

Psychology and spirituality

By Dr Itai Ivtzan

Psychology and spirituality must combine to bring about growth.

Growing means daring to go beyond your personal boundaries. We all conduct our lives according to our personal definition of self, which carries with it a series of boundaries and limitations. Growth means pushing the boundaries to expand one's inner space. In practice, this implies that certain options, which were previously out of bounds, are now permitted and available. You have pushed your boundary, you have grown, and therefore you have the choice to say "yes" to certain things that used to be an automatic "no" in the past. This process frequently provokes two conflicting emotions: excitement and apprehension. While the adventurous prospect of going beyond your own boundaries and exploring new territories is exciting, it also provokes apprehension and anxiety. New experiences touch on the unknown, and most of us are intimidated by the unknown.

Psychology and spirituality: The meeting point

Psychology and spirituality could be described as "feet on the ground, head in the sky". Psychology represents the "grounding" effect, in which the mind is used for thinking, rationalizing, and understanding life. Spirituality transcends rational thought and evolves intuitively over one's lifetime. Living a full life would mean embracing these different aspects of life, and maintaining a balance between them. Most people tend to search for a single unambiguous answer and dismiss all others. They either follow the mind-oriented psychological path or the intuitive transcendental one. Many members of the academic milieu reject vehemently all intuitive alternatives; they strongly believe that life should only be experienced through the mind. But many spiritual groups with which I am acquainted firsthand, see the mind as the enemy, and consider intuitive transcendent experiences as the only valid tools in life. By adhering to their one-sided views, both groups are restricting themselves. While being well equipped to deal with certain situations, they are ill equipped to deal with others. Rather than being contradictory, mind-based and intuitive-based experiences are complementary. They represent two aspects of the entity we call life. Certain moments in life require mind-oriented skills, while in others one must let go of the mind and act intuitively. Having both options at one's disposal at any given moment offers greater flexibility and taking action properly. This could happen only when both the psychological and the spiritual are alive within you. To realize in full the potential of growth in your life, you must be able to shift between the psychological and the spiritual poles in accordance with the situation and at your own choice.

Psychology and spirituality: Interdependence

Because psychology is based upon the mind, it has an important role in our journey towards self-awareness. Psychology is the means to explore and map out your mind, and understand its hidden motivations. The mind contains fragmentary information that ultimately defines who you are. Psychology helps you get in touch with this information, and gain insights on who you are and how you define yourself. Spirituality, on the other hand, aims to transcend this rational processing. The newly acquired ability to transcend that which has been acknowledged is the point where psychology and spirituality meet. To transcend something, one must be aware that it actually exists.

In other words, awareness is the key word. To become who you really are, you must transcend your illusionary perception of yourself. Since this illusion is based upon mind constructs, the awareness gained through psychological processing is necessary for spiritual transcendence. By exploring your psychological processes you get acquainted with your mind's definition of yourself. Psychology is therefore crucial to the spiritual journey for transcendence. Thus there is a strong bond between psychology and spirituality: Psychology is the means by which you get to know your mind, spirituality enables you to transcend your mind. They are essential for one another.

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