

Synapse:
Individual & Global Connections
perspectives on Indian cultures

Dr. Michele Marie Desmarais

Buffy Sainte-Marie



synapse

- name of junction between neurons (brain cells)
- from Greek 'sunapsis' 'to clasp, connect, join'
- Yoga

Overview

- What's East, what's West?
- The historic global village
- India's influence on the West
- Unexpected meetings: the 'other' Indians
- The cultural imperative: new perspectives in the village

The Historic Global Village

- What's East, What's West?
- Historical reasons for contact between cultures or peoples?
- Migrations
- Trade
- Rulers



Greek perspectives

- Greek openness and transcendence
- the Indian and Socrates (470-399 BCE)
- pre-Alexander: vegetarianism, equanimity/toleration of opposites
- Alexander and philosophers in India (327-325 BCE)
- known for practical/ethical wisdom: Indian sages as political advisors or investigating nature
- barbarians, supremacy of Greek culture
- what do cultures that draw their traditions from Hellenism inherit?

further contact with the West

- King Asoka's envoys (r. 273-232 BCE)
- King Menander and Buddhism (150-110 BCE)
- Christianity?
- St. Thomas in Kerala 52 CE

*What did the West inherit from
India?*

Did it say thank you?

Sadhana

- malas “bede”
- stupas...relics?
- monasticism: Desert Fathers and the vinaya
- ‘Catholic’ Saints
Barlām and Josaphat

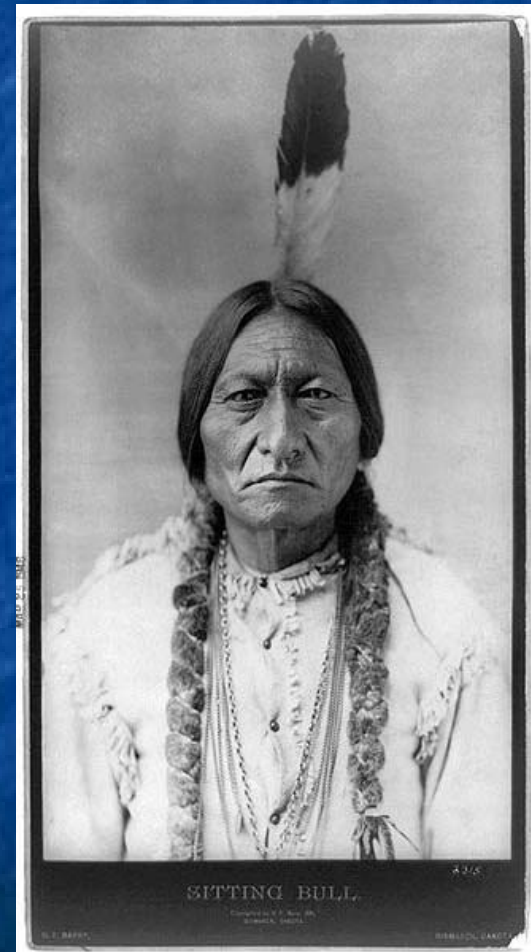


*Unexpected
Meetings
in the
Global Village*



the 'other' West

- the 'other' Indians
- Tatanka Iyotake
- Chief Sitting Bull
- Hunkpapa Lakota (Sioux) leader, medicine man (1831-1890)
- Little Bighorn (June 25, 1876)
- Custer



Q. What do 'Indians' have in common?

A. Lots!

1. Name!

- origin of term 'India'?
- origin of the term for the other 'Indians' (Native Americans, First Nations Peoples)?
- *“What would they have called us if they thought they'd found China instead of India”*

Gwendolyn MacEwen

2. Colonialism

- India: East India Trading Company
- Question: What is the oldest commercial corporation in North America?
- Hudson's Bay Company
- also: schools, contact with Christianity (Jesuits)
- Huron carol

3. Beliefs and Practices



ruminating on civilisation



- Lakota: tatanka; White Buffalo Calf Woman (Ptesan Win)

a matter of time



- yugas
- Wakan Tanka, Western gate to hold back waters, Four ages

rebirth

- the Mowachaht and Luna



interconnectedness

- Mitakuye Oyasin “all my relations”
- Sarvam khalvidam brahma
- the unexpected Vedantin
- Exercise:
 - What are you wearing? Where was this item of clothing made? Who might have made it?
 - Water and Salt
 - Who are we? We are all relatives, all relations.
 - Sage



disciplines of action

- Kriya-yoga
- Tapas (ascetic heat)
- Svadhyaya
- Isvara-praṇidhana
- Inipi (sweat lodge)
- oral traditions, elders
- focus!



Taking Direction From Tradition

- how to profoundly change a person?
- practice intensely, for a long time, without interruption, with reverence (*sat-kara*)
[Yoga-sutra of Patanjali]
- similar principles are shared in common with Native traditions and others--*why?*

neuroplasticity

- ability of the brain to change
- formation of new synapses (chemical connections)
- loss of existing synapses
- loss of neurons
- genesis of new neurons

factors affecting plasticity

- genetic issues
- age
- area of brain involved
- areas related to sensory information, memory, and emotion normally retain ability to change

behavioural factors influencing plasticity

- neuroplasticity researchers: Merzenich, Mahncke, Nedivi
- neural Darwinism: use it or lose it

repetition

- physical repetition
- emotional repetition
- Richard Davidson, University of Wisconsin
- we choose what to repeat

importance

- rising above neural noise encourages neuroplasticity (increased magnitude in neural firings)
- importance of traditional teachers, elders, systems of thought to communicate values and practices

attention, mindfulness

- attention activates neural circuits
- Hebbian law
- the problem of habit: of not seeing, not hearing....
- repetition plus mindfulness is a powerful combination

expectation

- Pavlov's dog
- placebo effect
- expectation is enough to initiate change
- faith and confidence in a path make other practices more likely to be practiced, reinforce the importance of what we are doing, and encourage us to pay attention

The Global Village in Agreement

- Traditions and neuroscience remind us that what we

repeat

find important

pay attention to

have expectations about

all have real effects on us and the world

What will you...

- repeat
- find important
- pay attention to
- have expectations about

