

Review Article

Fostering Spiritual Development: The Guru and the Yogic Path to the Soul

Lynn Hickey Schultz*

Department of Human Development & Psychology, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, USA

*Corresponding author: Lynn Hickey Schultz, Department of Human Development & Psychology, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, USA. Tel: +17818625667; E-mail: lynnhickey99@gmail.com

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Introduction

Professor Larry Kohlberg of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) co-wrote a paper entitled “Development as the Aim of Education” [1], a notion embedded in the Human Development culture at HGSE when I studied there in the 1980’s. In the view presented in this paper, spiritual development comprises a clinical-developmental process involving body, mind, and spirit, which requires enlightened teachers/therapists to facilitate it. I examine spiritual development from two traditions here-social-cognitive development from the West and yoga from the East-to develop a clearer picture of how to foster development in spirituality, and how the role of the guru is crucial for persons to progress spiritually.

Spirituality in Social-cognitive Developmental Theory

Kohlberg’s [2,3] theory of moral development is the natural starting point when examining spiritual development from the social-cognitive tradition. Table 1 shows parallel stages of development in four social-cognitive developmental theories. The table is a “Necessary but not sufficient” chart, meaning that Piaget’s [4] cognitive stages are necessary but not sufficient for corresponding stages of social perspective coordination. Selman’s [5] levels of social perspective coordination, in turn, must be reached for a person to develop parallel stages in Kohlberg’s moral development theory, but they don’t guarantee that growth. Fowler’s [6] faith stages were derived in part from Kohlberg’s theory, and most likely Kohlberg’s moral stages are necessary but not sufficient for the corresponding faith stages.

| Type of Development | Piaget | Selman | Kohlberg | Fowler |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Cognitive | Social Perspective Coordination | Moral | Faith |
| 0-7 years | Sensorimotor | Undifferentiated | Obedience and Punishment | Undifferentiated |
| 7-11 years | Preoperational | Egocentric | Instrumental Purpose & Exchange | Intuitive-predictive |
| 7-11 years | Concrete Operational | Differentiated/subjective | Conformity and Interpersonal Accord | Mythical-literal |
| 11+ years | Concrete Operational | Reciprocal/self-reflective | Authority and Social Order | Mythical-literal |
| | Formal Operations | Third-person/mutual | Social Contract | Synthetic-conventional (early teens) |
| | Formal Operations | In-depth/societal | Universal Principles | Stages 4-6 |

Table 1: Parallel Stages of Development in Four Domains.

[7] Notes that in recent years the term spirituality has generally come to mean “Our search for the transcendent,” and he identifies themes of self-transcendence, a source of values and ultimate meaning or purpose, a way of understanding, inner awareness, and personal integration. I view the search for the transcendent and inner awareness to be most operative when fostering spiritual development on the yogic path.

| Fowler's Stages of Faith Development | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|------------------------|--|
| Stage | Ages | Name | Characteristics |
| 1 | 3-7 | Intuitive-predictive | Egocentric, becoming aware of time. Forming images that will affect their later life. |
| 2 | 6-12 | Mythical-literal | Aware of the stories & beliefs of the local community. Using these to give sense to their experiences. |
| 3 | 12+ | Synthetic-conventional | Extending faith beyond the family and using this as a vehicle for creating a sense of identity and values. |
| 4 | early Adult | Individual-reflective | The sense of identity and outlook on the world are differentiated and the person develops explicit systems of meaning. |
| 5 | Adult | Conjunctive | The person faces up to the paradoxes of experience, begins to have universal ideas, and becomes more oriented towards other people. |
| 6 | Adult | Universalizing | Persons become totally altruistic, making tangible the principles of love and justice. They feel an integral part of an all-inclusive sense of being. This stage is rarely achieved. |

Table 2: Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development.

Using this lens on spirituality, (Table 2) shows details of Fowler’s stages of faith development, the social-cognitive theory most directly related to spiritual development. In Fowler’s stages 1 to 4, a person is oriented to the outer world. We see hints of inner awareness in the second highest “Conjunctive” stage 5, though persons at this stage remain mostly directed outward. In the “Rarely Achieved” Universalizing stage 6, there are clear descriptions of transcendence and inner awareness, but again there is a strong emphasis on action in the outer world, as we can (see in Table 3).

| | Oriented to outer world | Oriented to inner world |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| Stage 5 Conjunctive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> beginning to develop universal ideas becoming more oriented towards other people committed to justice discovering truth through multiple viewpoints | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a person faces up to the paradoxes of existence reclaiming & reworking one's past |
| Stage 6 Universalizing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a disciplined activist seeking to transform the social order a feeling that everything matters becoming totally altruistic manifesting the principles of love and justice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> all-inclusive sense of being denial of self for total unity with God a felt sense of the ultimate environment transcending specific belief systems to achieve a sense of oneness |

Table 3: Characteristics of Fowler’s Faith Stages 5 & 6.

