The Psychology of Yoga: Integrating Eastern and Western Approaches for Understanding the Mind.

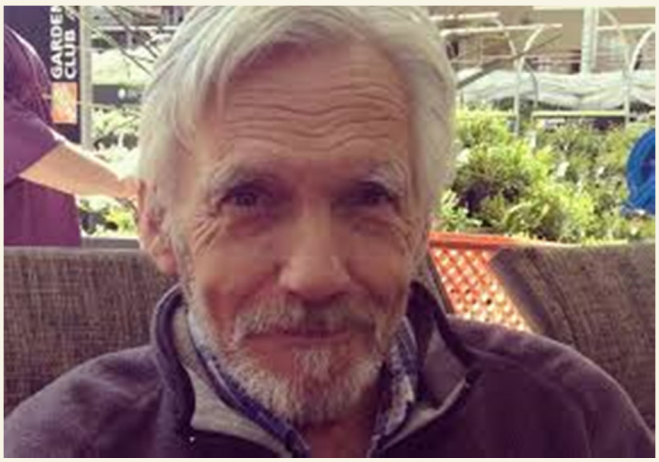
Written by Georg Feuerstein, PhD

Reviewed by Dawn Bhat, MA, MS, NCC, RYT-500, LMHC

A Personal Note

What fascinated me, having studied with Georg, was how seeped he was in the yoga tradition and that he intended to explore Eugene Gendlin's Focusing; yet, my impression is that he was unaware of the fields of somatic psychology and body psychotherapy, though he does include a brief comment on Reichian physiology, which I note later in my review. Knowing Georg and being academically immersed in somatic psychology, I respect how difficult it is to comprehend Eastern thought and dogmatic modern psychological science. Personally, I was as engaged reading this book (583 pages, released posthumous, 2014), as I was with most of his writings. My intellect was nourished by Georg's study on yoga psychology. My heart filled with gratitude for this absolutely wonderful work. My inner awareness came to a place of stillness as I realized, felt, and witnessed the connection and space deep within.

Georg Feuerstein, PhD wrote what might be the most comprehensive work on the subject of the psychology of yoga today: *The Psychology of Yoga: Integrating Eastern and Western Approaches for Understanding the Mind*. One of the world's finest scholars of yoga, Indian and Eastern spiritual traditions, Feuerstein authored over 30 books and can be credited with bringing yoga into academia, education, research and therapy. In this volume, Feuerstein focuses on understanding the mind by integrating ancient yoga tradition, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and modern psychology in his formation and conceptualization of yoga psychology.



Georg Feuerstein 1947-2012

The Eight Limbs of Classical Yoga

1) Yama - moral discipline: nonharming (ahimsā), truthfulness (satya), nonstealing (asteya), chastity (brahmacarya), and nongrasping (aparigraha).

2) Niyama - self-restraint: This branch is composed of purity (shauca), contentment (samtosha), asceticism (tapas), study (svādhyāya), and dedication to the lord (īshvara-pranidhāna).

3) Asana - posture: Contrary to contemporary popular opinion, Patanjali did not teach any postures specifically but sought to capture the essence of meditational posture.

4) Pranayama - breath control: involves the control of the in- and out-breath

5) Pratyahara - sensory inhibition, or sense withdrawal: control of the senses that bring attention into the outside world

6) Dharana - concentration: fixing attention on whatever inner object has been selected for the contemplative process

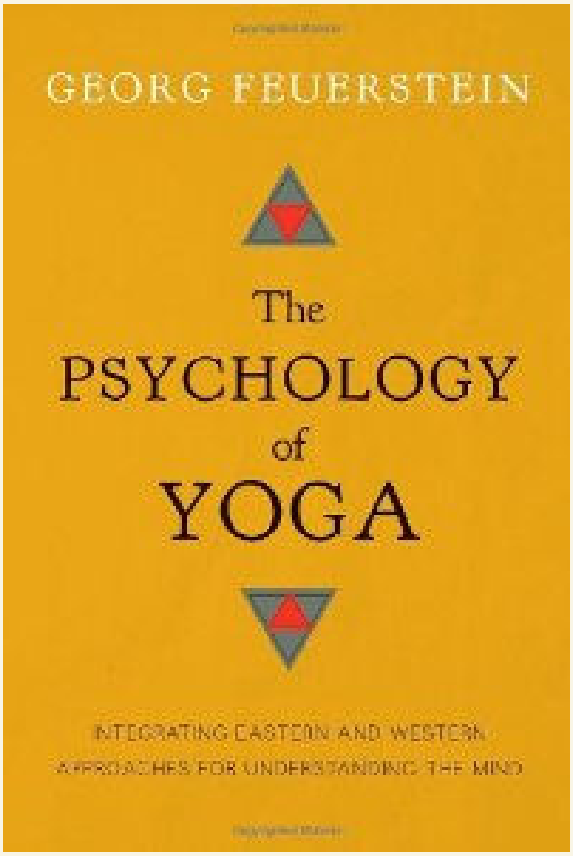
7) Dhyana - meditation: the process of sustained mental concentration

