

The Developmental theory of Psychosynthesis, by Kenneth Sørensen

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By Kenneth Sørensen

In the last chapter, I quoted Assagioli's remark that the Egg Diagram, "leaves out its dynamic aspect, which is the most important and essential one".

This dynamic aspect is **The Developmental Theory of Psychosynthesis.**

In 'Psychosynthesis,' Assagioli gives a brief outline of this, and he later expands on the idea in 'The Act of Will'. The theory illustrates the self's journey from preconscious, to self-conscious, to superconscious awareness. Here I will present a general outline of this process.

Assagioli was inspired by the Italian poet and writer Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). He considered Dante an enlightened being, and he compares the process of Psychosynthesis to Dante's Divine Comedy, which he describes as "a wonderful picture of a complete Psychosynthesis." (1975, p. 211) Dante's poem is about the soul's journey from hell, through purgatory and into paradise.

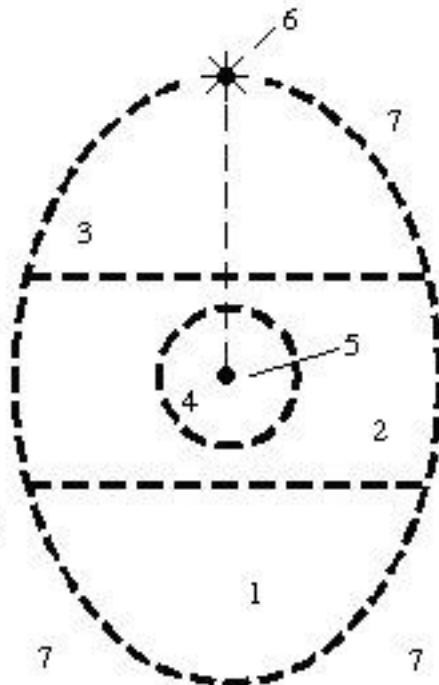
As Assagioli writes:

"The first part, the Pilgrimage through Hell- indicates the analytical exploration of the Lower Unconscious. The second part – the Ascent of the Mountain of Purgatory- indicates the process of moral purification and gradual rising of the level of consciousness through the use of active techniques. The third part- the visit to Paradise or Heaven- depicts in an unsurpassed way the various stages of

superconscious realizations, up to the final version of the Universal Spirit, of God Himself, in which Love and Will are fused." (1975, p. 211)

In this quote, Assagioli describes a model of development moving through several stages. Starting at the bottom of the Egg Diagram, it passes through several levels and stages to Self-realization. In my Master Dissertation Integral Psychosynthesis (Sørensen, 2008), I provide many sources supporting this view. Here I will examine the many nuances that accompany this model.

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 Higher Self
7. The Collective Unconscious



As Assagioli developed his model, he integrated ideas from many of his colleagues. An important influence was the American psychologist Abraham Maslow. Maslow wrote a number of influential books in the 50s and 60s and was instrumental in the development of Humanistic and Transpersonal psychology. He is especially known for his: "Hierarchy of Needs." Assagioli frequently refers to Maslow in his work and he encouraged his students to study his books. (Undated 2)

In the 'The Act of Will', Assagioli brings **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** into the Egg Diagram. (1974, ch. 8-10) The similarities between Assagioli's and Maslow's ideas are evident and Assagioli quotes Maslow 25 times throughout the book. The integration of Maslow's developmental theory with Assagioli's "static" model is obviously an important point, because it relates his own model with a very clear and dynamic stage model. The evolving self's journey goes through natural unfolding stages from the lower unconscious, through the middle unconscious and to the superconscious and beyond.

There is some confusion about this stage model within the Psychosynthesis milieu. Influential Psychosynthesis thinkers such as John Firman and Ann Gila have suggested extensive changes to Assagioli's original model. We currently find two different theories of development within transpersonal psychology, with Assagioli belonging to the same camp as Maslow and the contemporary American thinker, Ken Wilber. As I discuss this in my MA thesis, I will not dwell on it here, although I will mention an excellent article about the subject by the Dutch thinker Frank Visser. (Visser, 1998)

Development through the three levels of the Unconscious

Let us look at how Assagioli integrates Maslow's ideas into his diagram. As mentioned, Maslow speaks of a 'Hierarchy of Needs', a ladder of necessities that motivate the self. These range from "deficiency needs" like hunger, to higher "being" or "meta- needs" for meaning and enlightenment. Maslow recognised that when needs at one level are met, higher needs will appear, driving the self towards the next level of development. In the next diagram, Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" is included in the Egg Diagram from Assagioli's guidelines in The Act of Will. (1974, p. 99, 106, 110)



As Assagioli explains:

"Maslow has clearly described the "Hierarchy of Needs" in Motivation and Personality. He speaks first of the basic psychological needs; then of the personal needs such as belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization; and also of a third group: Transpersonal or Metaneeds. Achieving the satisfaction of the first two groups of needs often engenders, paradoxically, a sense of boredom, ennui, emptiness, and meaninglessness. It leads to a more or less blind search for "something other," something more". (1974, p. 106)

Assagioli also explains how Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" fits into the Egg Diagram: "We can look at the diagram of the psychological constitution of man (Egg Diagram). The basic and normal personal needs concern the lower and middle psychological life, both conscious and unconscious. However, there is also a third and higher level – the area of the superconscious, which culminates in the Transpersonal Self." (1974, p. 110) So for Assagioli, basic needs such as hunger and security are located in the Lower Unconscious. We can see this from the first quote, where he calls the need for belonging, love, self-esteem and self-actualization personal needs. They are related to the Middle Unconscious, with the need for meaning and transcendence within the Superconscious.

