Healing, Growth and Transformation in Integral Psychotherapy

by Brant Cortright

The three powers of our human instrument—body, heart, and mind—have produced in India three major paths to the Divine:

- The path of action in the world or karma yoga
- The path of the mind and knowledge or jnana yoga
- The path of the heart and love or bhakti yoga

Each traditional yoga uses the powers and capacities of one part of our nature as a lever to lift us toward Spirit. In so doing each yoga develops splendidly one part of us but unfortunately neglects the other two-thirds of our natural being.

Integral yoga is both a synthesis of the three traditional paths of yoga and a unique yoga in its own right. The integral psychology of Sri Aurobindo uses his integral philosophy and yoga as an enlarged, integrating framework for Western psychology. Integral psychotherapy applies the expanded perspective of integral psychology to the work of psychological healing, growth, and transformation. It uses the three traditional yogas as lenses to examine the process of psychotherapy.

Integral psychotherapy seeks a rich development of our whole being, an integral harmony that is our birthright and evolutionary goal: body, heart, and mind raised to their full capacities, led by the psychic being through an increasingly psychicised and integrated authentic self. Since consciousness is evolving along different dimensions, this must be considered in inner development. The wisdom of Eastern psychology, as embodied in the three classical yogas, recognises that each individual has natural routes for inner development. So, too, in psychotherapy—an integral psychotherapy must allow for individual differences and be able to use what natural strengths and abilities a client has to further the psychotherapeutic process. One way of thinking about these differences lies through the different instrumental parts of the being and the classical yogas that spring from them.

Behaviour Change

Each gateway to the inner being is more accessible for certain people than others, yet everyone has some way to make this inward turning, even if it is only a first start. A first point of entry into the inner world is through behaviour. This pathway is open to everyone, even those whose natural inclination is not to look within, for everyone acts. Behaviourism has come upon a similar insight, that
behaviour is universally available as a way to change. And, as we shall see, each
pathway eventually leads to, takes up and includes the others when followed
along its natural direction, for in the end this is a path of wholeness and integral
evolution.

People generally enter psychotherapy in pain. Many clients are not
interested in why they are in pain, they just want it to go away and to feel better.
For such clients the natural starting point is a behavioural approach. Psychotherapy
of whatever persuasion finds that unskillful behaviour creates
pain and that feeling better comes by acting differently. This fundamental insight
unites all schools of psychotherapy. The differences between orientations consist
only in how to best bring about this change in behaviour: behaviour therapy uses
outward means, depth therapy uses inner means.

In focusing on outwardly observable learning and behaviour, behaviourism does not concern itself with deeper levels of consciousness, only
their visible, behavioural expressions. Consequently behaviour therapy, cognitive therapy, and all the various offshoots of cognitive-behavioural
methods are concerned with getting clients to behave differently and to think
differently in order to reduce symptoms. The goal is behaviour change, and any
new awareness is an extraneous, though not unwelcome, accompaniment.

Feeling bad is feedback that indicates certain behaviour does not meet our
needs. Feeling better, in cognitive and behavioural therapies, comes by changing
body, cognition, and behaviour:

1) The body – for example teaching relaxation techniques to reduce
muscle tension, or teaching fuller, more relaxed diaphragmatic
breathing. It also includes the use of physical means to directly
change the brain’s chemistry and so alter feeling states includes
using drugs such as tranquilizers and anti-depressants.

2) Cognitions – challenging old thinking patterns and suggesting
more rational thinking.

3) Behaviour – supporting the person in doing what is being avoided.

