

## **The Essentials of Psychosynthesis**

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### **Introduction**

"Our 'Age of Anxiety' is, in great part, a result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools with yesterday's concepts". (Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, N.Y.: Bantam Books, 1967, pp. 8-9.)

"Myth is the mode of simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects. Electric circuitry confers a mythic dimension on our ordinary individual and group actions. Our technology forces us to live mythically, but we continue to think fragmentarily, and on single separate planes." (ibid, p. 114) "The fragmenting of activities, our habit of thinking in bits and parts— "specialism" —reflected the step-by-step linear departmentalizing process inherent in the technology of the alphabet". (Ibid, p. 45)

"One main factor in the upward trend of animal life has been the power of wandering. Perhaps this is why the armor-plated monsters fared badly. They could not wander. . . . When man ceases to wander, he will cease to ascend in the scale of being. Physical wandering is still important, but greater still is the power of man's spiritual adventures— adventures of thought, adventures of passionate feeling— adventures of aesthetic experience." (Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, N.Y.: The MacMillan Co., 1948, p. 297.)

"Man's search for meaning is a primary force in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance that will satisfy his own will to meaning...Man, however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values". (Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, N.Y.: Washington Square Press, 1963, pp. 154-5.)

"Man's principal task today is to create a new self, adequate to command the forces that now operate so aimlessly and yet, so compulsively... Without a concept of development, without a hierarchy of values, the mere lifting of unconscious repressions might simply produce, as it has often done in our day, a wholesale eruption of the libido, which would turn the mind itself into an instrument for slaying the higher impulses. Perhaps the greatest difficulty today... is the failure to recognize that wholeness demands imperatively that the highest elements in the human personality should be singled out, accepted and trusted, fortified and rewarded... In this replenishment of the whole self under a formative idea lies the promise of reducing the distortions, conflicts, isolationisms, infantilisms and obsessions that have limited human growth." (Lewis Mumford, *The Transformation of Man*, N. Y. Harper & Bros., 1956.)

These four quotations reflect something of the type of thinking that is in the air today. The traditional neuroses of the turn of the century are much more rare today; they have been replaced in large measure by disturbed states arising from a loss of purpose in life and confusion about one's identity or true self. We are going to have to find ways to meet the challenge presented by the "LSD generation" to help them find the expansion of consciousness and sense of meaning that they are seeking. As change is something which seems to be proceeding at an increasing rate, and the perennial gulf between the generations is probably widening, there is every reason to believe that the disease entities of tomorrow will be different from those of today and that the psychiatry and psychotherapy of the future will differ significantly from its present forms if it is to keep up with these developments. Just as the theory of the "four humors," which was once accepted without question, has gone the way of the dinosaurs, so it is safe to assume that much of our present thinking is obsolete or obsolescent.

Our era is one of swift, inevitable, and global change. The industrial age has passed and we are rapidly hurtling into the age of automation, overpopulation, and of total and instant communication due to the electronic extension of our central nervous system. These explosive developments are bringing about profound and widespread changes in our selves and in our world.

Automation brings about an abundance of free time and the possibility of its use creatively for leisure, contemplation and more meaningful activity. The population explosion, coupled with emerging patterns of urban living, is rapidly bringing about conditions of high population density in which little of our former private worlds will be left. It can be easily calculated by mathematical formula that while between three persons there are seven possibilities of relationship, the number of possible relationships between six persons is already sixty-three, and the number of possible relationships between ten persons is 1023. Much of our present life that is highly fragmented, isolated and private will be replaced by new modes of existence which will certainly include a greater accent on group relationships. It is clear that the psychiatry of tomorrow will have to develop new methods to help people live together harmoniously and to realize that in their innermost selves men are united and not divided.

In addition, the instant communication and electronic technology will no doubt produce a more instantaneous, more comprehensive, and more total involvement in life situations. This logically will involve less attention being paid to the unfolding linear developments of sequences of past events and more awareness of the "here and now" and of the unfolding future.

In summary, because of the swift and inexorable changes now taking place in man's environment, man is undergoing and will doubtless continue to undergo profound changes. Our psychology and psychiatry will have to evolve accordingly, for as Meister Eckhardt has said, "only the hand that erases can write the true thing."

These preliminary remarks will serve to set the general background for the presentation of Psychosynthesis.