8) Samadhi - ecstasy: consists of the temporary merging of subject and object in a state of supernormal lucidity

In the preface, Feuerstein openly admits that exploring the psychology of yoga was "challenging" and "I would probably not have dared to attempt this study if I had gauged its difficulty before embarking on it with my usual enthusiasm and boldness" (p. 1X). Readers who keep this sentiment in mind may avoid being overwhelmed by the terminology and the mixture of modern versus yoga psychology, Buddhism, Tantric, Indian and so forth. Yoga predates Buddhism, and it is plausible that the Buddha himself studied with the yogis of his time.

Yoga is popular today and reaches people worldwide. Given the expansion of yoga classes in modern culture and the therapeutic implications of yoga, it is important to open by saying that yoga is much more than postures (asanas) and breath work (pranayama).

Feuerstein discusses the similarities and differences between yoga psychology and modern psychology in Part One: The Foundations. The fields are similar only in that both value pragmatism—the application of the relative understandings. In contrast, Feuerstein presents a sound argument for the differences between yoga psychology and modern psychology. Yoga psychology is concerned with transforming the person to transcend reality, attain enlightenment and with the whole person – body, mind and spirit. Modern psychology is concerned with proper functioning of the ordinary individual and treating neurosis or undesirable character traits. Another difference is methodology. Yoga employs introspection through meditation; modern psychology relies on external experimentation. Modern psychology has a goal of objectivity. Yogic knowledge is concerned with a spiritual adventure of inner transformation, subjectivity. Traditional yoga aims to reveal the core of an individual distinct from its conditioning. To free the transcendental Self from the bodymind or recognize it's always been free is the goal of yoga.



Suffering: Going from *Dukha* to *Sukha* on the Spiritual Path

Suffering, called *dukha* in Sanskrit (a classical language in India), often brings people to the yoga path and into the psychotherapist's office. Buddhists recognize the universality of human suffering through the four noble truths—there is: suffering; a cause to suffering; potentially an end to suffering; and the way is the eightfold path. Feuerstein notes eight types of suffering in Buddhism: birth; old age; illness; death; encountering pleasant experiences; separation from pleasant experiences; not attaining one's desires; and inherent in the five aggregates (the body, sensation, perception, subliminal karmic impulses and consciousness). It appears that the Buddhist perspective complements, enhances and (some of which) is even derived from yogic thinking.

When the body is in connection with consciousness, the experience is joy or happiness, *sukha*. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*—the text of yoga aphorisms or threads Patanjali complied from earlier Indian/Hindu works (i.e., Rig Veda, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita among others)—associates suffering with the universal experience of change in the phenomenal world, anguish in the face of loss, unconscious in the form of subliminal activators (*samskaras*) and conflict in the *gunas* (the building blocks in the phenomenal world).

Feuerstein points out that suffering is psychological and is a cognitive response to pain. Similar to Viktor Frankl (an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist who founded logotherapy, a form of existential analysis), Feuerstein acknowledges that humans want their suffering to be meaningful. Taken from *The Bhagavad Gita*, a Hindi scripture, Feuerstein described the source of suffering to be the desire for worldly experience or pleasure.

From a yogic perspective, the antidote to suffering is a mind that is not troubled by passion, fear, or anger. A yoga practitioner is to discern the self from the non-self or the real from the non-real. Yoga is inner stability that is attained by controlling the senses. By cultivating a particular kind of awareness of the Self, a person can immediately recognize the egoic stuff such as self-centered emotions, impulses, motivations, and thoughts. Instead, a person can move forward into the depths of inner freedom. Psychology also talks about pleasure and pain, which have neurobiological substrates suggesting that seeking pleasure and avoiding pain are adaptive or maladaptive behavioral manifestations. While this line of research is found in the addiction and motivation literature, Feuerstein clearly acknowledges that transforming suffering has more of a spiritual tone. Feuerstein asserts that any comprehensive consideration of the psychology of yoga would have to include karma and reincarnation, which are rejected by modern psychology because they are not considered scientific.

