-old cultural norms to tell us what is good and what is bad, many feel lost in a world that seems to make no sense. Adrift in a sea of growing numbers of meaningless things, we are bombarded with information and have no yardstick with which to measure the value of one thing relative to another.

Psychologists who study animal intelligence tell us that the capacity to stand back and reflect on ourselves and our world is a uniquely human capacity. Caught up in the whirlwind of change, flooded with meaningless bits of information, we lose touch with this ability and react blindly to passing circumstance. Without consciously setting out to do so, we produce a world that makes no sense. We create air that is not fit to breathe, water that is not fit to drink, and in the midst of plenty, millions go hungry. In just the past twenty-four hours, over forty-five thousand people have died of starvation—more than a dozen times the number of people who died in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. In the same twenty-four-hour period, we have poured another 13 million tons of toxic chemicals into our environment.¹

SLOWING DOWN, TURNING EAST

This increasing tension has compelled many to look for a way out, for a way to insert a pause in the frenzied pace of life. Looking for something that has not been infected by the rush and meaninglessness of modern life, many have turned to the spiritual traditions of India.

India is for many a land of contradictions that conjures images of the majestic Taj Mahal, crowds of impoverished children begging for money, ascetic yogis meditating in Himalayan caves, and wealthy businessmen negotiating high-tech deals. Whatever truth may lie behind these clashing images, it is a place that has held a fascination for the West for centuries. This has been the case at least since Christopher Columbus set sail in search of a faster trade route to India, then one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

What began centuries ago as a desire for exotic material goods soon grew into a quest for the subtler treasures of the spirit. In the early 1800s, German philosophers and poets looked to ancient Indian writings for inspiration. As a result of the British colonization of India, knowledge of yogic practices began to filter back to England. In response to the Industrial Revolution then under way, some were drawn to these practices as a way to keep their balance in the face of widespread social upheaval and an increasingly mechanized way of life.

While greater peace of mind was the goal for some, others sought greater understanding. In the early twentieth century, physicist Erwin Schrodinger turned to Indian spiritual texts to help him solve the mysteries raised by the new discoveries of quantum physics.² During the same period, William James announced to his psychology class at Harvard that the Buddhist understanding of the mind, rooted in Indian teachings more than two thousand years old, would one day provide the foundation for modern psychology.³

Schrodinger and James looked to the wisdom of the ancient yogic tradition in search of something outside their familiar framework that might illumine it in a new way. William James in particular understood the potential of the psychological and spiritual aspects of yoga to revolutionize our basic understanding of reality. Many decades later, in the 1960s and '70s, scientists like biofeedback pioneer Elmer

Green and mindfulness meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn initiated research programs with the goal of explaining these practices in modern scientific terms.

Recognizing that the culture of the time would not have been receptive to the psychospiritual roots of the yoga tradition, they presented the practices in a way that did not challenge the prevailing materialistic view. By using acceptable scientific language—for example, defining meditation as an attitude of “attentional manipulation”—they were able to bypass the foreign cultural and spiritual context from which they had borrowed the yogic techniques.⁴ Their cautious terminology was effective in gaining respectability within the mainstream scientific culture for what were essentially yogic practices in disguise.

One of the more skillful bridge-builders between science and yoga has been Dr. Herbert Benson. An associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and chief of behavioral medicine at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, Benson has become one of the foremost pioneers in the field of mind-body medicine and the integration of spirituality and healing. Looking back, he admits that it was with great “trepidation and footdragging” that he initially came to engage in mind-body research. As a young cardiologist in the 1960s, he recognized there was a real possibility that he could be severely criticized, if not ostracized, by his colleagues for exploring topics that were at the time considered taboo.

Benson was first persuaded to take up his research in mind-body medicine in 1968, when some practitioners of Transcendental Meditation approached him with the claim they could induce physiological changes through the practice of meditation. Benson turned down their initial request, but their persistence and enthusiasm eventually persuaded him to embark on what was soon to become a vital part of his life’s work.

After studying the effects of Transcendental Meditation for several years, Benson extracted from it the components that he believed were essential to its effectiveness. Patients were thus taught to sit or lie quietly and repeat a sound or phrase such as the word “one.” This practice was found to result in a significant reduction of physiological and psychological stress. In order to avoid association with the yoga tradition, Benson

referred to the effects of this practice simply as “the relaxation response.”