(Table 3) shows more details of Fowler’s two highest faith stages in adolescents and adults. There are suggestions of inner awareness beginning in stage 5 (in facing the paradoxes of existence, and reclaiming & reworking one’s past), but a person remains mostly directed toward the outer world (committed to justice, oriented towards others, discovering truth through multiple viewpoints, etc. In Fowler’s Stage 6 there are clear descriptions of inner awareness and self-transcendence (an all-inclusive sense of being, denial of self for total unity with God, etc.) that sound remarkably like Eastern notions of samādhi in yoga and nirvana in Buddhism. Nevertheless, a person at stage 6 still has a strong orientation toward behavior in the outer world, as a disciplined activist seeking to make tangible impact on transforming the social order; an “Actualize” of an inclusive and fulfilled human community, etc.

I am struck by the great leap in spirituality (in terms of inner awareness and transcendence) between Fowler’s two highest faith stages as well as how much his highest stage 6 is populated with social activists. Fowler believes this “Rarely Achieved” stage 6, is reached only by great spiritual and social transformers like Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King. In Fowler’s theory and in the Western psychological literature in general, spiritual development tends to remain a construct relating to the mind, an outward orientation to the world. In contrast, in yogic philosophy and psychology, spiritual development is a journey inward toward the soul (universal consciousness).

In the Western psychological literature, spiritual development tends to remain a mental construct, a quest for meaning [6], for example, define faith as “A person’s way of seeing him- or

herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose.” [6] notion of faith (or spirituality) as a person’s orienting toward the object of their “Ultimate Concern,” that is, something presumably outside themselves

Some of you here today may remember how in the 1970s and 1980s the third floor of Larsen Hall was a hub of intellectual excitement and debate, with students and scholars from around the world attracted to Larry Kohlberg’s brilliance. Although I feel blessed to have studied with Larry at HGSE, it was Bob Selman who became my mentor, advisor, and colleague. His theory of interpersonal thought and action intrigued me, as did the clinical-developmental question it generated: Why doesn’t social-cognitive capacity always translate into mature action and relationships. Why don’t many of us walk the talk? And how do we as educator-clinicians foster that connection?

My work with Bob Selman [8,9] occurred when our research group was focused on translating the social-cognitive constructs of social perspective coordination and interpersonal understanding into a developmental construct of interpersonal action. We operationalized Interpersonal action into the constructs of negotiating conflict and sharing experience. Because levels of social perspective coordination are most evident when the perspectives of self and other clash in conflict situations that must be resolved, these interactions are the easiest in which to observe perspective taking in behavior. (Table 4) shows Selman’s levels of social perspective coordination (thought) and interpersonal negotiation strategies (action). The negotiation levels go from impulsive behavior (hit or run away) to unilateral strategies (take it or give it up), to reciprocity (trades), to compromise and collaboration. Sadly, many authoritarian world leaders, historically and today, operate on the unilateral level, action from a one-way perspective [10].

| Level | Social Perspective Coordination (thought) | Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies (action) |
|-------|---|---|
| 0 | Egocentric | Impulsive |
| 1 | One-way | Unilateral |
| 2 | Reciprocal | Cooperative |
| 3 | Mutual | Compromising |
| 4 | Interdependent/societal | Collaborative |

Table 4: Developmental Levels in the Selman Framework.

In my dissertation [11,12], I explored the “Gap between interpersonal thought and action,” that is, when one’s highest level of social perspective coordination is not employed in relationship behavior. [13] Noted a similar gap in the relationship between moral reasoning and moral behavior: research has shown only a

very modest relationship between them, with moral reasoning accounting for only 10% of the variance in moral behavior. Blasi conceived of “An emerging self-identity in which moral principles and values become increasingly integrated and central for one’s true self” [14]. Our research group found linkages between the interpersonal thought/action gap in two groups: a positive relationship between the gap and adolescent girls who had parents with affective disorders [15], and a negative relationship between the gap and children with better social adjustment and positive peer nominations [16].