## **Historical Background**

The founder of Psychosynthesis, Dr. Roberto Assagioli, was born in Venice in 1888. He took his medical degree at the University of Florence, specializing in neurology and psychiatry, but pursuing at the same time psychological and philosophical studies. A beginning of his conception of psychosynthesis was contained in his doctoral thesis on Psychoanalysis (1910) in which he pointed out what he considered to be some of the limitations of Freud's views. He began his practice of psychiatry in Italy using a variety of methods, gradually developing his own form of psychotherapy. In 1926 he founded in Rome the "Institute of Psychosynthesis". His work was held up by the Fascist government in 1938 but he reopened the Institute in Florence in 1948. As writer and lecturer he had traveled extensively and his essays and articles have been translated into eight languages. In 1965 he published the book *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques* (N. Y.: Hobbs, Dorman) which is a collection of his basic writings along with some contributions by other workers in the field. At present his professional activity is mainly dedicated to the "didactic psychosynthesis" of psychotherapists and educators.

Since the publication of Dr. Assagioli's book, professional interest has been growing in the subject of Psychosynthesis. There was a paper given by Dr. Juan Aleandri on psychosynthesis at the Fourth World Congress of Psychiatry in Madrid in 1966. There are local institutes of Psychosynthesis in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Florence, London, and Buenos Aires, including a university affiliation in Buenos Aires.

## **Basic Concepts**

Psychosynthesis is essentially an open and not a closed system. It is a frame of reference which includes the biological, the psychological and also the spiritual, philosophical and ethical realms and hence, strives to be comprehensive and inclusive without being eclectic.

Psychosynthesis has many significant similarities with existential psychotherapy and with what has been termed the "third force" in psychology.

The similarities are as follows: The importance of the concept and experience of "identity"; the realization that each person is growing and developing latent potentialities; the central importance of the meaning which the person gives to life and looks for in life; the recognition of the importance of esthetic, ethical and religious values; the fact that each individual is confronted with choices and decisions and hence, responsibility; the need to be aware of the motivations which determine the choices and decisions; the importance of the future and its significance for the present.

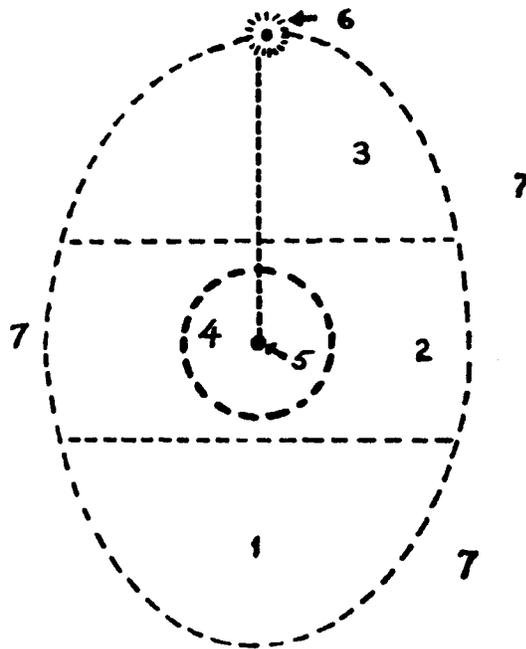
The differences between existential psychotherapy and psychosynthesis include the following:

Psychosynthesis assigns to the will a central function; it considers the direct experience of the self an inner reality which can be produced by appropriate techniques; it places

greater stress on joyous experiences (Maslow's "Peak Experiences"); the experience of loneliness is not considered essential in psychosynthesis—it is a temporary condition only. Assagioli says of loneliness, "It can and does alternate with, and finally can be substituted by the genuine living experience of interpersonal, interindividual communications, relationships, interplay, by cooperation between individuals, and among groups—and even by a blending, through intuition, empathy, understanding and identification. This is the large field of interindividual psychosynthesis." (Dr. Roberto Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis*, p. 5) A further difference is that a large number of active techniques are used for—

- a. The transformation, sublimation and direction of psychological energies.
  - b. The strengthening and maturing of weak or undeveloped functions.
  - c. The activation of supraconscious energies and the arousing of latent potentialities.
- There is a conscious and planned reconstruction of the personality.

The structure of the personality as conceived by Assagioli can be represented geometrically as follows:



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|--|-------------------------------|
| 1. The Lower Unconscious                       | 4. The field of Consciousness |
| 2. The Middle Unconscious                      | 5. The Personal Self          |
| 3. The higher Unconscious or<br>Supraconscious | 6. The Transpersonal Self     |
|  | 7. The Collective Unconscious |

Perhaps some comments are in order here. Layer one is the unconscious of traditional psychodynamics. Layer two is formed of psychological elements similar to our waking consciousness and is easily accessible to it. Psychosynthesis places great emphasis upon the supraconscious. As Assagioli states (page 17) "From this region we receive our

higher intuitions and inspirations -artistic, philosophical or scientific, ethical 'imperatives' and urges to humanitarian and heroic action. It is the source of the higher feelings, such as altruistic love; of genius and of the states of contemplation, illumination, and ecstasy. In this realm are latent the higher psychic functions and spiritual energies." Assagioli stresses the awakening or contacting and then the releasing and utilization of the supraconscious energies and their transforming impact on the personality. Here he draws a good deal on the thinking of the East.

