

What is Psychosynthesis?

In its most basic sense, psychosynthesis is simply a name for the process of personal growth: the *natural* tendency in each of us to harmonize or synthesize our various aspects at ever higher levels of organization. One wants a word for this natural process, and “psychosynthesis” is a good word. Psychosynthesis as a process is nothing unusual, nothing new — like Moliere’s *bourgeois gentilhomme* who realized, after a session with his elocution teacher, that, “He had been speaking *prose* all his life but hadn’t known it.”

In its more specific sense, psychosynthesis is a name for the conscious attempt to *cooperate* with the natural process of personal development. Albert Szent-Gyorgyi in his article in this issue, describes the “drive in living matter to perfect itself.” In human beings, this drive becomes conscious — we feel it as an urge and try to

implement it, try to make its natural progress easier.

But cooperating with evolution in this purposeful way requires conceptual understanding, a framework, and a range of practical techniques. Psychosynthesis, therefore, integrates the best available concepts and methods into an inclusive but growing framework, so as to facilitate the natural human drive toward development.

As an inclusive approach to human growth, psychosynthesis dates from 1911 and the early work of the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli. Though one of the pioneers of psychoanalysis in Italy, Assagioli maintained that Freud had not given sufficient weight to the higher aspects of the human personality, and recognized the need for a more inclusive concept of man. From this beginning, Assagioli and an increasing

number of psychotherapists, educators, physicians, social workers, clergymen and others have worked to develop and refine this synthetic view of human growth. This task is considered to be an open one, one that will never be ended. Each year, new discoveries in psychology, new developments in the fields of education, religion, anthropology and many other disciplines add to the principles and to the techniques of psychosynthesis. By its very nature, psychosynthesis is always open to other approaches or to new approaches to human development.

Over the last sixty years, a number of conceptual points and a number of methods have proven themselves to be fundamental. These provide a working structure for psychosynthesis.

A SYNTHESIS OF MANY TRADITIONS

Any comprehensive psychological and educational approach to the development of the whole person must draw from many traditions. Eastern disciplines often have tended to emphasize the spiritual levels of being, while Western approaches usually have focused on the personality side. But Man must be viewed as a whole and each aspect accorded its due importance. Psychosynthesis recognizes that man has a transpersonal essence, and at the same time holds that man's purpose in life is to manifest this essence, or Self, as fully as possible in the world of everyday personal and social existence.

THE SUPERCONSCIOUS

Traditional psychoanalysis recognizes a primitive, or "lower" unconscious – the source of our atavistic and biological drives. But there is also a higher unconscious, a *superconscious* in man – an autonomous realm from which originate our more highly

evolved impulses: altruistic love and will, humanitarian action, artistic and scientific inspiration, philosophic and spiritual insight, and the drive for purpose and meaning in life. Man can suffer not merely from repression of his basic biological drives, as Freud pointed out, but he can be equally crippled by "repression of the sublime" – the failure to accept his highest nature. Thus true psychosynthesis must be concerned both with integrating material from the lower unconscious and with realizing and actualizing the content of the superconscious. To this end, we need to use a wide range of techniques for contacting the superconscious and establishing a bridge with that part of our being where true wisdom is to be found. The superconscious is thereby accessible, in varying degrees, to each one of us, and can provide a great source of energy, inspiration, and direction.

THE SELF

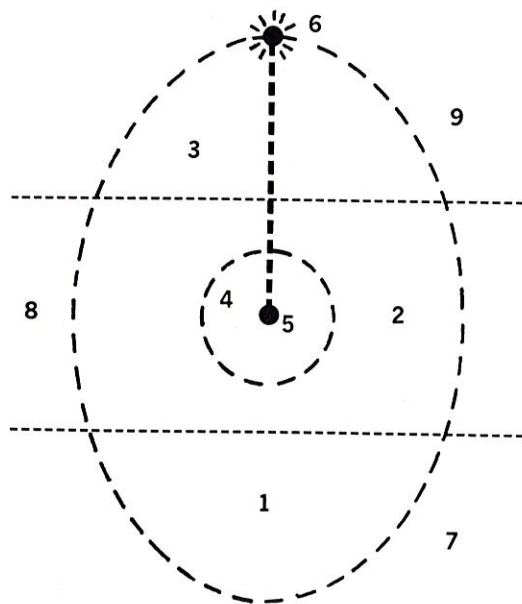
The concept of the self as an entity supraordinate to the various aspects of the personality, such as body, feelings and mind, is to be found in the major world religions and in more and more branches of Western psychology and philosophy. Taking the concept out of any doctrinal background and examining it empirically, we find first of all a center of awareness and purpose, around which integration of the personality takes place. This is the "personal self," the "I," or center of personal identity. An important distinction needs to be made between the personal self and the "Transpersonal Self." The Transpersonal Self is the focal point of the superconscious realm. It is a deeper and all-inclusive center of identity and of being, where individuality and universality blend.