Our group felt that these thought-behavior gaps were caused by emotional interference-by emotional distress or ingrained, often unconscious, patterns of behavior with other people. In a small sample of adolescents, I found modest, but statistically significant, support for my hypothesis that lack of emotional maturity interferes with a person’s ability to use their highest interpersonal understanding in their social behavior. Emotional maturity was operationalized in measures of developmental levels of (1) defense mechanisms using [17-19] (2) object relations using Sidney Blatt’s work [20,21]. Interpersonal thought and action were operationalized using the construct of interpersonal negotiation strategies [8] using a hypothetical dilemma questionnaire [11] and a real-life interview about actual conflicts with parents and a best friend. (Figure 1) depicts the study’s hypothesis that immature emotions can interfere with putting interpersonal understanding into action.

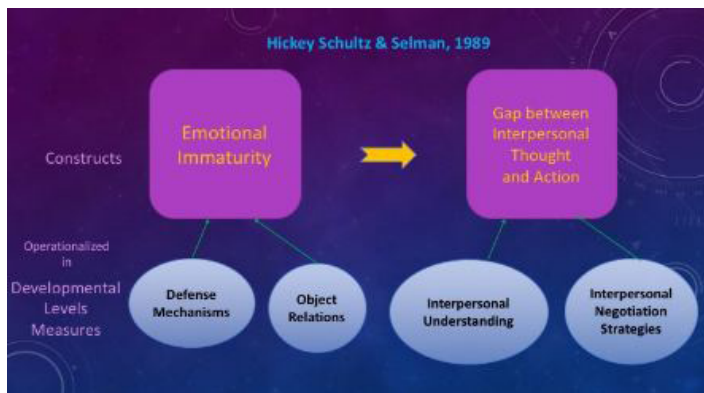


Figure 1: Emotional Immaturity Causing the Gap between Interpersonal Thought and Action.

Spiritual Development in Yoga

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

Although yoga was mentioned in the earliest Vedic texts (e.g., the Upanishads), dating back to the 8th century BC, it was around the 3rd century AD that Patañjali codified yoga in the Yoga Sūtras, a seminal yoga text [22,23]. The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali define yoga as “Yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ,” translated as yoga is the stilling of thought, the stilling of the waves of consciousness in the mind. In the intensive milieu of my many years of professional education in yoga and Ayurveda (yoga’s sister science) I

witnessed profound changes in my fellow students. The changes were evident both in their spirituality (the ultimate goal of yoga) and in their interpersonal thought and action. For example, many yogis noticed that they became more adamant about yogic ethical principles like ahimsa, the Sanskrit word for nonviolence, and less reactive in close relationships. These observations generated a clinical-developmental question: What is the relationship between yogis’ interpersonal development and what motivates and supports their spiritual growth?

Yoga incorporates not only the goal of stilling the mind, but also practices that help us achieve it. In Patañjali’s work, yoga is comprised of eight components or “Limbs,” not just that of the postures (āsanas) for which yoga is widely known in the West. Table 5 depicts the eight limbs of yoga. The first limb is thymes, five ethical principles that guide our interactions with the world. The first yama, ahimsa (non-harming), encompasses the other four principles. These include truth fullness, non-stealing and non-grasping. The second limb is the niyamas or personal observances, which include cleanliness and purity, contentment, discipline, self-study, and surrender to life and to God. Thus, yoga is built on a strong foundation of moral teachings and personal practices. [24] Notes that these ethical precepts “Underpin and bind all the teachings of Yoga,” and that adherence to the yamas and niyamas “Precedes and super cedes all other yoga practices” (p. 29).

The third limb of yoga is āsana, the postures that most in the West know as yoga. A major difference between as an and exercise is that when the postures are done correctly, we focus on movement with the breath and an inner awareness of body sensations, eliciting a meditative state of mind. The postures stimulate the nervous system and engender movement in prāna, the life force (often equated only with the breath), that gives us the vibrant energy that not only sustains our life, but works to progressively remove blockages in our body and mind.