Cognitive and behaviour therapy works most effectively with phobias and
fears of various kinds. Phobic behaviour maintains itself by reinforcing the fear
every time the feared object is avoided. The essential therapeutic strategy for
eliminating phobic behaviour is to confront what is avoided. Just as Arjuna’s
initial fear on the battlefield caused him to recoil and avoid behaving as a
warrior, Krishna works to change his thinking patterns and behaviour, to face
the enemy and engage the battle, to act according to his nature rather than from
his fear. Thus, the Gita recommends exposure to what is feared—the great
behavioural prescription. For what decades of psychological research into fear
has discovered is that exposure heals fear.
However, it should be noted that not just any kind of exposure is healing, for exposure accompanied by fear and distress can simply reinforce fear. It must be a safe and controlled exposure, done with a relatively relaxed body and calm mind. Here the Gita encompasses the truth of controlled exposure and surpasses it when Krishna tells Arjuna that his action is not to be done in an agitated state or in anger but must be done from a state of deep peace and equality. This peace and equality comes out of the inner spirit, and it is from these depths that action must ultimately spring.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy produces a reduced version of this by teaching relaxation strategies and changing catastrophic, rigid thinking patterns, then proceeding with controlled exposure to the feared situation. For example, in working with a man who has a bridge phobia, a behaviour therapist may teach him how to relax his muscles and to breathe from his belly as he relaxes. Drugs may also be prescribed for relaxation. The therapist challenges the man’s catastrophic thinking and gets him to re-evaluate more realistically the actual dangers of bridges. Then the therapist works with the man to gradually walk toward a bridge. As the man’s anxiety increases, the man would be instructed to stop or back up a few steps, to relax and calm down before proceeding. Then the therapist would encourage him to approach the bridge again. As the man’s anxiety builds up again, the therapist counsels him to stop and relax again. This stop-start pattern continues until gradually the man is standing in the middle of the bridge. In surrendering illogical cognitions to logical cognitions, in surrendering contracted muscles for relaxation, and in surrendering avoidance of bridges to exposure to other bridges, the man’s bridge phobia is resolved, and he is able to act differently.

Integral psychology draws on the yogic understanding of essential being or uniqueness as a unifying principle of wholeness. The Sanskrit word svabhava (pronounced sva-bha’-va) means our essential nature or uniqueness and can be translated in many ways, including intrinsic self, inherent nature, or self-being. This essential nature is inherent in our spiritual being. As it develops over many lives, the influence of the spiritual nature increases so that more and more of the frontal self follows one’s svabhava. What Western psychology studies as the authentic self is but an expression of the inner, essential uniqueness that Indian psychology studies as the soul or psychic centre.

Indian spirituality has declared for thousands of years that with a spiritual aspiration, we can follow our authentic nature to a higher, spiritual fulfillment. Following our svabhava leads to a path of self-realisation (svadharma), or action that follows the authentic development of the self. In India’s most revered sacred text, the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna states that one’s intrinsic nature can lead to the highest spiritual liberation:
By worshipping with his own proper action (*svadharma*)
Him from Whom beings have their origin,
Him by Whom all this universe is pervaded,
A person finds perfection.
Better one’s own innate action (*svadharma*), though imperfect,
Than the innate action of another well performed.
One should not abandon one’s inborn action
Even though it be deficient,
Indeed, all undertakings are enveloped in deficiency
As fire is in smoke. (XVIII 46-48, Sargeant trans. 1984)

This is very much in accord with the learnings of modern psychology. Although Western psychology has not yet fully understood the nature of our essential being, it points toward an authentic self through which we find ourselves and find fulfillment. Western psychology has not comprehended the deeper, spiritual nature of our essential being, but it does recognise the importance of honoring our unique nature. Here, in a nutshell, is the reason why what psychology calls self-actualisation feels so good and so right, for in a larger, more integral view, self-actualisation is part of a larger process of spiritual unfolding. Self-actualisation touches into the deeper essential spiritual being without fully recognising it.

**Mindfulness**

The second major way of entering the inner world is through the mind: *jnana* yoga, of which mindfulness practice is a major form known to the West. The path to *atman* (or Buddha-nature) is called *jnana* yoga, which uses mindfulness or the mind’s discrimination to sift through the mind’s illusions to discover the foundation of consciousness.

The path of mindfulness is the path of the eternal Now. All that exists is this present moment—right here, right now. But the ego lives in the past and future, spinning out fantasies and inhabiting a kind of virtual reality that is more akin to dreaming or being half-asleep. Because of gross desires for things, people, sensory pleasure, and avoidance of pain, consciousness becomes dull, tied to a fixed groove of sleepwalking. The spiritual practice of mindfulness penetrates this habitual stream of reactions and begins the process of awakening.