Here Assagioli explains how by satisfying the needs of the Middle Unconscious we activate and develop the *will*:

"All needs evoke corresponding drive toward their satisfaction. The drives concerning the basic elementary needs are more or less blind, instinctive and unconscious. But for the more personal needs the drives gradually lead to conscious volitional acts, aiming at their satisfaction. Therefore every need arouse, sooner or later, a corresponding will." (1974, p. 111)

The development of the Middle Unconscious culminates in what Assagioli calls Personal Psychosynthesis. This is the harmonious integration of the resources in the Lower and Middle Unconscious around the self as a center of self-awareness and will. He equates this stage of development with Maslow's self-actualization. (1974, p. 121) Here we find the liberated, goal oriented and self-conscious man, who is fulfilling his personal needs and dreams.

Self-actualization is not primarily driven by the need for recognition (self-esteem). It is by definition "beyond" self-esteem. It is aimed at actualizing creative needs and potentials. At this stage we ask: "How much can I accomplish in life when I focus all my resources on a few selected goals?" We do not have a real conscious will until we reach this type of maturity; we cannot self-actualise at an earlier developmental stage. At this point we draw on holistic energies, integrating the personality's many varied resources in order to achieve an overall goal. We can call this the integral stage. The presence of any spiritual or humanitarian motivation is not necessarily suggested at this stage; the self-actualized human can still be selfish. It is very often

the urge to be “successful” or to display personal strength and power which drives this stage.

Self-realization begins when the self opens up to Superconscious energies. This is often preceded by an existential crisis. According to Assagioli: “When the first two groups of needs are met, they cause, paradoxically, a feeling of boredom, ennui, emptiness and meaninglessness.”(1974, p. 106) During this crisis of meaning and purpose whatever stage the Self has reached will determine whether the needs of the soul or the personality will direct our life. If the self reaches a new stage in its development, a new motivation, anchored in the Superconscious, can begin to guide our lives.

Eight Developmental stages

Assagioli’s model of development distinguishes between a Personal and Transpersonal Psychosynthesis (1975, p. 30) and argues that Transpersonal development leads to Self-realization. He defines this as “the blending of the I-Consciousness with the Spiritual Self.” (1975, p. 202)

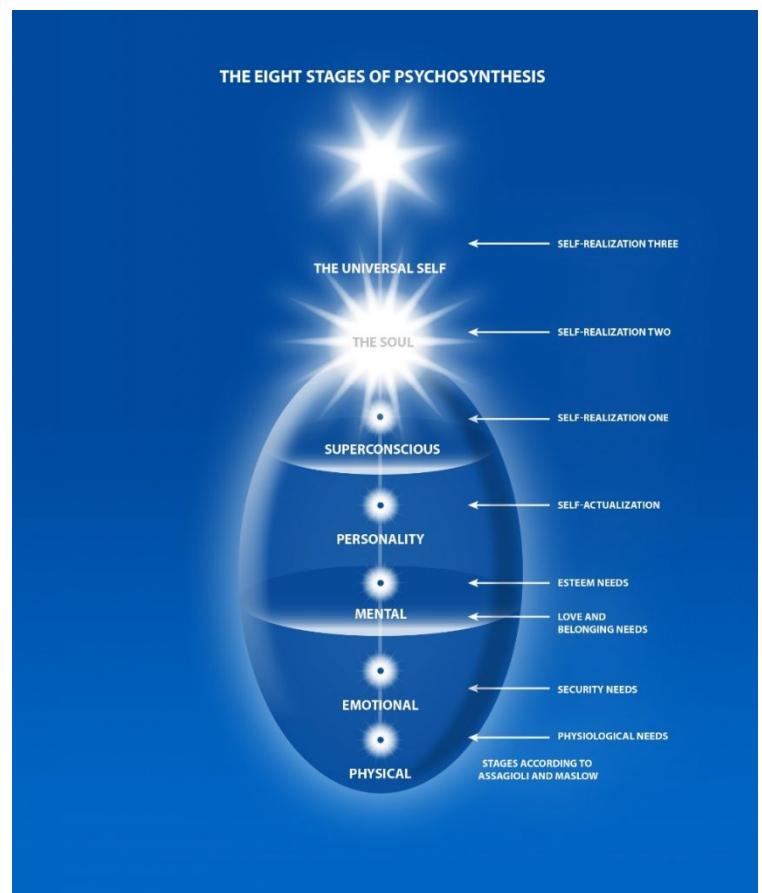
In ‘The Act of Will’, Assagioli integrates Maslow’s theory into this process and presents all the stages of development in connection with the egg-diagram. For him, “Maslow has presented an illuminating progression of five stages of evolutionary development.” (1974, p. 120) These stages exemplify different types of people and what motivates them.

The Eight Stages of Psychosynthesis

The first two types are motivated primarily by the deficiency needs of the Lower Unconscious and Middle Unconscious. The next two are centred on the drive to self-actualize and the higher energies of the Middle Unconscious. Assagioli sees two types of self-actualization, a “selfish” self-actualization and a higher stage actualization, motivated by Transpersonal values. The fifth type is the Self-realized person, whose focus is on the creative expression of the energies of the Superconscious and an identification with the soul.

Assagioli sub-divides the fifth stage into three parts, so the path of Self-realization goes through eight stages in total. For him the fifth stage is made up of:

1. *The activation and expression of the potentialities in the Higher*



Unconscious. Leonardo da Vinci and Goethe are examples of individuals who reached this stage.

2. *The direct awareness of the Self in the union of the consciousness of the Personal self with the Higher Self.* For Assagioli Gandhi, Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King and Albert Schweitzer reached this stage.