In Part Two: Mind and Beyond, Feuerstein further lays out yogic concepts and that of modern psychology in understanding the mind. Readers are introduced to new ways of thinking about psychology and the study of

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the mind by exploring neuroscience, sensorium, unconscious processes, emotion, the body, knowledge, awareness, and consciousness from the lens of yoga. This section is highly technical and complex but not intimidating. While it may be difficult to understand for people with little background in yogic thought, Sanskrit, and Hinduism, Feuerstein's depth and breadth of knowledge and his clear writing make it a great introduction for newbies.

While Feuerstein seems to jump around, it is important to remember that the yoga tradition did not arise from a linear trajectory—it is comprised of various other schools of Indian thought. For one, the Samkhya tradition is closely related to classical yoga, and is an understanding of the structure and function of the mind. *Samskara* corresponds to the unconscious in modern psychology. *Citta* can be translated as mind. Understanding Samkhya's influence on yoga becomes important in understanding yogic concept of purusha, the witness, or the transcendental self, which is discussed in the final chapters of part two.

The chapter on The Sensory Apparatus discusses the five senses (*indriya*), which are: faith (*shraddhā*), energy (*vīrya*), mindfulness (*smṛti*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajnā*). The yoga and Samkhya theory of sensory functioning is about realizing the Self and that the sentient being is not the 'I'. For this review, I will merely share some of these terms to orient readers to yoga philosophy. For those whose interest is piqued and have a desire to study yoga psychology further, I recommend reading Feuerstein's other writings and perusing the website, Traditional Yoga Studies.

The Unconscious and Its Mechanisms

While acknowledging that Freud brought the term 'unconscious' into modern psychology, Feuerstein respects the influence of earlier philosophers, scientists and physicians on unconscious processes. Using Freudian terminology, the id is at the core of unconscious, the ego is consciousness, and the superego is the parent. From a yogic perspective, seeing ourselves as the ego and not the Self is limiting and binding and opposed to freeing and liberating.

The concept of the unconscious has been the subject of scientific and scholarly scrutiny, especially within the materialistic-behavioristic paradigm. Feuerstein is curious about depth psychology, which through clinical evidence, proved unconscious exists. Feuerstein again acknowledges Frankl and his attribution of a spiritual side to the unconscious. This spiritual force is what drives people to make meaning out of their lives and suffering.

From a yogic perspective, the unconscious is a place where desires are stored. The desires prompt one to move towards action or embodiment. The unconscious mind holds these *samskaras*, subliminal activators, which are impressions from past experiences. *Smṛti* as used in *The Yoga Sutras* means unconscious memory. Though no reference is made to somatic psychology, perhaps this yogic term is similar to the implicit or somatic memory.

According to yogic teachings, an individual is to transcend all unconscious processes. Freedom lies beyond unconscious impulses or drives, which influence the narrative and history of an individual. In order to move

towards freedom, in a yogic sense, one is to overcome the cause of *kleshas* or afflictions, which are: ignorance (*avidya*), I-am-ness (*asmita*), attachment (*raga*), aversion (*devesha*), and the will to live or survival instinct (*abinivesha*).

Emotions, Affects and Motivation in Yoga

Feuerstein reviews psychiatrist and Buddhist practitioner Mark Epstein's views on emotions, as emotions bring people to spiritual practice and into psychotherapy. Epstein suggests that during meditation we allow affects to surface while witnessing them through the practice of mindfulness. We let the emotions, thoughts, and pain simply be. In yoga, practice may be about getting in touch with and experiencing affects.

Feuerstein stresses that the emotions in classical yoga have been ignored mainly because of the strong rational, cognitive side of yoga. In fact, Patanjali does not ignore positive and negative affects. In addition, *raga* (attachment) and *devesha* (aversion) are discussed. Yoga teaches to not cultivate pleasure or pain but instead equanimity (*upekshā*) or calm indifference through stilling the mind-stuff. A yoga practitioner learns to control and cease the mental fluctuations (*chitta vritti nirodha*). The *vrittis*, or whirls of the mind, include emotions, cognitions, or sensations, and in the language of yoga: correct perception (*pramāna*), misperception (*viparyaya*), imagination (*vikalpa*), sleep (*nidrā*), and memory (*smṛti*).

