

self-control East and West: implications for psychological health and personal growth

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If you cannot find it in yourself, where will you go for it?
ancient Chinese proverb

In the ancient Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the man [person] of wisdom is described as "one who has not a hair's breadth between will and action—Who sees action in inaction and inaction in action, he is enlightened among men—He does all actions disciplined." How does the person of enlightenment gain this discipline? And how, as counselors and educators, can we encourage the pursuit of this discipline in children? In this article, we explore visions of self-control (the "discipline" referred to in the *Bhagavad Gita*), the skills for attaining self-control, and ideas about how they may be applied both personally and professionally.

There has long been a concern that our increasingly mechanized and technological society may deprive individuals of a sense of control over their own lives. Many writers have eloquently identified the adverse consequences to the individual of a society preoccupied with productivity and material consumption, and have poetically illustrated the sense of alienation, isolation, and loneliness that may result. All of us are aware that these adverse consequences afflict not only adults but adolescents and even young children as well. The increased crime rate among juveniles and increased reliance on psychotropic chemicals and alcohol to induce altered states of consciousness are evidence of a society whose youth are too often bereft of a sense of meaning and purpose.

But where do we turn to rediscover values of a personal, interpersonal, and spiritual nature? How can we learn the skills necessary to regain control over our lives, and the skills to help children feel more in

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control of their lives? As a partial response to these questions, a new model, a new vision of our human potential is necessary. Some aspects of this vision may come from the Eastern esoteric and mystical tradition; others may come from our Western scientific research laboratories and field experiments. Parents, teachers, and educators are in a pivotal position to transmit aspects of this vision to future generations, to offer them a vision of an enlightened life, and to teach them the skills of self-control to implement such a life.

Disease prevention and health promotion in the future will challenge each of us to replace our prevailing ethic of expensive self-indulgence with an ethic of rigorous personal responsibility: to forsake habits that seem pleasurable but are ultimately self-destructive in favor of habits that are prosaic but lifesaving: exercise, for example, proper diet, and non-smoking. We need to change direction. Government cannot force it; doctors cannot administer it like a drug. We can only choose it for ourselves. But the costs of personal irresponsibility have become staggering. We face a choice between taking increased responsibility for our own health—and continuing the present wasteful sick-care system, with its staggering toll in dollars, wasted lives and grief.

Joseph Califano

VISIONS OF SELF-CONTROL

We will discuss two visions of self-control, one primarily from our Western tradition and one primarily from the Eastern tradition. Each of these traditions has developed certain sets of skills that enable individuals to attain the qualities inherent in its vision. The teachings of Zen and the Eastern traditions in general have emphasized techniques that encourage individuals to yield, let go, develop egolessness, nonattachment, present-centeredness, and altered states of consciousness. A dominant emphasis in Western behavioral psychology has been the precise use of the intellect and rationality, the setting of goals, self and environmental analysis, assertiveness, strong ego development, the search for causality, and the perfection of ordinary awareness.

Both Eastern and Western traditions have certain blinders, which encourage them to believe that their vision is the only true reality. Thus problems of dogmatism and methodological purity occur in both traditions. We believe that a more flexible, pragmatic approach is needed, one that involves combining the best of both traditions to arrive at a truly comprehensive approach to realizing our human potential.

Western Goals

Unless we decide to retreat to a cave in the Himalayas, we live in the world, and we must learn certain skills to survive. We need to learn how to set goals for ourselves, how to interact effectively with others, how to interpret and abide by the mores and customs of our society, and how to respond appropriately to feedback from our environment. As educators, we also have a responsibility to teach these skills to our children, to reinforce children systematically for specific skills they have learned, and to socialize them to the importance of both assertion and accommodation. All these skills are examples of the precise awareness involved in behavioral self-management skills (Shapiro, 1978; Thoresen & Mahoney, 1974).

Eastern Goals

We need to learn more, however, both for ourselves and for our roles as models and educators of the young. We need to learn how to avoid becoming trapped by the goals we have set for ourselves, or by the goals society sets for us. Although future planning may be important and functional, it is also important to know how to value the spontaneity and joyfulness of the present moment—the smile of our child, the wind blowing a leaf to the ground, an ant crawling. Feedback is important for learning, but analyzing, categorizing, and labeling may inhibit direct experience. We need to learn how to let go of the security of labels, the security of ordinary ways of perceiving reality, and trust the “flow of the river” even though we don’t know where it leads. We need to learn to respond to ourselves and to the children we work with in totally non-judgmental, totally accepting ways, for no reason, for no accomplishments, except that they are, that we are. All these skills are examples of the global, nonprecise nirvana (awareness) that may be achieved by meditation.

INTEGRATION

What we would like to suggest is that neither of the above visions of the world represents a true reality, neither is higher or better than the other. Neither meditation nor behavioral self-management skills provide a final answer. Rather, both are necessary. Therefore, we need to learn a *precision nirvana*, a nondoctrinaire model for enhancing our personal growth and that of children to whom we have professional or personal commitments. Precision nirvana as conceptualized here consists

of three aspects: the skills of applying ordinary awareness in self-management strategies; the skills of applying altered states in meditative strategies; and the ability to know intuitively and accurately when which mode of awareness is called for (Shapiro, 1978; Shapiro & Zifferblatt, 1976).

Every belief is to be examined and transcended.

John C. Lilly

Being able to use both modes, we can learn to master both. Through knowledge of both Eastern and Western modes, we can learn to maintain a perspective on ourselves: we know how to set goals, but do not feel enslaved by them; we use feedback and evaluation as a means of learning, but do not forget direct experience; we give precise reinforcement to optimize performance and skill-learning, yet we are also able to give a noncontingent cuddle. We learn to discriminate which situations cause self-consciousness, which situations make us joyful; simultaneously we learn to let go, relax, and simply accept negative and positive feelings. We may strive for the goal of excellence, yet we learn to see perfection as a playful game of becoming.

REFERENCES

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Editor's Note: Because space limitations of this special journal, the Shapiros' ideas were not fully developed. For a more detailed account of practical, step-by-step instructions for practicing the techniques of meditation and self-management, and explaining in more depth both the Eastern and Western visions of health and growth, readers are referred to Deane Shapiro's recent book *Precision Nirvana*.