3. *The communion of the Higher Self with the Universal Self.* The highest mystics of all times belong here.

In this diagram all the stages are related to the Egg-Diagram.

Self-realization in its technical meaning is a process, which primarily reaches through the Superconscious, towards the soul and the Universal Self. A prolonged phase of purification is also a part of this process, so the descent into the abyss of the lower unconscious is also necessary. Our personal energies must be purified so they can express the universal love-wisdom that flows from the Superconscious. Dante's journey through Mount Purgatory is a poetic expression of this process.

By responding to the call of the soul, the self can transcend the limitations of "normal consciousness" and manifest the energies needed for Self-realization. Along with the psycho-spiritual path to self-development, other avenues to transcendence relating to different personality types also exist.

For Assagioli these include:

1. *Transcendence through Transpersonal Love.* Through altruism, devotion to nature, humanity and the divine, we evolve through the expression of Transpersonal love. This way to Self-realization can be called the Way of Love..
2. *Transcendence through Transpersonal Action.* Because humanitarian and socially conscious action can involve personal sacrifice and risk, it can be Transpersonal. We can call this the Way of Action.
3. *Transcendence through Beauty.* This is the aesthetic Way. The true artist is willing to endure much pain and suffering in order to express the beauty he or she experiences.
4. *Transcendence through Self-Realization.* This is the way of Enlightenment and concerns those who consciously seek to realize the potentials of the Superconscious and which have their origin in the soul.

We can see these Ways of transcendence as forms of will: a fundamental will to transcend the limitations of the personality through the union with someone or something greater. All of the Ways represents the union of love and will. (1974, p. 116)

Non-linear Development

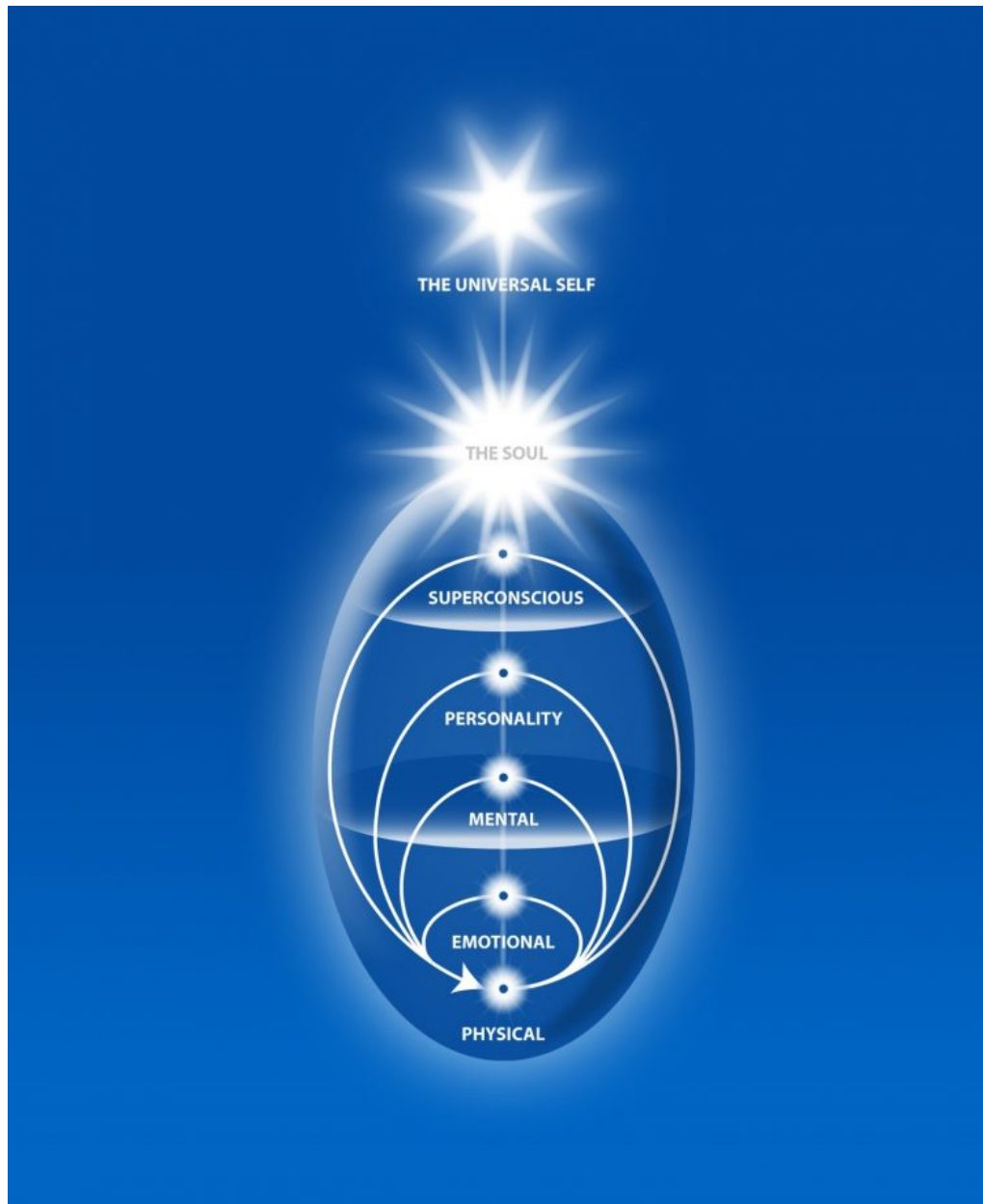
Maslow's hierarchy of needs might suggest that people develop linearly, but Assagioli, like Maslow, knew this was not the case. Transpersonal qualities can appear in a poorly integrated personality. There are idealists who do not have the strength to realise their ideals, and people sensitive to beauty but ineffective in life. (1974, p. 121)

The development moves through stages, but not necessarily step by step, like walking up stairs. For the gains to be integrated one must take “two steps forward and one step back”. When a new, higher stage is conquered, we must return and integrate the earlier stage from the standpoint of the new perspectives, needs and values. Every step forward triggers conflict with earlier needs. This tension must be resolved, integrated and aligned with the new level. Our awakening to the Superconscious must be reflected in our physical and subconscious behaviour. All aspects of the psyche, including sub-personalities, must be reorganised according to the new reality.