Essentially, there is a deconditioning of the mind and a motivation to move toward *kaivalya* or liberation/freedom. When one realizes one's true nature as *purusha*, the transcendental self, it is freeing. Ultimate awareness is an aspect of our being that is devoid of mind. The truth is, ordinarily, we never are in a neutral disposition. The exception is self-transcendence.

Feuerstein acknowledges that strong emotions tend to arise especially in the context of interpersonal relationships but reminds readers of the moral practices in yoga – *yamas* and *nyamas*. The five moral

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disciplines (*yama*)—nonharming, truthfulness, nonstealing, chastity, and greedlessness are the cornerstones of spiritual life.

What does yoga say we do with emotional triggers? The yoga practice technique, *pratipaksha-bhāvana*, thought replacement, has similarities with the field of positive psychology and cognitive behavior therapy. It's about expression rather than repression. Feuerstein seems to encourage psychological techniques in tandem with yoga practice, as he noted that emotional stabilization is primary and yogic practices such as *pratipaksha bavana* are secondary.

By transcending the ego-personality, emotions, which are part of human experience, in their negative form, are overcome so an individual can contribute harmoniously socially. Feuerstein discussed that in many scriptures emotions are described but prescriptions on how to deal with them are not given. It can be inferred that a good place for dealing with emotions and feelings is in psychotherapy. Spiritual and yoga practice does help to improve one's condition in the future by affecting the inverse relationship between *karma* and liberation. In the present, a person's life can temporarily be painful limiting spiritual practice and the use of psychological interventions is a sound decision from spiritual and conventional perspectives.

The Subtle Body: Its Structure and Function

Perhaps, the most relevant chapter to somatic psychotherapists is about the subtle body, which consists of the *soma*, the enlivened, natural body and a spiritual/ breathing body. Eastern spiritual traditions suggest that the spirit or soul is closely attached to or works in tandem with the subtle body and separates at death.

Feuerstein boldly traces Western psychological science to Hinduism and ancient yogic texts. A section on research opens with a discussion on the late 18th century scientist/ physician, Frans Anton Mesmer. Mesmer's work on animal magnetism and mesmerism gained little credence in its day and was credited as magic, at best. However, this line of research eventually lead to the validation of the *subtle body* and the rise in the interest with hypnosis. Incidentally, research on hypnosis is at the root of the field of somatic psychology and body psychotherapy with Pierre Janet, Charcot and others. Interestingly, hypnosis was much earlier recognized in the pre-dated Hindu Vedas.

According to the ancient yoga texts, the *subtle body* is immaterial and associated with *purusha*, which enjoys all experiences. In Vedic terms, the postmortem body is made of light. In Tantric schools the *subtle body* receives close attention, as it is a vehicle to realizing truth and within contains great knowledge. The *subtle body* represents reality and the cosmos at large.

The *subtle body* is made of *prana*, life force, which is cosmic energy and found all over. *Chakras,* or wheels of layered life energy in the body, and *nadis* are transport lines of *prana*. The *chakra* system is complex with seven *chakras*, from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. The main three *nadis*, *sushumna*, *ida* and *pingala,* are associated with each of the three *gunas, sattvic, tamasic, and rajasic*. *Ida* is on the left and is symbolized by qualities such as cold, blue, moon, feminine or wisdom. *Pingala* is on the right and is symbolized by qualities such as heat, red, sun, masculine and compassion.

These *nadis* are said to originate below the center of the navel. Hatha yoga attempts to balance *ida* and *pingala nadis* in the body, which correspond to the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems, respectively. It is believed that when balance is restored in the body, the *sattvic kundalini* energy flows. Certainly, balance and regulation in the nervous system is a goal of somatic psychotherapy.

The Serpent Power: The Goddess in the Body

Hatha yoga grew out of the Tantric tradition. Both recognize the power of the *kundalini-shakti*, spiritual energy represented by a serpent or coiled snake. This goddess power, *Shakti*, is responsible for all aspects of creation and evolution. In contrast, Shiva is transcendental awareness. Shiva and Shakti are inseparable.

Feuerstein recognizes that there is not a Western concept for this spiritual energy but finds that Freud's concept of the libido might be the closest. According to Freud, when a person had a certain quantity of sexual energy, libido, it rose to the brain and was converted into psychic energy. Anxiety neurosis manifested when this conversion failed. Psychologically speaking, conscious and unconscious forces are driven by libidinal forces.

