

PSYCHOSYNTHESIS: WHOLENESS AND THE TRANSPERSONAL

Josephine Newman

Wholeness is a familiar theme in the world of psychotherapy today. Its echoes reach far into the past, to the philosophers of old whose sense of core meaning at the heart of all existence was the unity within the multiplicity and diversity of its parts.

In engaging the theme of wholeness, psychotherapy also focuses on multiplicity, the multiplicity of parts within the person who cannot yet find, or cannot yet maintain, a sense of unity as a person. Without this sense of unity personal life moves towards its own fragmentation and dissolution. With it personal life opens to its own possibilities and to a sense of meaning and wholeness.

Psychosynthesis practices a therapy of wholeness, a wholeness rooted in the person's essential being, which is not yet fully realized. This essential being gives unity and coherence to all that a person is and all that a person can become and is the innermost core of the person. To live in relation to this central core of one's being is the heartland of psychosynthesis practice. To guide the client to connect with it and express it is a central focus of its therapy.

Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974) formulated his idea of psychosynthesis as a psychotherapy of life. He assumed, however, a philosophical stance in focussing on the unity of the self as the central core of the person. (1) As a contemporary of Freud and Jung, he was well schooled in the psychology of psychoanalysis. His own contribution was not a rejection but a further development of his psychoanalytic training. With the methods and insights of the new psychological sciences he explored the domain of 'superconscious' (spiritual, transpersonal) experience. For the most part this had been

relegated to the wisdom literature of the ages: literary, philosophical and religious. It was shunned by the new psychological sciences. By 'superconscious' he indicated experiences outside or above the norm of our ordinary conscious experience. (2) These experiences were typically moments of sudden insight and intuition, moments in which transpersonal qualities of life were experienced, moments of receptive inspiration and aspiration. Such moments were common experiences and were all documented throughout human history. (3). For Assagioli, as for Maslow, they were evidence of the higher reaches of possibility in the self-actualization process. It was the duty of psychologists, he thought, to explore these facts of human experience in addition to the facts of the repressed unconscious. Indeed, he thought, the expression of human ideals in life was the outcome of our ability to integrate these experiences. The psychological task he set himself, then, was to explore the dynamics of the conscious "I" as it relates to and integrates its own ego development as a person. He then related this level of self-realisation to the dynamics of transpersonal life. The reality of that life opened a way for the personal "I" to journey towards its deeper transpersonal centre which he called the Higher Self. The Higher Self is the unifying centre and organising principle of the individual soul/psyche. In itself it opens to a further level of alignment with the Supreme Reality, God. But this further level was, for Assagioli, beyond the scope of psychology and science. "Of this," he writes, "I am unable to speak; it is outside the confines of science and psychology. However, psychosynthesis can help to approach it and to reach the very threshold." (4)

Psychosynthesis: Practice and Therapy

Psychosynthesis, then, refers primarily to the practice of the the whole self as the core reality of life. There are two focal points in this practice around which the stages of self-realisation unfold. The first is the conscious self. Here issues of personal development and the experience of inner freedom to express oneself effectively in the environment of one's life are the primary concern. At this level practice of the self involves the conscious "I", synthesising or unifying its fragmented self-experience occasioned by early stage developmental processes. The second focal point is the unfolding of the unconscious, transpersonal or Higher Self. Here, through practice, the conscious "I" is drawn into deeper relationship with its emerging inner essence. The unity of the whole psyche is the unconscious ground of this whole process. It is the ground of healing and wholeness in the respective levels of the self-realisation process. The role of therapy in psychosynthesis is to facilitate this practice of the whole self in accordance with the level of its unfolding process. The form of therapy appropriate at each stage of the process will be different. For the therapist a clearly understood distinction between these two levels is essential. At the level of personal life the process of the conscious "I" concerns the achievement of a sense of personal identity and its efficacy in one's actual life. This dynamic is self-reflective, and is concerned with organising and managing life within the context of an adequate and effective sense of self. But at the transpersonal

level the dynamic is fundamentally receptive. It is the practice of 'allowing', 'letting be' and 'letting go' to the deeper self.

This receptive energy cannot be mastered or achieved by the conscious "I" though the latter is dynamically set to try to achieve it! However, it does not preclude the attempt by the personal "I" to include more spiritual, idealistic values in everyday living. As personal accomplishments, however, they belong at the level of personal achievement and do not as such pertain to the dynamics of transpersonal self-realisation. Lack of clarity about this distinction leads to distortion both in therapy and in self-practice and becomes yet another psychological block in the self-realisation process. (5)

Assagioli's theory of subpersonalities provides part of a comprehensive understanding of personal synthesis. It addresses the activity of the conscious "I" centre of awareness and will, as the conscious "I" relates to and takes responsibility for preconscious elements of the personality. Each subpersonality within a person's psyche is a complex with an unconscious drive as its dynamic centre. To the extent that a complex or many such complexes prevail in one's life, a person is subject to their control. In this experience there is a loss of the personal centre as self-directive and self-expressive. It indicates a rift in the personal psyche between its conscious and its unconscious processes and a resulting fragmented experience of life. To heal that rift the person needs to be free to relate to rather than to be driven and controlled by the unconscious drives of the subpersonalities. At this basic stage of personal process the conscious "I" begins to practise self-awareness which actively recognises and includes the inner needs expressed at the core of its subpersonalities. It begins to assume responsibility for those needs accepting them as part of the self's identification. This identification dynamic is self-expanding rather than self-limiting. It freely relates to its needs as part of the self and thereby opens to experience more of the self than these needs in themselves express. It is the practice of the identification-disidentification process involved here that frees the person to align with his/her unfolding essence.