The Spiral Development in Psychosynthesis

To be able to react subconsciously with love and wisdom in all situations requires a deeply transformative process. Those who practice a spiritual life know this. There is a natural rhythm to the evolutionary process, a flow between ascent and descent, and a gradual conscious collaboration between the self, the soul, and the unconscious parts. This diagram illustrates this development. It includes the three aspects of the personality – Mental, Emotional and Physical – and the stage of the integrated personality. In a healthy development, a continuous exchange of higher and lower energies takes place, in which our new values inform our sexuality and relationship to money and power.

Destructive shadow material may emerge if lower energies are excluded from our spiritual development, a consequence that may be observed within spiritual milieus that focus too much on transcendence.



The superconscious energies must manifest through the Lower Unconscious before they can be expressed at the physical level, in service to humanity. Transcending our personal needs is not sufficient; energies from the Lower Unconscious – sexuality, aggression, assertiveness – must be brought in under the domain of the soul’s love and wisdom.

Assagioli believed that the aim of enlightenment is to be of service to humanity; the ecstasy we feel at our contact with the soul must serve this purpose. (1975, p. 207, 210, 2006, p. 251, 270) The synthesis of humanity- and ultimately the cosmos – is the goal of evolution.

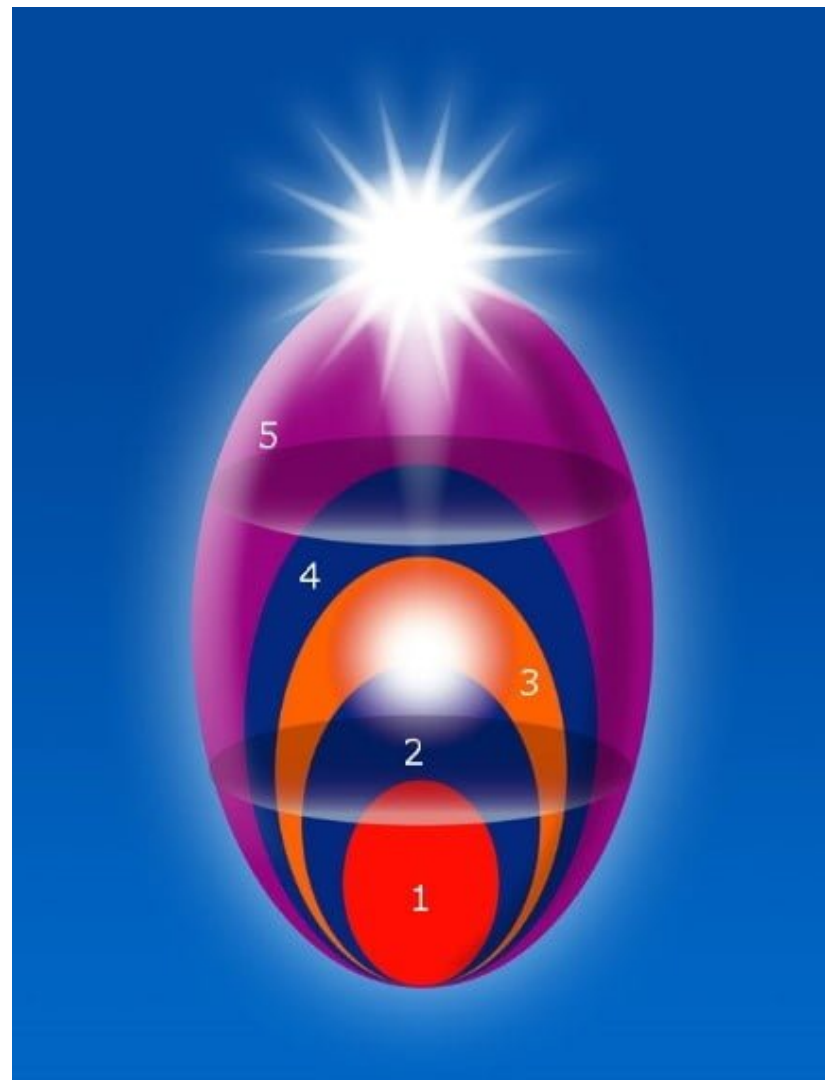
Evolutionary Panentheism shares this perspective. Transcendental consciousness is of little use unless it can help the struggles of humanity. We are humanity. To use a metaphor: We go up the mountain, as it were (the Superconscious), so we can return to share our inspiration, love and will, knowing that humanity, the earth and cosmos exist together in a divine union. This is a reality on the spiritual level, but not yet on the physical.