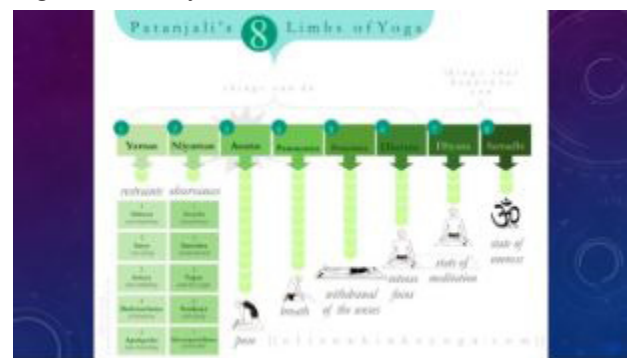


Table 5: Patanjali’s Eight Limbs of Yoga.

The fourth limb of yoga, prānayāma or breath work, is a meditative practice that includes different patterns of inhalation, exhalation, and breath retention that calm, strengthen, and balance the nervous system and magnify inner experience. The fifth limb prātyahāra-sense withdrawal-pivots the mind directly inward. The

last three limbs of yoga (dharana, dhyana, and samādhi) are increasingly deep levels of meditation, from concentration on one object, to a state of meditation, and finally to the complete stilling of the mind in a state of oneness. In samādhi (nirvana in Buddhism), the endpoint of the yogic path, the soul-the pure consciousness within us-merges back into purusha, the universal consciousness from which it sprang.

Both Buddhism and yoga present eightfold paths that map onto each other in terms of ethical practices and meditation, but only yoga offers the mind-body practices of postures and breath work that are mechanisms to engage both the body and the mind to cultivate meditation.

Sāmkhya Philosophy as a Mechanism of Spiritual Growth

The limbs of yoga provide tools to still the mind but don't explain the mechanism, the it that I have observed changing in those who become serious students of yoga. The ancient Indian Sāmkhya philosophy, the oldest of six schools of Indian philosophy, provides the foundation for yoga and Ayurveda's philosophy and psychology [25]. This Vedic philosophical system depicts an evolution from universal consciousness to matter, and its reverse-the involution from matter back to consciousness [26]. It is the involution from matter to consciousness that comprises the yogic journey to enlightenment, the inward journey of spiritual development.

The evolution from universal consciousness to matter starts with purusha, or universal consciousness, which in Sāmkhya cosmology was the whole world in the beginning. Purusha is pure consciousness, eternal and unchanging, beyond attributes. It harbors our souls within it, comprising a part of us characterized by choice less passive awareness and a witnessing and observing self. The Sāmkhya creation story goes that the world of nature evolved when a wave of vibrations (the sound of OM) emerged from purusha, which produced prakriti-un manifested primordial matter and will (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Prakriti Emerging from Purusha.

After prakriti becomes manifest it becomes the phenomenal reality of the world of nature, and represents creative potential, awareness with choice, with form, color and action-related attributes.

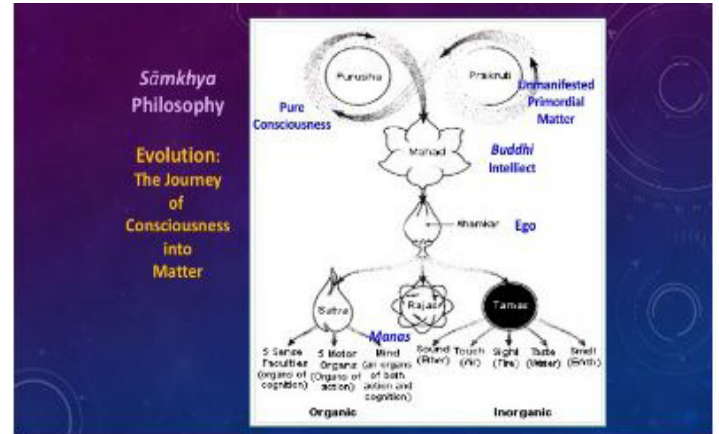


Figure 3: Evolution: The Journey of Consciousness into Matter in Sāmkhya Philosophy.

(Figure 3) depicts the further evolution of nature and matter, using a hand-drawn chart from [26]. He writes: “In the potential energy of Purusha and the creative will of Prakriti, we find an understanding of the evolution of non-material energy (Purusha/ Prakriti) into material expression....” (p. 6). When prakriti begins to manifest, the first expression of creationism mahat, a supreme intelligence that has self-awareness, the self-reflective quality of consciousness. The mahat encompasses all levels of intelligence in nature, which in humans range from cellular intelligence to the buddhi, the discriminating intellect in human beings. Next comes the ahāmkara or ego, which represents the “I”-maker, the self-shape, and the source of self-identity. Ahāmkarare presents a process of self-identification based on previous accumulated experience, a process by which consciousness can start to (incorrectly) take on false identities [26].