In addition to the concept of the supraconscious the second basic concept of Psychosynthesis is, and I might go on to say that much of modern psychology is, concerned with the self.

Again using a geometric type of thinking, we may represent the self by a number of concentric shells or layers in which the outer layers are more superficial and less genuine than the inner or deeper or true self. The process of psychotherapy and of personal growth involves the person discovering or contacting his true self.

Psychosynthesis is based upon traditional psychodynamics, and it also has many similarities to the Jungian point of view.

The well-known psychic functions of Jung are the four fundamental functions of sensation, feeling, thought and intuition. Jung differs from many psychologists in the significance which he attaches to the function and power of intuition. The intuition can vary from intuition in the Bergsonian sense which occurs in a normal personality to the intuition of Plotinus which is purely spiritual.

Psychosynthesis adds to the four functions of Jung three other processes the imagination, the will and the drives. This latter concept of course is by no means new and is one of the cornerstones of psychodynamics. The introduction of the imagination and of the will requires some comment and explanation.

Imagination is a function which can operate at various levels and at various levels concurrently, namely, at the levels of sensation, feeling, thinking and intuition. Moreover, imagination presents itself in many types, visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic and so forth. The function of evoking and creating images is one of the most important and significant active functions of the human personality. This involves both conscious and unconscious aspects. It is a faculty which can be controlled and developed in psychosynthetic therapy.

The will, once important in earlier frames of reference, has in the recent past been largely discredited, but is now in a cycle of return. It has a close relationship to concepts of meaning purpose and growth. Leslie Farber, in a recent book, *The Ways of the Will* (N. Y.: Basic Books, 1966), refers to a conversation he once had with Martin Buber who told him that he believed that what psychology needed more than anything else for its further development was a psychology of will.

Many of the older views of the will have tended to consider it as having an inhibiting activity. Still other concepts regarded it primarily in a sort of pushing role—as though a person were pushing a car from behind. Psychosynthesis is concerned with attaining complete volition in the process of the development of the will. The first stage in the development of the will is the uncovering of unconscious motives and of rationalizations related to this. This field, of course, has been extensively developed by psychoanalysis.

The second stage in the use of the will is that of decision-making, based upon the reality principle rather than on the pleasure principle and expressed in terms of positive reference.

The third stage in the act of will, following the decision-making, is that of affirmation or commitment to the decision made.

And the fourth stage is that of planning and organizing of activity in terms of a clearly outlined program.

The fifth stage of the total act of will is that of execution or action, and this involves a maintenance of direction or "one pointedness." One is reminded here of the thinking of Zen along these lines. In addition to the "one pointedness" there is the matter of maintenance of set or the persistence and endurance.

In essence, psychosynthesis is an active process. The patient is engaged in a searching, intensive, penetrating activity. He is responsible for his state and does much work naturally during psychotherapeutic sessions and also a good deal of work between the sessions which is of great importance. The result of all these factors is that the process is usually a rapid but by no means instant one. The basic relationship between the therapist and the patient could be described as an existential encounter. There is also an aspect in which the therapist is a teacher or guide. We could use the analogy of mountain-climbing and state here that the therapist and the patient are both on a mountain path, with the therapist presumably somewhat farther along the path than the patient. The aim of psychosynthesis is to help the person to contact and to discover his inner self and to continue the process of growth which began in childhood and which very probably has been interrupted in many ways for a number of reasons.

This will involve the discovering and resolution of conflicts, and then, beyond this, the experience of positive growth once the conflicts and defenses which have formed an armour plating on the outer layers of the personality have been removed. One of the key factors in neurosis is the process of avoidance—the avoidance of conflicts, resulting in a failure to grow. This has been conceptualized at least in part by the concept of resistance. Symptoms may be viewed as fulfilling a defensive function which may be necessary for that particular level of integration. The aim is to work to a higher level. The principle of synthesis applies here so that opposing attitudes and tendencies can be united and viewed as complementary rather than antagonistic. Psychosynthesis, then, is concerned with the resolution of conflict, defense, and resistance, as they act as barriers to self-realization and the full actualization of human potential. It goes beyond the level of conflict

resolution, however, and endeavors to channel and utilize the energies thus liberated in a direct way and for constructive purposes.