The two central functions of the personal self are *consciousness* and *will*. With the

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consciousness of the self one can be clearly aware of what is going on within and around him, and perceive without distortion or defensiveness. This has been called the inner "attitude of observer." To the extent that one is able to achieve this vantage point, the claims of the personality and its tendency to self-justification no longer stand in the way of clear vision. There are a variety of techniques to help gain access to this vantage point, from which the most effective work on oneself can be done.

The following diagram is a graphic representation of some of what we have been describing.



1. The Lower Unconscious
2. The Middle Unconscious
3. The Higher Unconscious or Superconscious
4. The Field of Consciousness
5. The Conscious Self or "I"
6. The Transpersonal Self
7. The Lower Collective Unconscious
8. The Middle Collective Unconscious
9. The Higher Collective Unconscious

FALSE IDENTIFICATIONS

To act from our center can be difficult, as we have all experienced. One major difficulty in learning to act "from center" is the large number of *false identifications* we make with specific elements within ourselves. We may identify, for example, with a temporary feeling such as fear or anger, and lose or distort our true perspective. Or we may become identified with one of our "sub-personalities"—those semi-autonomous and often contradictory aspects of ourselves that follow a predictable, pre-programmed routine when evoked by a certain set of circumstances. Much of the basic work of psychosynthesis must be aimed at recognizing and harmonizing subpersonalities. We are then no longer helplessly controlled by them, but can learn to bring them increasingly under our conscious direction. Doing this involves learning the central process of "*disidentification*" from all that is not the self, and "*self-identification*," or the realization of our true identity as a center of awareness and will.

STAGES IN PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

Every person is an individual, and the psychosynthesis of each person follows a unique path. This is obvious, and we forget it at our peril. But in the overall process of psychosynthesis we can distinguish two consecutive stages—*personal and transpersonal* psychosynthesis. In personal psychosynthesis, the integration of the personality takes place around the personal self, and the individual attains a level of functioning in terms of his work and his relationships that would be considered optimally healthy by current standards of mental health.

In the transpersonal stage of psychosynthesis, the person learns to achieve alignment with, and to express the energies of

the Transpersonal Self, thus manifesting such qualities as social responsibility, a spirit of cooperation, a global perspective, altruistic love, and transpersonal purpose.

Often the two stages overlap, and there can be a considerable amount of transpersonal activity long before the stage of personal psychosynthesis is complete.

METHODS EMPLOYED IN PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

Any method that is effective in the personal evolution of human beings is a psychosynthetic method, when it is employed with a clear understanding of its purpose, its effects, and of the needs it is meant to fulfill. So to be maximally effective in our own psychosynthesis or in helping others, we need to have at our disposal a broad range of methods to meet the needs presented by different situations and different people. And as each person must be treated as an individual, an effort must be made to choose, out of the range of methods available, the ones that are best suited to each person's existential situation, psychological type, unique goals, desires and path of development. Some of the specific techniques commonly used include guided imagery, movement, gestalt, self-identification, medi-

tation, development of the will, symbolic art work, journal-keeping, ideal models and development of intuition, though a complete list would be much larger. The emphasis is on fostering an ongoing process of growth that can gain increasing momentum and bring a more joyful, balanced actualization of one's life.

As this process goes forward, one gains the freedom of choice, the power of decision over his or her actions, and the ability to actively regulate and direct the many personality functions. This entails developing one's personal will—the will of the personal self. Through this development we free ourselves from helpless reaction to unwanted inner impulses, and to the expectations of others. We become truly "centered," and gradually become able to follow a path in accordance with what is best within each of us.

And as we reach toward the Transpersonal Self, we liberate the synthesizing energies that organize and integrate our personality. We can make increasing contact with the Will of our Transpersonal Self, which provides ever clearer meaning and purpose in our personal lives and our social tasks. We become able to function in the world more serenely and effectively, in a spirit of cooperation and good will.