From a biological perspective, scientists have been trying to understand *kundalini* and spiritual seers, such as Gopi Krishna, who wrote subjective testimonies of awakening this energy. While Feuerstein refers to "Reichian physiology" when discussing scientific skepticism about the concept of *prana*, I wonder if Feuerstein had been more familiar with the growing field of somatic psychology, if he might have gone into more of a comparative analysis of Reich's theory of orgone energy.

Knowledge, Wisdom, and Gnosis

Feuerstein discerns that intellectual knowledge and wisdom are different. Conventional knowledge is an intellectual comprehension of information about a subject. Whereas, wisdom transforms a person, enhances one's life and has great healing potential. Though knowledge (jnāna), wisdom (prajnā), and gnosis (samyag-darshana) are discussed, Feuerstein is mostly concern with vidyā, a higher form of knowing— one that is spiritual in nature.

Modern psychology has had a short history compared with that of yoga. Feuerstein outlines various schools of psychological study that may focus on the psyche, self, behavior, cognition, sensations, perceptions, emotions and consciousness. What appears to relate most closely to yoga, according to Feuerstein, are humanistic views and a transpersonal model of consciousness. Again, it appears that Feuerstein may have been unaware of somatic psychology as an emerging field, which as a bodymind approach has many similarities to yoga psychology.

Feuerstein presented Freud's five layers of the psyche: unconscious, consciousness, preconscious, ego and superego. As I expected, Feuerstein paid attention to the work of Carl Jung, who was interested in yoga and incorporated yogic techniques into his analytical work. Inspired by Jung, Abraham Maslow studied human potential and self-actualization. A person who is self-actualized has gratified basic needs for belongingness, affection, respect and self-esteem. Maslow described the attitudes of self-actualized individuals as values similar to those of spiritual traditions, including yoga. Some of these values (truth, goodness, beauty, unity, wholeness, aliveness, perfection, justice, order, simplicity, playfulness, and meaningfulness) were associated with 'peak experiences' —happiness, bliss or ecstasy. Incidentally, all of which are goals of spiritual seekers, 1960s experimenters with psychoactive substances, and those seeking psychotherapy.

In addition, Assagioli's psychosynthesis, which integrated spiritual traditions contributing to the field of transpersonal psychology, appeared to have intrigued Feuerstein. Assagioli himself meditated for hours a day when imprisoned for one month in the late 1930s due to his Jewish descent, studied with Blueler, and collaborated with Maslow. Feuerstein also offers a key discussion on consciousness and pure awareness.

Pure Awareness, the Witness and Self

In yoga the ultimate Self is *satchitananda* (pure being, consciousness/awareness and bliss), which may also be call *purusha*. When the *vrittis* or activities of the mind are brought under control, the Seer remains as its true nature – pure awareness. The Seer is the transcendental Self or the Witness. To shift identification with the *vrittis* to simply being is an intrapsychic event and one that could have been given more attention as a focus in psychotherapy.

Feuerstein demonstrates there is a difference between the invariable witness and the variable self. The image of two birds, one enjoys the fruit and one looks on, represents the individual self and transcendental self, respectively. The transcendental self is the witness, pure awareness or consciousness. In yoga, the dualistic teaching involves purusha and parkriti, the unmanifest and the manifest. In contrast, Vedanta, another branch of Hindu thought, is a nondualistic approach. Whereas, Buddhism does not speculate about a transcendental reality but teaches that the world and the psyche hold nothing permanently and that everything is constantly changing. Regardless of metaphysical stance, the witness, reality and awareness are ever-present.

The witnessing self has an important role in psychotherapy. In yoga, the self is at the center and is surrounded by *koshas*, sheaths or layers, which correspond to states of mind. The *koshas* are: bliss, awareness, mind, psychosomatic energy and the physical body (in Sanskrit: ānanda-maya-kosha, vijnāna-maya-kosha, mano-maya-kosha, prāna-maya-kosha and anna-maya -kosha, respectively). Feuerstein would say that the field of psychology is similar to working within the mano-maya-kosha and recently the vijana-maya-kosha.

In addition, science as a whole accepts the physical or 'food body.' From a yogic perspective, removing each layer or veil of illusion (*maya*), bliss is realized. However, this is not a mental process but intrinsic to the self.

Differences Among Concepts of Ego, Self and Purusha

Yoga understands the ego as the identification with the mind and body. Feuerstein compares that with psychological concepts of the self and ego. In yoga, the process of connection between the self and the Self (*purusha*) is called *samyoga*. *Avidya*, spiritual ignorance, comes in seeing the ego-personality for the transcendental self. A cause of suffering to the yogin or yogini is the fear inherent in the duality and disconnection. Seeing the self as *purusha* is a change or shift that happens in the mind. As aforementioned, this spiritual process could be incorporated into psychotherapy process.