Assagioli recognized that different people reach different evolutionary stages at different times. It was important, he argued, to identify a child’s evolutionary level in his or her educational setting. (1960) He was also aware of the resistance to such an attitude:

”Another reason or pseudo-reason for the hostility... is a false concept of the equality of human beings and the democratic ideal... It seems...almost an insult to admit that there are people of a higher stature, psychologically and spiritually.” (Besmer, 1973)

The Oval Diagram and Holarchies

According to the evolutionary perspective, we have all equal value as human beings, but our perspectives are not equally good. “Gender equality” is a more valuable perspective than male chauvinism or assertive feminism because it is concerned with the total welfare of humanity rather than that of a single sex. There is wider and deeper love in a desire for equality, and people



who are driven by this value display a higher level of consciousness in this area. Another way of illustrating these levels is through the idea of “holarchies”. As shown in the diagram these are wholes within wholes, where the body (1) is enclosed by emotions, the emotions (2) by thoughts (3), thoughts by the personality (4), and the personality by the soul (5). The Superconscious is also enclosed by the soul, and finally we have the universal Self (God) enclosing all. Spirit can be experienced both as a universal being (the blue field) and as a universal Self (a core).

Developmental Lines in Psychosynthesis

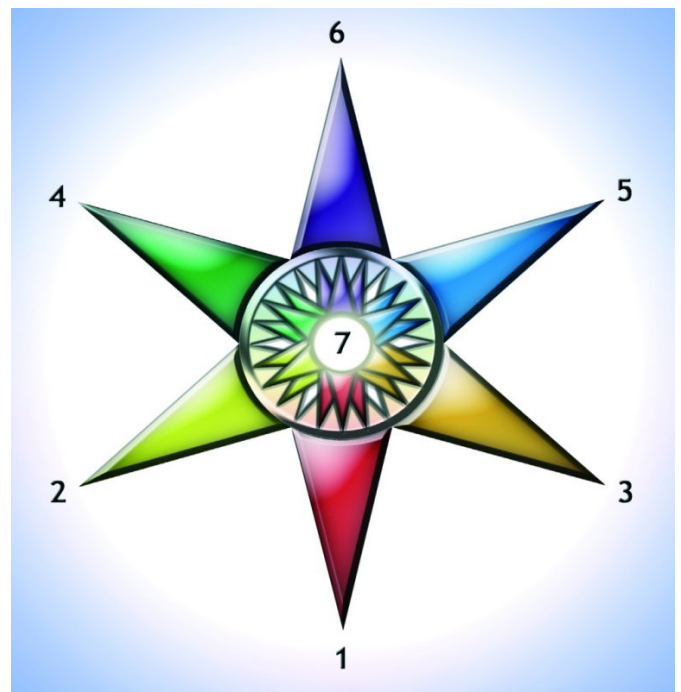
So far we have described the developmental stages of the self and the different needs with which the self identifies from the Preconscious to the Superconscious. Psychosynthesis theory also involves seven psychological functions, through which we experience and expresses the self. This allows for a much more nuanced and varied developmental theory, with each of the functions having their own unique developmental sequence.

The Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung spoke of four functions: feeling, thinking, sensing, and intuition. Assagioli included seven in his version. In ‘The Act of Will’, Assagioli explains the Psychological Functions using the Star Diagram. (1974, p. 13) We can think of the psychological functions as “abilities” we use during our journey through life. The self and the will form the center of the star out of which the psychological functions emanate, and through which they receive and transmit various energies.

Assagioli’s Star diagram

As the diagram shows, Psychosynthesis works with:

- | | |
|-----------|-----|
| Will | (7) |
| Intuition | (6) |
| Thought | (5) |
| Fantasy | (4) |
| Passion | (3) |
| Feeling | (2) |
| Sensation | (1) |



We all share these psychological functions; through them we learn to master our lives. They are instruments of action through which the self manifests in the world and seeks to understand the inner and outer worlds. At the center of the star is the observer, the silent awareness and being, the “Unmoved Mover,” in Aristotle’s words. From this silent center active forces emanate through the psychological functions, and manifest the current level of consciousness and intention of the self.

The will directs our energy through our intentions, choices and decisions. The will is the basic motivation setting everything else in motion, but we rarely notice it. Only with real self-awareness does the will become a true will and not simply unconscious desire. We make decisions with our will and our actions reveal our identifications.

Feeling represents our sensitivity, our ability to sense and identify the quality of our psychological surroundings. It tells us what feels comfortable or uncomfortable. It responds to the external world and lets us know what is happening inside and outside ourselves.

Thought tells us what something is. It collects, organizes, categorizes and labels information, enabling us to assess impressions coming from other functions. Thought interprets our reality based on our knowledge and enables us to communicate with others through language.

Imagination is the ability to create highly evocative images. We use imagination to visualize reality as it could be. Such images influence our emotional and mental life, and so are as “real” as physical, “factual” reality.

Desire includes our instincts, drives, wishes, needs, attractions and repulsions. Desire moves us and makes things happen. There are many levels of desire, from the survival instinct to the passionate love of God.

Sensation involves the body and the senses. It enables the self to act in the physical world. The body anchors energies coming from the other psychological functions, and informs us of what is happening in the outside world and how it affects our body. Sensation and the body provide the energy and life force required to keep us healthy. Intuition is mainly a Transpersonal function, according to Assagioli, but is available to us at all levels of consciousness.

Intuition provides a direct insight into the whole, how we or a situation fits into the bigger picture. It provides direct access to the truth and conveys a sense of the interconnection of everything throughout the universe.