Applying mindfulness to psychotherapy frames the therapeutic process in terms of consciousness. This harkens back to Freud’s view of the goal of therapy—*to make the unconscious conscious*—but goes well beyond Freud’s ideas
about what the unconscious is and what the possibilities are for full consciousness. Unconscious defenses result in fixation and developmental arrest. Psychotherapy brings attention to these avoidances, defenses, and contractions of awareness. Unconsciousness keeps a person stuck; mindfulness brings movement and growth.

Grounding psychotherapy mindfulness makes therapy present-centred and shows how neurosis, wounding, and our defensive machinations take us out of the now. Indeed, psychological health can be seen as the degree to which a person is living in the present moment. All forms of psychological impairment reduce present-centredness and involve us in fantasies of the past and future.

Gestalt and existential therapies have spearheaded a present-focused approach to psychotherapy. In seeing the present moment as all that exists, the past is seen to exist here and now in the form of memory, recall, history, nostalgia. The future is seen to exist here and now in the form of anticipation, hope, dread, despair, fantasy. When we remember the past or anticipate the future, we do so now. Memory and anticipation are experienced now, and both past and future are present constructions of thought.

There are a number of therapeutic strategies for becoming more mindful and present-centred that different schools use. These include:

- Completing old unfinished business.
- Unfolding present potentials of the self, favoured by existential approaches
- Bringing old, buried, undeveloped aspects of the self on-line by completing interrupted developmental processes, and filling in deficits in self-structure, favoured by psychodynamic approaches.
- Behavioural prescriptions to act now to replace avoidance with exposure to what is feared and expanding behavioural possibilities.
- Coming into the body, both sensorily and emotionally through the bodily felt sense, an approach used by somatic therapies.
- Coming into the here and now in the transference, an approach pioneered by existential therapy and now gaining wide acceptance in analytic circles.
- Reducing fantasy by enhancing sensory experience or else using fantasy as a gateway to working with emotional issues.
- Confronting defenses or having them erode through empathic acceptance. As defenses drop away, more present-centredness results.
- Stopping addictive distractions and replacing them with genuine, real satisfactions, i.e., developing a more cohesive self whose needs are more fully met rather than being lost in daydreams or fantasies.
• Letting go of inauthentic ways of being by seeing how they are avoidances of difficult issues and affects. Choosing and creating new, authentic ways of being that enhance aliveness and mindful living. Although these therapeutic strategies increase mindfulness, mindfulness is both the goal and the method. Bringing increased mindfulness to bear on these issues increases the power of the therapeutic process.

**Opening the Heart**

The third traditional point of entry to the inner world is through the heart. Psychotherapy and spirituality can be seen to have the same goal: *opening the heart*. Both seek to expand the heart’s capacity for feeling and love, but they proceed in very different ways. Spiritual traditions work to open the heart *directly*—through devotion, love, *bhakti*, positive emotions, and dis-identifying with negative emotions. Psychotherapy, on the other hand, works to open the heart by *seeing how it is closed*—by exploring the defenses against feelings and by re-owning painful, negative emotions, the avoidance of which so limits the heart’s emotional range.

The history of psychology can be read as a dawning recognition of the heart as the key to psychological life. Modern psychology began with Freud showing just how much the mind is at the mercy of powerful unconscious feelings and instincts, a puppet whose strings are continually pulled by emotional forces. As psychoanalysis evolved and the self came into better focus, it has become even clearer how essential emotions are for psychological functioning. Affects and affect regulation are now seen as central functions of the self.

Emotions organise our experience in four basic ways:

1) as *information*,
2) as a way of *evaluating* situations,
3) as a form of *communication*, and
4) as a *direction for our behaviour*.

Feelings give us information about people and the world that we get in no other way. At the simplest level emotions tell us what is good or bad, nourishing or toxic, and they make this evaluation rapidly, without a long, logical process of reasoning. Feelings are also a means of communicating with others and of expressing ourselves, a way we see others and are seen by them. Additionally, feelings motivate us to take the next step forward in our lives, giving us a guiding direction for how to act to best meet our needs.