Other researchers, including Jon Kabat-Zinn, Richard Davidson, and John Teasdale, have since discovered that meditative practices have psychophysical effects beyond those that Benson attributes to the relaxation response.⁵ In recent years millions of people have become involved in meditative practices, and many as a result have developed a new sense of joy and inner peace. Meditation and other practices based on the yoga tradition have been adapted for a wide variety of uses, from the rehabilitation of longtime convicts to the training of Olympic athletes. Biologists, cellists, CEOs and even priests, among many others, have found that these practices have helped them be more effective in what they do and find deeper satisfaction in their lives.

The initial motivation for taking up yogic practices is often the desire to bring about a change in one’s health or performance—perhaps a reduction in pain or stress, an improvement in athletic abilities, or an increased effectiveness in the workplace. However, after some time, as the body learns to relax and the mind becomes calmer, some begin to have glimpses of a deeper experience. Accompanying these glimpses, there may be a vague sense that something still more is possible. Benson himself found, after years of cautiously presenting his technique in secular terms, that patients occasionally would share with him spiritual experiences that arose spontaneously while experiencing the relaxation response. Reflecting his recognition that bringing a spiritual context to the practice makes it richer and more powerful, Benson began to speak openly of the importance of the “faith factor”—that is, a “faith in an eternal or life-transcending force.”⁶

Like Benson and others, we had initially felt the need to present meditative practices in a “safe” secular form. Don conducted research on the effectiveness of Buddhist meditation in reducing pain and applied his findings to his clinical work. Inspired by the yogic underpinnings of Peter Senge’s work with learning organizations,³ Jan developed a program to help create a more collaborative atmosphere in her workplace—one based on learning and a deeper sense of purpose.

a. For more information on learning organizations, see Peter Senge’s book *The Fifth Discipline*.

These early attempts were limited in their effectiveness. Part of this was due to our inexperience, but we also felt it was a result of having taken these practices out of their deeper spiritual context. In recent years we've integrated some of that larger context, and to the extent we've done so, the work has been more effective. Still, we continued to feel that something was needed to counter the influence of a culture that in so many ways is opposed to a spiritual sense of things.

While this may have been difficult to do even ten years ago, it seems the time may now be ripe for a fuller presentation of the essence of the Indian spiritual tradition. The fact that a small but growing group of eminent scientists is beginning to challenge the prevailing materialistic perspective suggests an increased receptivity to an alternative view. Nobel Prize-winning physicist Brian Josephson,⁷ biologist Mae Wan-Ho, and psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz, for example, are saying, respectively, that the laws of nature, the process of evolution, and the workings of the brain cannot be explained without taking some form of conscious intelligence into account. Articles in leading scientific journals have explicitly called for a spiritual, or non-material, understanding of consciousness, an understanding that is fundamental to the yoga tradition.

The presentation of yoga and meditation separated from its spiritual roots may have been a wise and necessary accommodation at the time. And thanks to the work of pioneering spirits like Dr. Benson, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and others, it has now become possible to present the deeper view underlying the yoga tradition.

THE METHOD AND FORMAT OF THE BOOK

Intimations of Infinity

One of our major aims in this book is to both describe and evoke this deeper view that sees everything in the universe as the expression of an infinite consciousness. Some of what we describe may seem at first to be remote from everyday life. But if there is any validity to the yogic idea that everything is an expression of an infinite reality,

then that reality must be an intimate part of our most ordinary experience.

Many spiritual writings point to intimations of the pervasive presence of an infinite reality in our lives. The Sufis speak of a longing we sometimes feel, a longing that is an intimation of the presence of something deep within us, some “place” of harmony, a source of profound contentment. The Buddhists speak of the “sky of mind” to refer to a feeling of spaciousness, that is an intimation of that greater reality beyond all time and space which holds the entire universe in its embrace. Both use familiar experiences—the sense of longing or the simple perception of space—to point to a deeper spiritual reality. Throughout the book, we use such familiar experiences to show how this greater reality is reflected in our everyday lives.

One way we do this is through the presentation of Sharon’s story, which is based on events in the lives of several army veterans, some of whom served in the Vietnam War. For example, the awareness of “something strange yet familiar” that came to her while sitting in the backyard of her father’s house is an intimation of a greater presence in the depths of her being. Her story is offered as an invitation to readers to examine similar intimations in their own experience.