Psychosynthesis and developmental lines

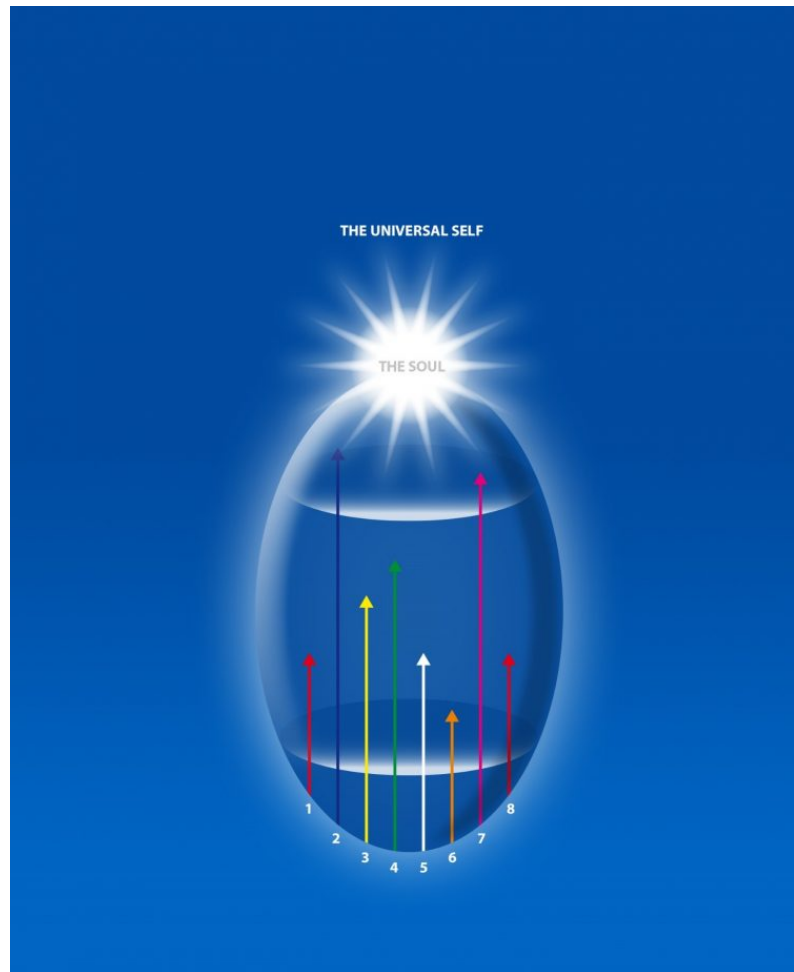
Psychosynthesis aims to develop these psychological functions. As Assagioli writes, Psychosynthesis promotes “the development of the aspects of the personality which are either insufficient or inadequate.” (1975, p. 29) Assagioli was concerned with “unbalanced development” and many of his techniques are aimed at strengthening the weaker psychological functions. (1975, p. 57)

In ‘The Act of Will’ Assagioli argues that the psychological functions develop hierarchically [1]; they can be weak or more highly evolved. In Maslow’s hierarchy the needs at the top of the pyramid are more complex, and represent a higher development than the basic needs further down. Assagioli does the same with the psychological functions: “The existence of different levels having different values is an

evident and undeniable manifestation of the great law of evolution, as it progresses from simple and crude levels to more sophisticated and highly organized ones.” (1974, p. 99)

Applying this to love Assagioli’s writes that “a love that is overpowering, possessive, jealous and blind is at a lower level than one that is tender and concerned with the person of the loved one... “. (1974, p. 99)

The same applies to the other psychological functions. The developmental lines illustrate this law as they unfold from the bottom of the Egg Diagram up to the level of the soul. The psychological functions develop towards universality, with higher levels more inclusive than lower ones. Assagioli is aware that hierarchical ideas are not popular. On this he echoes C.G. Jung: “Jung rightly deplores this pseudo-humanitarian concept and false conception of democracy:” The desire to bring all people to the same level and reduce them to the status of sheep by suppressing the natural aristocratic and hierarchical structure (in the psycho-spiritual sense, be it well noted) leads inevitably, sooner or later, to a catastrophe.” (1967b)



With the self’s own development we have eight fundamental developmental lines. These do not develop equally, which illustrates the complex character of our development and shows why it does not proceed in a linear ladder-like way. Ken Wilber has done a wonderful job illuminating this subject and the reader seeking a detailed study of these different stages and lines of development can find it in his book ‘Integral Psychology’.

For example, we can be highly developed cognitively, but less developed emotionally, or we may find it difficult to turn our ideas into action. The eight lines of the Egg Diagram relate directly to the development of the self, but other developmental lines represent various combinations of all the functions. Values, sexuality, aesthetics have their own development, but space does not allow me to discuss this here. In the diagram, we see a person’s self-line (5) developed to the level of rational self-awareness. His empathy, compassion (2) and idealism (7) are also highly developed. If his self-line reaches into the level of the Superconscious, his experience of separateness from other people will dissolve. Our idealism may be highly developed –

we may work for the welfare of animals or the rain forest – but our sense of self may not yet reach the level of unity consciousness.

Let me briefly describe the developmental lines of the self and three of the psychological functions.

The developmental line of the self (5) expresses the level of consciousness (breadth and height) within and outside the Egg Diagram. It determines our center of gravity and on what stage we have our anchor of identification, how much we can observe and include of reality from body- to superconscious awareness. Through meditation the self awakens to an enormous inner landscape of energies. Awareness meditation, which involves dis-identification from the content of consciousness, is an important tool in this development.

The will develops by making deliberate, conscious decisions. Before this, we are driven by instincts, security and adaptation needs. At the personal level the will is oriented towards success and the power to control one's life. When motivated by the good will of the Superconscious we develop the skill to create harmony and synthesis in the world. We can gather people, organizations and nations around charitable and humanistic values that unite the world.

By strengthening the feeling function we develop our sensitivity, empathy and the space and strength needed to emotionally contain the world around us. Here we develop our understanding, both horizontally in becoming more inclusive of other people, but also vertically by lifting our feelings to the level of the Superconscious where they can express impersonal, universal and unconditional love. Emotional development provides the strength and inner space needed to contain destructive, heavy and painful emotions.