As noted in the discussion about the *koshas*, a step down on the spiritual ladder is the awareness associated with the mind or buddhi. As such, there is the Witness (*purusha*) and the process of witnessing. The mind can be conscious of itself, which is self-consciousness. Mindfulness practices and meditative disciplines, such as vipassana, cultivate self-observation and the process of witnessing. Self-observation is a process in the nervous system. Feuerstein notes that self-observation, psychologically speaking, is often unreliable and rejected. However, this phenomenological and experiential concept is accepted in and often at the heart of somatic psychology and body psychotherapy.

The Yoga Path is discussed in Part Three: Mind in Transition, which may provide a helpful understanding when integrating yogic concepts in psychotherapy. Feuerstein explored other dimensions of yoga practice such as sound, mantra and dance. He also compares and contrasts nature of the student/teacher (*guru*) relationship with that of the analyst/analysand.

The goal of yoga is liberation through self-realization. To transform the mind is to transform one's entire life. The yoga path can be interpreted as continual inner control, mental simplification, or inner purification. Feuerstein states that physiologically we must be able to take control over the animal part of our brain and reminds us of the eight-fold yoga path. Yoga practice, as noted earlier, is much more than yoga postures.

Meditation & Mindfulness

Meditation and other contemplative practices have become increasingly supported by research, especially neuroscience. Meditative techniques and meditative states may vary. In yoga, concentration means a merging with the object, which is called *samadhi*, which is an immediate goal of meditation. Liberation is the ultimate goal where the spirit wakes up to itself.

In similar vein, mindfulness practice, which consists of the continuous, nonjudgmental observation of bodily and mental processes, notably breathing, feeling, and thinking, has become mainstream and incorporated in many traditional psychotherapies.

While Feuerstein discusses the yogic perspective on death and dying in one of the final chapters, it is not one of insignificance. Yoga is an attempt to understand the nature of one's existence, life and mortality. For more on this subject matter, Feuerstein points readers to what the Dali Lama thought was one of the most important books civilization has ever produced: Robert A. F. Thurman's *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation through Understanding in the Between (1993, xvii).*

Feuerstein concludes in Part Four: Analysis and Relevance with his commentary about a future integration of yoga psychology in Epilogue: Toward a Western Yoga. Feuerstein asserts that "Indian thought—be it Hindu, Buddhist, or Jaina—has a distinct advantage over contemporary psychology when it comes to the issue of spiritual freedom and the path to freedom" (p.445). Although Jung insisted that yogic methods are too forceful, Jung believed that everything should be done to help the unconscious reach conscious awareness to free the mind from rigidity.

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What may be extremely interesting to somatic psychotherapists is Feuerstein's discussion on body-oriented therapies in general and Gendlin's Focusing in particular. Feuerstein called Focusing somatic concretion, which is feeling the identified problem in the body, and indicated it was a biologically based spirituality. He stated that Focusing was an alternative to *samadhi* or enlightenment. Feuerstein was so impressed he intended to study it. The Six Steps of Focusing are: 1) Clear a space; 2) Felt sense; 3) Get a handle; 4) Resonate; 5) Ask; 6) Receive. While he goes into a description of Focusing, he seemed intrigued that the process allows the felt sense to speak.

Lastly, there are three Appendices: Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina Yoga, A Survey of the Literature of Yoga Psychology, and the East and West in Antiquity. Much of these final pages are scholarly in tone. Should anybody become seriously interested in the psychology of yoga, Feuerstein was the leading scholar of Indology and he surveyed the relevant literature from antiquity to present-day. The yogic view and for that matter Indian spiritual traditions, Oriental or Eastern views of psychology could be taught alongside modern psychology.

The Psychology of Yoga: *Integrating Eastern and Western Approaches for Understanding the Mind* is an important contribution. While this volume is about the psychology of yoga and understanding the nature of the mind, there are few direct clinical applications. Feuerstein suggests that for an individual to be able to "engage Yoga properly, we must do a certain amount of preliminary psychological work. Otherwise we are apt to carry our confusion over into our yogic discipline" (p.53). To support this process, a somatically oriented psychotherapy may be indicated. On a final note, given the rise in acceptability of and accessibility to yoga in integrative mental health, Feuerstein's psychology of yoga is a marvelous contribution.

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