The process of psychosynthesis might be outlined as follows:

*1. Thorough knowledge of one's personality.* This corresponds in part to the stage of analysis, and implies a courageous facing of the "dark forces" of the lower unconscious. Psychoanalysis frequently stops here, but the regions of the higher unconscious, the supraconscious, are also explored in psychosynthesis. For example, dreams may have constructive or what Jung called "prospective" tendencies and are often of supraconscious origin. Thus, the patient discovers the vast sources of psychic energy latent in the total unconscious, which he can learn to use for constructive purposes.

*2. Control of the various elements of the personality.* This stage involves: the disintegration of harmful images or complexes; and the control and utilization of the energies thus set free. It is based on the principle that we are dominated by everything with which our self becomes identified and that we are free to use for our own purposes everything from which we disidentify ourselves.

*3. Realization of one's true self—the discovery or creation of a unifying center.* The self in psychosynthesis is regarded as a reality, a living entity which it is possible to experience directly. In most cases the unifying center will first be on the personal level—the personal self. After there has been a reasonable degree of integration on this level, there may be a gradual expansion of the personal consciousness towards the transpersonal or universal level. To attempt to shortcut the process of consciousness-expansion, without first having attained integration on the personal level, is dangerous, and this explains some of the LSD casualties. Psychosynthesis provides a method of growth which proceeds in a sound, step-by-step manner, enabling the patient to integrate his "peak" experiences. As the personal self becomes increasingly able to identify with the transpersonal self, there tends to be an integration on a more all-inclusive or cosmic level, and this is what Assagioli calls the stage of spiritual psychosynthesis as opposed to the personal psychosynthesis. Not all patients are ready for this stage and most will achieve it only in part. There is no rigid separation between the stages, however, and often it is possible for patients to contact supraconscious energies early in the process of psychosynthesis, thereby gaining the strength and inspiration to face the more frightening aspects of their lower unconscious.

*4. Psychosynthesis: the formation or reconstruction of the personality around the new center.* This is the actual psychosynthesis, which also has several stages. The first step is to formulate a plan of action, and this will, of course, vary with the individual. Some will find it helpful to use an "ideal model" as a source of inspiration—either models of all-round perfection or models of a more specialized nature such as being a good artist, teacher, wife, father, and so on. Others will prefer a path of greater spontaneity, allowing themselves to be led by the spirit or the self within, and working towards the goal by eliminating the various obstacles and resistances in their personality, so that the channels of communication with their transpersonal self are widened and deepened. A blending in

various degrees of these two attitudes is the most fruitful approach. Once the plan has been decided upon, the actual reconstruction of the new personality begins. This is done by:

1. transmutation and sublimation of the various energies available, when this is indicated;
2. development of the aspects of the personality which are either deficient or inadequate for the purpose we desire to attain. This development can be carried out by means of evocation, autosuggestion, creative affirmation, or by methodical training of the undeveloped functions such as memory, imagination, will, and so on; and
3. coordination and subordination of the various psychological energies and functions—the creation of a firm organization of the personality.

### **Methods and Techniques of Psychosynthesis**

There are several dozens of these, and others are continuously being developed. In his book (pp. 62-63) Assagioli lists over sixty.

For the purpose of this presentation, we will concentrate on four.

#### *A. Exercise for Self-Identification and Dis-Identification*

A clear distinction is made in psychosynthesis between the self and the contents of consciousness. This distinction is basic and underlies many of the techniques used in therapy. The rationale is that the individual must examine his various false self-identifications in order to arrive at a sense of his true identity. One method of approaching this is by what Assagioli calls the method of "critical analysis." The subject is helped to analyze the various contents of his consciousness—the flow of sensations, feelings, thoughts, and desires—in order to realize that these are continuously changing and hence cannot explain his permanent sense of identity. He is encouraged to examine the various roles he plays in life, and to realize that his true identity is something beyond these too. The goal is to become aware that one has emotions, desires, sensations, and one has thoughts, but the center of awareness of self-identity, is something beyond these changing contents of consciousness. This is called the "Exercise in Dis-Identification."

Following this the patient may work on the "Exercise in Self-Identification." This consists in examining the essence of one's being, one's true center. Assagioli suggests thinking along the following lines: (p. 119) "I recognize and I affirm myself as a center of pure self-consciousness. I realize that this center not only has a static self-awareness, but also a dynamic power; it is capable of observing, mastering, directing and using all the psychological processes and the physical body. I am a center of awareness and power."

The exercise in self-identification is used early in therapy, as it facilitates the use of all the other techniques, particularly the methods used for developing the will.