Thinking relates to our level of understanding and the different perspectives from which we are able to perceive reality. This includes understanding our external social context – our family and the world community – as well as the cultural values that shape our consciousness. “Vertically” this means broadening our perspectives to understand our place in the cosmos and the ocean of energy of which we are a part. This relates to the quality of our interpretations of reality, how integral we are and how many perspectives we include in our awareness of it.

Psychosynthesis and a developmental model

In ‘A Psychology with a Soul,’ Jean Hardy offers an alternative model of development, which is also hierarchical. For her the self develops through the stages of “body”, “feelings”, “thought” and finally “soul”. (See Illustration). This shows how multifaceted the development theory of psychosynthesis has become.

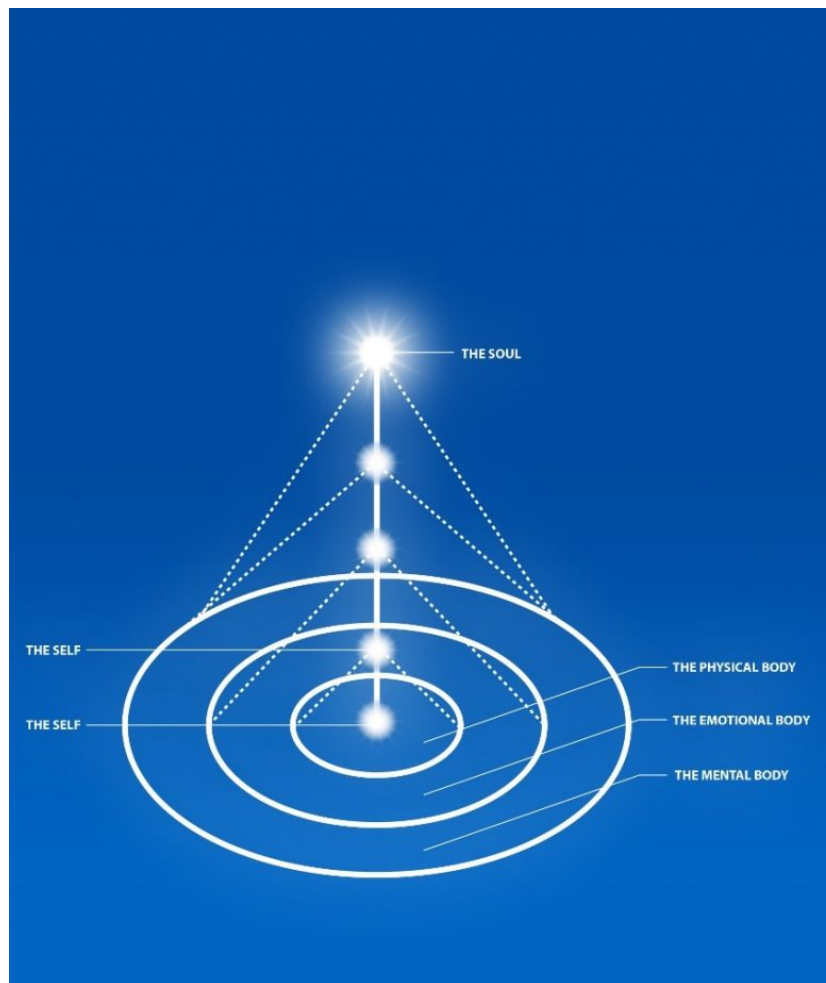
One element of our theory of development remains to be discussed: our relation to the Collective Unconscious, the area outside the Egg Diagram which we share with all of humanity and creation.

The Collective Unconscious
The Great Chain of Being
The Collective Unconscious consists of different ontological levels of reality and frequencies of energy that we share with all creation. According to this theory, the various levels of consciousness are not created by repressions as some thinkers suggest, although we may repress our conscious access to it. Assagioli speaks of what the great scholar Huston Smith (1976), calls “the Great Chain of Being”. They are “the various levels of reality or energy fields” which for Assagioli forms “an essential part of Psychosynthesis.” (Undated 2)

The majority of the spiritual traditions (Smith, 1976) embrace a hierarchical or holarchical structure of existence. In the diagram,[2] we see how this reality has been