From the ahāmkara, the evolution of creation separates into two different paths, that of organic and inorganic matter. The first organic evolute is manas, the “Mind.” Mana, in co-ordination with the sense-organs, receives impressions from the external world, transforms them into determinate perceptions and conveys them to the experiencer, the ego. Manas is the lower mind, a thinking/ sensing mind that is the driving force behind actions, speech, and the thinking process

In spiritual development in this system, we must reverse the course of the evolution of matter into an involution from matter to consciousness, from individual consciousness to pure consciousness, as (Figure 4) shows.

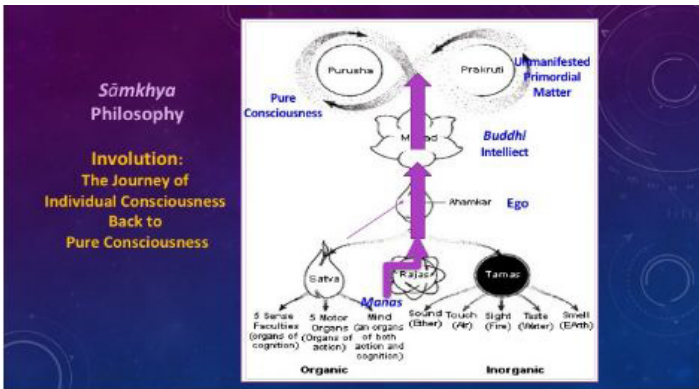


Figure 4: Involution: The Journey of Individual Consciousness Back to Pure Consciousness.

How do we accomplish this journey of involution? The “Mind” in yogic philosophy is a much narrower construct than the “Mind” in Western psychology. What Western psychology considers to be the mind is, in yoga philosophy and psychology, divided into three components—the discriminating mind (buddhi), the ego mind (ahāmkara), and the thinking/sensing mind (manas).

In yoga psychology, spiritual development happens in the interplay between the thinking mind, the ego mind, and the discriminating mind. The ego mind is fragile, self-protective, and surrounds itself with validation. This ahāmkara mind is a stable structure (actually an energy pattern) that resists change, provoking a hyper vigilant effort to make sure that what threatens or scares us won’t happen again. Our purusha soul becomes trapped in identification with the outer world, with the permanent soul being identified with the impermanent material body and mind.

Much of the interference of the yogic ego (ahāmkara) comes in the form of saṁskāras and granthis, which play a somewhat analogous role to that of defense mechanisms and object relations in the earlier study I mentioned, in which they were found to contribute to gaps between interpersonal thought and action.

Saṁskāras are mental modifications or impressions “That sink to the bottom of the mental lake, where they become potential activators to further thought activity” [27]. These “Grooves in the brain” form the deep inner structure of manas that influences all thought processes. Saṁskāras determine much of what constitutes our personality, habits, and behavior, causing the mind to be restless and outwardly directed.

Granthis are energy knots or blocks in our psyche as well as deeply stuck feelings in parts of the physical body. These “Knotted” areas of energy can impede the flow of prāna in the body, keeping us entangled in our preferences, desires and fears. The Buddhist Pema Chodron calls this “how we guard our heart.” She explains that “Our sense of victory just means that we guarded our hearts enough so nothing got through, and we think we won the war. The armor around our soft spot—our wounded heart is now more fortified and our world is smaller” [28].

In the yogic view, the key to moving our true self-closer to the universal spirit is a change in the dynamic between the three parts of the yogic mind—the buddhi, amhāmkara, and manas. This mechanism of spiritual development occurs when our discriminating intellect overrides dysfunctional energy patterns in our ego to enable us to be present in the moment and still our thinking mind. The inward development of the spirit progresses as the discriminating mind more often takes charge of unconscious patterns in the ego mind. The yogic limb of prātyahāra—the withdrawal of the senses—greatly facilitates this process in a retreat from the world of objects.