### *B. Techniques for Developing the Will*

This is an application of the basic concepts of the will outlined earlier in this paper. The first stage is mobilizing the energies. The patient is encouraged to place himself in a comfortable position with muscles relaxed. He is invited to consider the various consequences in his life which have occurred in the past or which might occur in the future as a result of his inadequate will. The patient is also encouraged to write down these ideas. He concentrates upon the feeling which this introspection allows and pictures to himself as vividly as possible the advantages that training of the will can bring and experiences fully the feelings aroused by concentrating on these advantages. He visualizes himself taking a specific action with concentrated effort. The patient is urged to work in silence to avoid dissipating the energies he needs for action. When the necessary motivation is thus aroused, the various steps in the training of the will, as discussed earlier, are applied.

### *C. The Technique of Symbolic Visualization*

In recent developments in psychosynthesis this has been the area which has undergone most rapid growth. It is based in part, at least, upon the realization that symbolic processes involving images are the language of the supraconscious and the unconscious and that associated with these images and symbols are energies. The technique of visualization, of course, requires practice and it is very directly tied up with creative imagination and the creative process in general. The technique may be initiated by telling the patient to visualize a simple geometric pattern such as a blue triangle, a green square and so forth. Following this, there is the use of symbolic visualization at a more complex and richer level.

Two of the key investigators in this field are Desoille and Leuner. Desoille has done the pioneer work on the "guided waking dream." In his technique the patient is placed on a couch with eyes closed in darkened room. The therapist guides him through a visualization in which he makes an ascent and a descent in imaginary space. The patient reports the dream which he has as it unfolds and this can be recorded and interpreted and worked through later.

Leuner in Germany has developed a further variant of this important process. He has devised a number of meaningful situations which the patient may visualize. For example, the patient visualizes himself in an Alpine meadow and then proceeds to encounter a number of experiences there, or he may be taken into a dark cave or he may enter into a large heart. There are numerous such situations which have been outlined by Leuner; they include the meadow, climbing a mountain, following the course of a stream, visiting a house, visualizing the ideal "personality," a pool of water in a swamp, meeting a lion, and so forth. These are very powerful techniques and involve the person contacting his lower unconscious and also his supraconscious. They are valuable both diagnostically and therapeutically.

Another interesting technique employing symbolic visualization has recently been developed by Martha Crampton. It consists in asking the subject to imagine he is taking a journey inward, visualizing in a step-by-step process the various layers of his personality-

starting with the outermost layer and moving inward until he contacts his true self. This method is very useful in outlining the work to be done in therapy with a given individual, as it reflects the various layers of conflict and defense on the outer levels and affords a means whereby the subject can be led to an experience of the inner self, the positive core and true ground of his being. This inner self is usually experienced as an identification with an inner source of light, a radiant sun, and can be a very powerful experience.

#### *D. Techniques for the Development of the Intuition*

The activation of this function is best achieved by eliminating obstacles to its activity. Intuition is immediate and direct, it is synthetic and holistic and in its purest form it is devoid of feeling. Intuitions are usually rapid and have a very fleeting character. A practical deduction from this is that they should be written down immediately. Assagioli points out (*Psychosynthesis*, p. 220) "Only intuition gives true psychological understanding both of oneself and of others." Obviously there are contraindications to the use of intuition. Those who do not have the capacity to discriminate between what we might call true and false intuitions obviously will not be helped much by concentrating on the development of their intuition. If there is a marked degree of psychopathology present the individual should await the clearing up of this before trying to cultivate his intuitive faculty.

We have of late tended to disparage mental processes which are not purely rational. There is, however, some ground for believing that in a certain sense the function of reason is inhibitory, at least as far as creative processes are concerned, and that once the rational work is done there must be a temporary suspension of reason in order to allow creative advance towards reality by means of intuition to take place. The intellect can then resume function in terms of data processing, data scanning, and decision-making. The proper state is healthy interplay between the various faculties of the personality.

#### Summary

1. Psychosynthesis is an open system. It is essentially a point of view and should not be considered as a particular psychological doctrine or set of techniques.
2. It draws upon Freud, Jung, existential and humanistic psychology, as well as the philosophy of the East.
3. The key concept of psychosynthesis is the unifying, integrating center or self as a center of awareness and will.
4. It employs active methods of therapy such as symbolic visualization and development of latent functions.
5. It is a method of treatment for psychiatric disturbances. It is also a method of psychological development and self-realization for "normal" people who wish to grow beyond the level of mere freedom from symptoms, and it has many applications in the fields of education and preventive psychiatry.

6. Psychosynthesis provides an adequate frame of reference for the changes which are taking place in man and his society, brought about by the cybernetic revolution and the advent of electronic total communication.