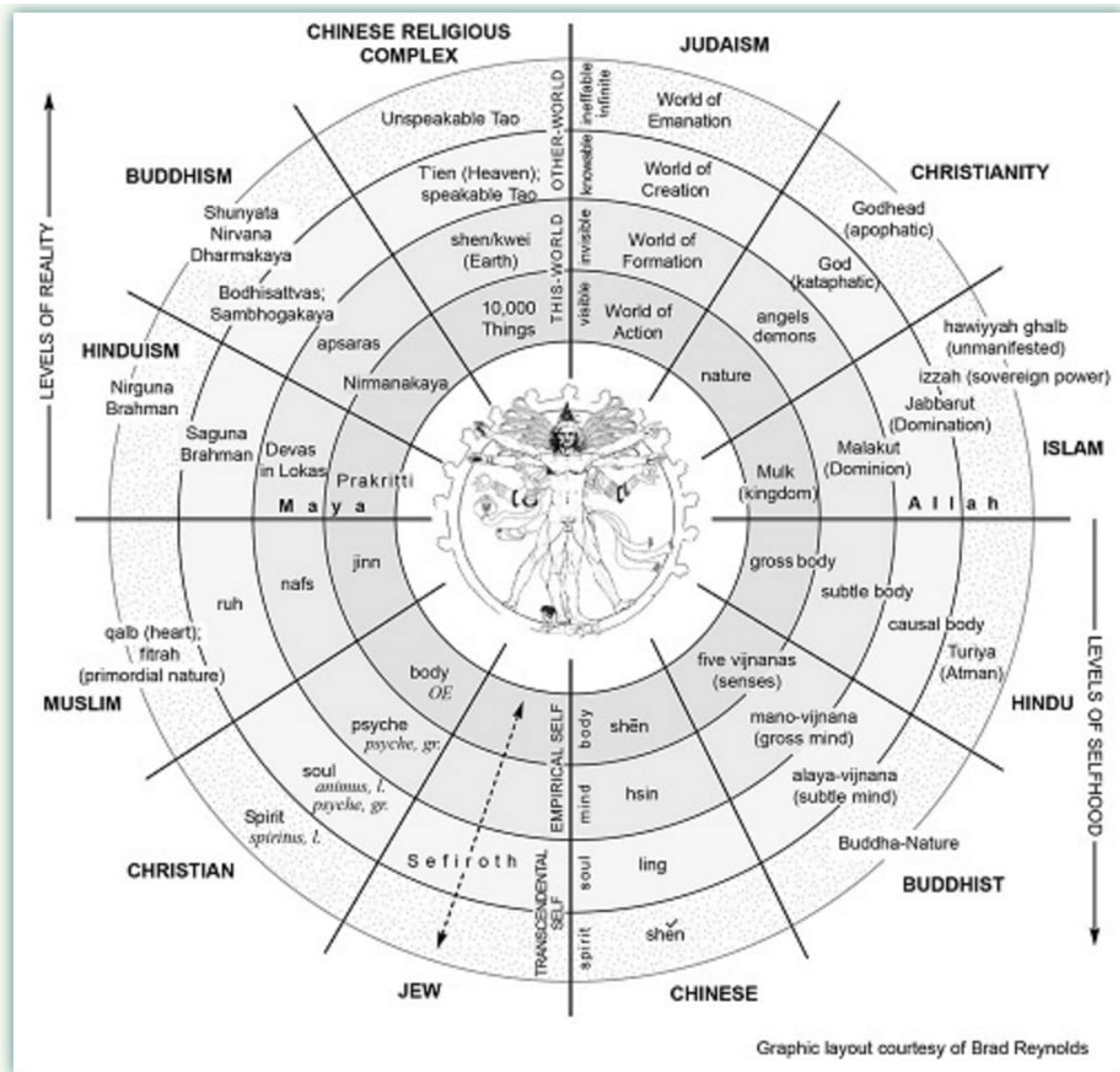
recognized by the great mystics and seers of the majority of the world religions. This idea is also part of the perennial philosophy, which views each of the world’s religious traditions as sharing a single, universal truth. Ken Wilber refers to a number of contemporary thinkers who share the same perspective.

The Great Chain of Being came into existence with the creation of the cosmos. This posits not only a material world – which may have come about through a Big Bang – but also a number of inner worlds created through the involution of the spirit, mentioned in Chapter I. Assagioli shares this view and he writes (2007, p. 84): “The third group of symbols, a frequently occurring one, is that of elevation, ascent or conquest of the ‘inner space’ in an ascending sense. There are a series of inner worlds, each with its own special characteristics, and within each of them there are higher levels and lower levels. Thus in the first of these, the world of passions and feelings, there is a great distance, a marked disparity of level, between blind passion and the highest feelings. Then there is the world of intelligence, or the mind. Here too are different levels: the level of the concrete analytical mind, and the level of higher, philosophical reason (nous). There is also the world of the imagination, a lower variety and a higher variety, the world of intuition, the world of the will, and higher still, those



indescribable worlds which can only be referred to by the term ‘worlds of transcendence’”.

The diagram below provides a basic outline of these inner worlds. My article ‘Psychosynthesis and Panentheism’ (Sørensen, 2015), includes many quotes from Assagioli relevant to this discussion. The diagram shows various hierarchies or holarchies where higher worlds transcend and include lower worlds, and can also be seen as a model of Jung’s Collective Unconscious. As Assagioli remarks: “The collective unconscious is a vast world stretching from the biological to the spiritual level, in which therefore distinctions of origin, nature, quality and value must be made.” (1967b)



Huston Smith’s Great Nest of World Religions — Philosophia perennis

The diagram illustrates how the self, with the rest of humanity, must journey through the different worlds to return to its spiritual source. This journey begins with the unification of the self and the soul, and continues with the Universal Self. The imagination is a synthesising function, which operates on several levels simultaneously: sensation, feeling, thinking and intuition. (1975, p. 143)

This concludes my survey of the theory of development. My description of the different stages has been necessarily brief; the reader is encouraged to pursue the references given in this chapter.

We now turn to the seven core concepts in Psychosynthesis, beginning with dis-identification, but let us conclude with a striking appeal from Assagioli.

"I make a cordial appeal to all therapists, psychologists and educators to actively engage in the needed work of research, experimentation and application. Let us feel and obey the urge aroused by the great need of healing the serious ills which at present are affecting humanity; let us realize the contribution we can make to the creation of a new civilization characterized by an harmonious integration and cooperation, pervaded by the spirit of synthesis." (Assagioli, 1975, p. 9)

[1] Assagioli supports Maslow and Wilber's notion that the structure of reality is hierarchical or holarchical. His use of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a clear example. He is referring to hierarchies several places in his work: 2007, s.173, 190, 192, 210, Keen 1975.

[2] The Great Chain in various Wisdom Traditions, compiled by Huston Smith (graphic layout courtesy of Brad Reynolds).