The Basis of the Book

What is yoga psychology? Psychology refers to the study of the mind. Yoga—literally to yoke or unite—is a means of helping us to recognize the connection between our individual consciousness and an infinite, all-pervading consciousness. Thus, yoga psychology is the study of the mind in light of its inherent connection to an infinite Reality.

We base our presentation of yoga psychology, for the most part, on the synthesis of the yoga tradition presented by twentieth-century Indian philosopher-sage Sri Aurobindo. However, we use the term “yoga psychology” in a generic sense to mean an intuitive, experiential study of our conscious experience in light of an infinite Reality. We also at times use it to refer to the large body of psychospiritual knowledge accumulated over thousands of years by those who have engaged in this kind of intuitive study.

To underscore our understanding that “yoga psychology” is ultimately about a way of looking that transcends any particular perspective, we draw from a number of sources besides Sri Aurobindo, including Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, and Christian sacred texts, as well as the writings of William Blake, Sri Krishna Prem, and other “yoga psychologists.”

We understand, however, that there are some real differences among different branches of the yoga tradition. Whenever we write “according to yoga psychology” or “from the yogic perspective,” it means we believe the idea we’re presenting is in harmony with the yogic tradition as a whole. When an idea represents something about which there may be different perspectives, we will specify the source, as in “according to Sri Aurobindo,” “according to Sri Krishna Prem,” and so on.

Potentially, the most troublesome aspect of our usage of the term “yoga psychology” is the implication of a common perspective between Buddhists and Hindus. In this, we are following the lead of Robert Thurman, a prominent authority on Tibetan Buddhism, who in recent years has used the phrase “yoga psychology” to refer to themes common to the whole Indo-Tibetan tradition.⁸

The Format of the Book

The book is organized around the theme of the evolution of consciousness. Book One gives an overview of what scientists have discovered to date regarding the emergence and development of consciousness in the universe. Book Three gives the yogic understanding of the evolution of consciousness. Because the yogic view is so profoundly different from the way we ordinarily see the world, we examine in Book Two the assumptions which shape that ordinary view. We devote two chapters to the examination of these assumptions because, to the extent we are unaware of them, they will make it more difficult to consider those aspects of yoga psychology that are most at variance with our conventional way of seeing things. We also develop the idea in these chapters that there is no inherent conflict between the vision of yoga psychology and the findings of science—at least, not when those findings are distinguished from the materialistic philosophy sometimes assumed to be inseparable from them.

Yoga Psychology: Fact or Fantasy?

Since the vision of yoga psychology is so much at variance with the conventional view of things, by what authority do we claim it to be valid? Perhaps yogis are mistaken in their views; perhaps Sri Aurobindo's understanding is mistaken; and we're certain that our own understanding of yoga psychology is limited.

The main aim of this book is not so much to present the "truth" of "how things are" but rather to present a way of looking. Our descriptions of various aspects of yoga psychology are offered as a series of what might be thought of as intuitive hypotheses. We have developed these hypotheses based on our intimations of what Sri Aurobindo refers to as the essential "movements of consciousness" underlying the processes of biological and human evolution.

We hope that, in the future, others who are more knowledgeable in these various fields will be inspired to come up with their own intuitive hypotheses, and that all such hypotheses will be tested and confirmed or disconfirmed by appropriately trained contemplative scientists.^a We believe this way of seeing—what we are calling the "view from infinity"—can be of immense practical value. In addition to contributing to the development of a new science of consciousness, it can provide the foundation for personal and societal transformation.

YOGA PSYCHOLOGY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

The issues crying out for attention are all around us. At the national level, we face ailing health care systems, unemployment, violence in the schools; at the planetary level, weapons of mass destruction, global

a. A method for developing this way of looking is described in the section on intuition in the last chapter of the book. There is a description of how it might be used for the development of a yogic science of consciousness in Appendix A. Alan Wallace's "Samatha Project," described in chapter 17, is an excellent example of a rigorous training program designed to produce expert contemplatives capable of serving as consultants in scientific research.

warming, and the possibility that the flow of oil will run dry before the end of this century. If we grant that some level of societal transformation is in order, we might wish to consider what would be required to bring it about.

Generally, our initial tendency when faced with social and economic problems is to look for some kind of external solution. Some look to institutions, private or governmental. Others look to technological innovations—alternative energy sources, new medicines, or new machines to increase productivity. It does seem likely that far-reaching technological, economic, and political reform will, in fact, be needed as part of any truly fundamental transformation.

But will such structural reforms be long-lasting? What evidence is there from the recent past that gives us reason to believe continued reliance on external change will solve our problems?