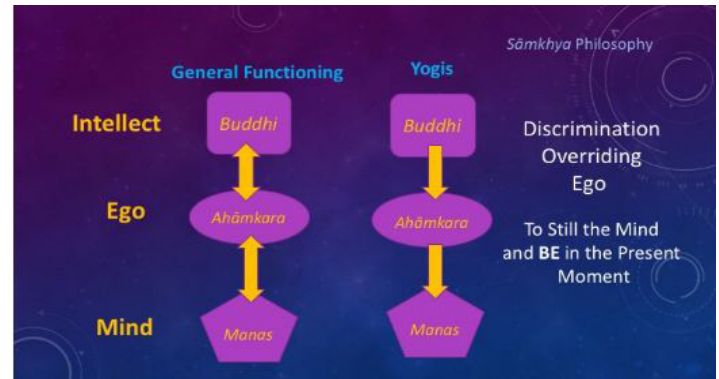


Figure 5: Interplay Between the Discriminating, Ego, and Thinking Mind.

(Figure 5) depicts the how this dynamic works in general human functioning compared to a practicing yogi (or others progressing spiritually). Usually, there is a bidirectional influence between the buddhi and the amhāmkara, and between the latter and the manas. When our ego mind quashes our discriminating mind and there is a free flow between our ego and thinking minds, we lose the self-awareness that the discriminating mind provides. This impairs our discrimination between what is permanent and what is temporary, blurring our sense of reality.

On the other hand, to the extent that our buddhi subordinates the ego, we gain in self-awareness and inward focus. The latter is the pattern that yoga practice cultivates. In each moment when our discriminating intellect takes charge over our ego, we are self-aware and present in that moment. Energy patterns from the past that no longer serve us shift, and the defensive ego structures mentioned earlier—psychodynamic processes in Western psychology and saṁskāras and granthis in yoga psychology—are dismantled. This process restructures the unconscious mind and completely transforms how we perceive the world and our self-identity.

The Role of the Guru in Spiritual Development

Why are social relationships important for progress on the inward journey to the āt man, the soul? An early developmental psychologist, James Mark Baldwin (1902), was a genetic theorist who greatly influenced the developmental theorists discussed earlier—Piaget, Selman, Kohlberg, and Fowler [29,30]. Baldwin viewed human

development as a social process, believing that growth in the self occurs in dialectical relationships, where patterns of thought and behavior are relationally transmitted, learned through interaction with individuals and the group [7].

In both structural-developmental theories and yoga philosophy, we progress in spirituality as our self-awareness increases. But there are powerful impediments to that progress: maladaptive ego structure impeded self-aware action. That is why our social milieu matters. Spiritual development, like moral development, is a complex social process. Both types of development require the guidance of a teacher, mentor, or whole community, to serve as a guru. In India gurus are simply teachers: you can have a music guru, a Vedic astrology guru, etc. Yoga communities themselves can function as a spiritual teacher in early stages of practice, but to plumb the deep depths of yoga, we need to find a “Sat” (“Sad”) guru.

The Sat guru takes charge of your soul and guides you along the path of spiritual growth and liberation. The guru introduces conflict that we as students must resolve and integrate into a refined ego that has new patterns of energy. This, of course, is the basic mechanism of development that Piaget described in cognitive development in the assimilation-accommodation-equilibration dynamic [31] described in social-political development (thesis → antithesis → synthesis).

Over the course of the guru-student relationship, the student learns to see that when the mind is active, the purusha-the true-self-identifies with the activities of the mind. Because the discriminating mind is not involved, the ego mind mistakes the outer world that is temporary (“Maya”) for what is permanent and real (purusha, the soul). In this therapeutic process, the student learns how to step back from any situation in the world or in the mind to make space for the understanding of the buddhi. In choosing the buddhi over the ego mind the student chooses the path toward union with the soul. In an interview entitled “The Grace of the Guru on the Ayurvedic Path,” [32] discuss the role of the Satguru and gurus in general in fostering spiritual development.

Welch: “The two have a connection, the Satguru and the guru of whatever, whether it’s Tablas, Hindi, or Ayurveda because I think the Satguru, the spiritual path, gives us a way to find the juice in life and the essence of ourselves.....