Psychology has discovered that through the process of feeling we can disentangle ourselves from the snares of inauthentic living. By following our
heart’s true impulse we find our way toward authenticity. Our authentic self seeks to fulfill itself on every level—physical, lower emotional, central emotional, higher emotional, and mental. It needs the world to bring forth its full powers—an awakened body sense that reveals the embodied richness of living, love and intimate connection and nourishing relationships of all kinds, freedom of the imagination and creativity, mental stimulation and meaningful work to express the self’s true talents. It is only the heart’s radical aliveness that reveals the richness and intensity that comes when these things are part of our life.

Using our heart’s guidance to find what we need for “the good life” represents a major step forward in evolution. But as revolutionary as greater authenticity is for human welfare, the human spirit requires more. As discussed earlier, psychology leads to our outer authentic nature (svabhava) but not our inner authentic nature. An authentic life is a major development, but it is not enough. Psychology alone does not give us a vision of a higher life. In our heart of hearts our deepest soul longs for more.

The heart is a double centre. In front is the heart that psychology studies, with all its unconscious defenses and depths. Behind and deep within lies what the spiritual traditions speak of, our soul or psychic centre. The failure to distinguish these two dimensions of being is the cause of much confusion and seeming paradox. Psychology opens the frontal, outer levels of the heart but does not attempt to go further. It embraces earth and ignores heaven. But without a larger, spiritual context, the self becomes the measure of all things. Any psychology that grows out of this context inevitably has an impoverished view of human life.

What depth psychology shows us is that the biggest block to opening the inner heart is a closed outer heart. Viewing psychotherapy as a process of opening the heart represents a fundamental revisioning of psychotherapy. Modern psychology has produced a more sophisticated understanding of the heart than we have ever had before. As depth psychology shows, the self is striving for love, for connection, for self-expression. From the perspective of integral psychotherapy, what is needed is to align the authentic self with the true soul. Then a harmonisation of our inner and outer being takes place. As the psychic light illuminates the outer self, our life transforms. We have a light within, a source of loving joy that uplifts all our relationships and work, filling them with an intrinsic peace and fullness of being.

Opening to this light is necessarily progressive, taking time and focus. There is but one thing necessary—aspiration—aspiration for a deeper living, aspiration for Spirit. Aspiration is the upward flame that carries us toward our source and brings out the full force of our heart’s deepest desire.
The heart is central to all living—the source of our actions, the key to our relationships, gateway to our deepest identity. Fully opening the heart is both a psychological and spiritual process. What we are seeking is our authentic self infused and guided by our deeper evolving soul. To bring our life into alignment with this deeper centre requires opening our heart on every level. In the view of integral psychology, such complete fulfillment represents the coming evolutionary wave. Freud said at the beginning of the last century that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious. Today, with an expanded view of the psyche, we can say that the heart is the royal road to the soul.

Heart-centred psychotherapy can be a bhakti yoga for the 21st century that brings together our inner and outer hearts. In the path of transformation, an inner freedom that rests on an inner joy and love can only be a beginning, not the final goal. Joy and love and compassion must also suffuse our outer life and heart. The surface, psychological heart of vital emotion must transform to become a radiant centre of love in the world, for only by such a shift can the world grow beyond its current adolescent stage of development.

Psychotherapy and spirituality come together in the heart. The heart is a pathway to immensely greater depths and richness in our life and relationships as well as to an exalted centre of delight within. When the psychic fire in the heart is lit, there is a steady stream of joy and love that can act as a balm to even the darkest, most painful outer circumstances life gives us. Lighting this inner flame is the highest goal of an integral psychotherapy, so that its light may infuse and transform the surface self as it heals, grows, and eventually becomes an instrument of this deeper psychic centre.

Integral psychotherapy utilises whatever doorway is most open to a client to enter the inner world—behaviour, mindfulness, or heartfulness. Following any one to its source will lead to the other two. As healing and growth proceed, this multi-dimensional working brings forth an integral development of our full being. As the authentic self emerges on all levels – body, heart, and mind – and as the psychic flame is lit in the heart, the authentic self refines and is guided by its deeper psychic source. A self-existent joy, love, and deep peace become the inner foundation for a life that increasingly surrenders to and aligns with the Divine.

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