What if the essential problem is not insufficient energy, failed institutions, or inadequate technology? What if the core of our problem is an inadequate view? The view underlying our predominant institutions is one that sees the world as made up of essentially separate competing individuals, countries, and ideologies, fated to be forever in conflict. So long as we are subject to this view, we will feel compelled to do whatever is required to support and defend ourselves, our country, and our “way of life” against those we perceive to be a threat. All actions flowing from that view will only continue to create conflict and disharmony.

But is it really possible that changing something as intangible as a “view” could bring about the magnitude of change that is needed in the world at this time?

Extensive psychological research has shown that when an individual’s view of himself changes, problems with anxiety, depression, hopelessness and despair diminish, leading to a life of greater happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment.⁹ Perhaps it is not too great a leap to imagine then, that a radical transformation of society might come about if there were a fundamental change in the view that currently shapes the minds, hearts and actions of human beings. If this is true, what kind of view is needed?

Theologian-ecologist Thomas Berry and physicist Brian Swimme, among others, propose what they refer to as a “New Story,” based on the

inspiring findings of modern science regarding the origin and evolution of the physical universe.¹⁰ Focusing on the sense of beauty and aliveness conveyed in astronomers' descriptions of the birth and evolution of stars, and biologists' portrayal of the birth and evolution of life, they use this story to evoke a feeling of awe and a greater awareness that each of us is an essential part of a greater creative process occurring throughout the universe. While Berry and Swimme succeed in imbuing this story with a sense of wonder, they refrain from challenging the basis of the materialistic perspective underlying the scientific view.

It just may be that there is a "new" New Story that is, in a way, a very old story, one with a very different basis from that of modern science. We believe that the "story" of the universe at the foundation of yoga psychology, taken in its full spiritual context, has the power to get to the very roots of our modern malaise. If these roots were to be addressed, a transformation in the structure and function of business, government, and other institutions might be a natural result.

Is this an overly utopian vision? Or is it possible that even a partial beginning to such a radical transformation is already under way? A number of individuals who have conducted extensive research on this question suggest that something along these lines is definitely happening.

Over the past several decades, sociologist Paul Ray has interviewed more than ten thousand people.¹¹ He found that an increasing number—from less than 1 percent of the American population in the 1970s to more than 25 percent at present—feel that something is lacking in the prevailing materialistic view. Similar numbers have been found in other countries as well. These individuals are looking for a view that brings together mind, body, and spirit, one that can inform everything from the way they eat and work to their choices about how they might contribute to cultural and political transformation. Philosopher Robert Forman spent several years in the 1990s interviewing leaders in the fields of business, education, and medicine.¹² His results, published in "The Grassroots Spirituality Project," suggest that high-level people in hospitals, universities, and other major institutions are looking for ways to integrate a nondogmatic, nonsectarian spirituality into all aspects of their respective organizations.

In 1969, Dr. Herbert Benson felt he had to conduct his research on meditation after-hours in order to conceal his work from the potential disapproval of his colleagues. More than thirty years later, he now reports that the desire for a spiritual approach to health care has become so great, he cannot train meditation teachers fast enough to meet the demand.¹³ According to Dr. Larry Dossey, a longtime leader in the movement to integrate spirituality and medicine, a majority of the medical schools in the United States have developed courses in alternative/complementary medicine, and nearly two-thirds offer “courses on religious and spiritual issues.”¹⁴

If such a change is actually under way, is there some way of understanding what is happening that can help us discern a larger purpose and align ourselves with it? Tibetan Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman suggests that we are on the verge of a second Renaissance.¹⁵ Thurman believes that, just as the first Renaissance five hundred years ago brought about major changes in European civilization through the reexamination of ancient Roman and Greek culture, similarly a worldwide Renaissance may be sparked by a reexamination of the yogic culture of India. Sociologists David Loye and Riane Eisler suggest another perspective on change—that we are approaching the end of the five thousand-year “age of empire,” leading to a new era of global collaboration.¹⁶ And a few, like Eckhart Tolle and Sri Aurobindo, go still further, proposing that what is happening now may be a shift in consciousness as great as that which began 5 million years ago, resulting ultimately in the emergence of a new species—*Homo sapiens*.¹⁷ Perhaps, to some extent, all three are correct.

Whatever the ultimate nature of the change, what we see depends on how we look. What might we see if we were to look through the eyes of infinity?