Svoboda: “... the purpose, as far as I can tell, for a spiritual guru, is to be able to actually connect you directly to that reality, to the reality that is behind everything else. And that reality is also the reality that is behind studying Tablas, studying Ayurveda, or studying dance, or whatever it might be. And it’s not only the

reality that is important. It’s your connection to that reality. It’s your sad guru’s connection to that reality. It’s your Sadguru’s connection to you. And all of these experiences that you have in the context of your relationship to reality and to the Sad guru are experiences or connections or relationships that can be replicated in a positive and a potentially positively dramatic way in all of these other relationships that you have with everyone else that you are learning from, sometimes even with people that you had never intended to learn anything from or never knew you were learning anything from. But because you have learned how to learn as a result of this reality of having a connection, a direct connection to that reality, it has the potential to transform the way that you interact with the world in general.”

Welch: “And there are not only the people we call guru and teacher. But animals and plants and spirit life in any form, animate or inanimate, have the potential to continue to take us on the spiritual journey or on the journey to whatever knowledge we’re looking for as long as we’re coming at it from that place that hopefully the Sadguru has taught us to walk, that path of enlightenment, not just ultimate enlightenment, but enlightenment of each thing that comes to us that unfolds and enlightens our within about something.” I would argue that the guru-student relationship is the ultimate therapeutic relationship, the kind of relationship that [33] describes as a key factor in the success of any healing modality (she calls this the “Art of Medicine”). In the West, psychotherapists play a guru role, using techniques to help clients dismantle ego defenses that no longer serve them and replace these old relationship patterns with new, healthier patterns. The therapeutic relationship challenges us to gradually become aware of old dysfunctional relationship behavior, and with this new self-awareness to refine how we relate to others. Therapy is a form of teaching and teaching is a form of therapy; education is a continuum of teaching/learning from instruction to therapy, involving varying degrees of cognition and emotion. Psychotherapists, Sat gurus, and other kinds of teachers, scaffold our spiritual development, modeling a way along a particular spiritual/psychological path. Welch’s Sat guru advised her to “Keep good company. Good company makes a man great” [32].

Yogic psychology differs from Western psychology in that the goal of mental and spiritual development in yoga is to merge the “Little self”-the ego-into the “big s” Self (purusha, the soul). (Figure 6) contrasts “mind fullness” in the West, which is the Western modality closest to the yogic mind, with yoga’s inwardly-oriented quest for Samādhi. Mindfulness in the West has proved effective to relieve stress, but affords no role for the soul-there is no end goal beyond staying in the present [34]. Mindfulness is only a start to the process-we need to seek union with the soul for liberation.

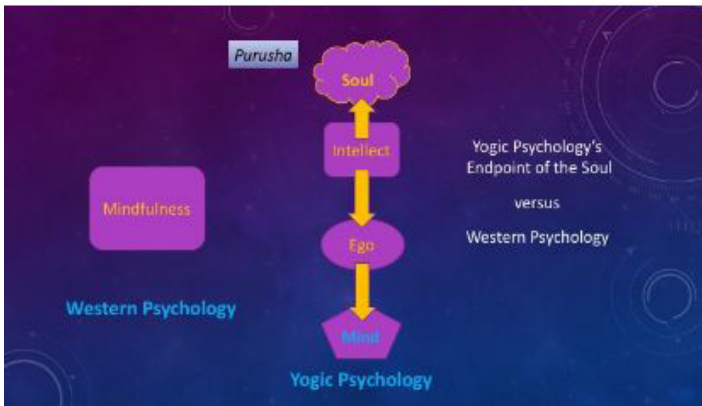


Figure 6: Yogic Psychology's Endpoint of the Soul versus Mindfulness in the West.

Like yoga, psychotherapy and moral education work on the level of the mind. Though both the psychotherapy and moral domains posit human spirit, in the practice of yoga the soul is central. Moreover, yoga uniquely works on the level of the body. Yoga has inherent therapeutic power because yoga engages body, mind, and spirit in a synergistic manner that propels our minds and hearts inward toward the soul, Yoga is a powerful method of human development because its philosophy and psychology identify a mechanism—the interplay of the intellect, ego, and thinking minds to connect to the soul—by which spirituality develops, while at the same time yoga practice applies body-mind methods that facilitate that spiritual growth.

In Kohlberg's just communities [35-37], moral growth is fostered by the mature interpersonal relationships of its members, who consistently treat each other with respect and compassion. Similarly, spiritual development in the yogic tradition is fostered in yoga communities and/or with a spiritual guru where those with mature social perspective coordination can model the discriminative intelligence they use interpersonally and spiritually. Students become aware of outmoded ego structures and learn the tapas (discipline) needed to still their minds—and thereby touch the soul—to live in the present authentically, justly, and kindly [38,39].

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