This process, of course, has its internal dynamic or stages which psychosynthesis terms recognition, acceptance and integration. Any one of these stages in a person's process may require significantly deep and long term therapy. This will depend on the person's present sense of him/her self and how this connects with earlier developmental processes. Areas of arrested development in the emerging self-structure of a personal psyche necessarily mean 'repair' and 'healing' if the person is to connect with his/her whole self. It is, consequently, an appropriate focus for a psychosynthesis therapist to incorporate into subpersonality theory the insights of more recent psychodynamic theory. In this the dynamics of each developmental stage of the self-structure are further elucidated. As a result, the issues and patterns which subpersonalities present to the person will be therapeutically related to on a psychodevelopmental basis. (6)

What is termed meditative practice is the other element of personal synthesis which needs emphasis. (7) Meditative practice is more a dynamic than a theory (as indicated by the word 'practice') and it is difficult to convey its reality in words! Nonetheless it is central to the healing, unifying dynamic of the whole-self experience. This unifying and healing dynamic is always experienced in an act of presence or self-presence. It is, in fact, the self experiencing itself in its unified body-feeling-mind awareness. One cannot, of course, 'grasp' objectively or control this self-reflective activity; one can only be present to it. So it is in meditative practice we develop and maintain a sense of presence to our embodied self-experience. This practice leads us into the imaginal structure of all our core experiences. In it our self-awareness, because embodied, opens to the layers of unconscious body-feeling processes which lay hidden in fantasies. These, in turn, shape the patterns of our individual self-structure. As one practises the act of embodied self-knowing one senses, imaginatively, the wholistic stages of the unified personal centre as it relates to the present moment of its life. This activity of meditative self-presence is the central dynamic in the identification-disidentification process which characterises the self-realisation process. In opening the self to include the complexity of its embodied experience energies of expanded self-awareness are released and become the dynamic expressive centre of one's life.

It is, perhaps, superfluous to add that the capacity for meditative practice, as embodied self-awareness, is itself part of the developmental process. The practice is distorted if it becomes a controlling observation on any level of awareness, whether body, feelings or mind. As practice it must rest on a willingness to receive full awareness of the embodied self in the present moment. As process, however, this has many levels and phases. It demands a willingness to 'work through' the deeply embodied repressions and ego-defences which continuously limit and restrict our self-perceptions. In this way one's actual self-experience will gradually align with the embodied sense of who one is in whatever experience the present moment may realise.

Spiritual Synthesis

In turning to what Assagioli called 'spiritual synthesis' that is, to the realm of transpersonal experience, we are focussing on a deeper level of unity within the psyche. This unity is between the personal self and its inner essence and ground of being. At the level of personal life we practise presence to the self-centre in which the unity of self as body, feelings, mind is experienced. The inner image giving shape to this movement is the personal self and its expression in one's life. In spiritual synthesis that practice remains in place, as it were. But the dynamic within the self changes. As the personal self becomes more active, secure and responsible in its life it begins to be drawn towards its own deeper centre and ground. The inner image shaping this movement is no longer the personal self but the Higher, Whole Self, as the ground of the personal.

Signs of this transition may appear through experiences of an ego-transcending quality which somehow relativise the sense of self. These include experiences of deep inner peace, or perhaps justice or compassion; or indeed inner emptiness, grief or desolation.

Whether positive or negative, ego-transcending experiences do break into human consciousness and awaken a sense of the spiritual core of life. Empirical evidence of such phenomena throughout human history is readily available. When such spiritual awakening happens it poses a threat to the personal ego-bound psyche. In response to this threat the conscious self tries to take control of the spiritual. It intensifies its efforts to foster spiritual values and perhaps to be more heroic in facing suffering and accepting the diminishment of life. But this effort, as has been noted already, can only achieve the spiritual as an ego-ideal. However admirable and important this may be it remains at the personal level and does not as such effect a deeper spiritual level of self-realisation. The ground to which transpersonal experience points is itself transcendent and cannot consequently be achieved by the ego trying to transcend itself! If we turn to the great spiritual traditions we will learn that the way forward at this point involves a transition from an active to a more passive transformative process. The ego dynamic of the personal self must 'let go' to the deeply transformative process unfolding in and through its life.

Meditative Practice

Psychosynthesis is in line with these traditions in pointing to meditative process as the way of receiving and responding to the transpersonal in life. The idea of meditative practice as explained here, however, stresses more focally, the element of spiritual practice in this process. (8) The practice of embodied self-presence to the transpersonal ground, in and through ordinary life activities, is central. (9) It draws us at the same time into an ever-deepening presence to our personal dynamic and its attachment to the ego image, organising life and preventing connection with the deeper centre. 'Letting go' to one's inner ground of being is a deeper and more inclusive life connection than the ego, in and of itself, can realise. The goal of spiritual practice, as a dynamic of the whole psyche, is to connect us with the deeper ground of our personal lives.

Spiritual traditions and the wisdom of both East and West have all attested to the psychological difficulties and dangers to be encountered on the spiritual, transformative journey. All have portrayed it as a way of detachment, the letting-go of ego attachment to the achievement of personal selfhood. But while they stress its difficulties and dangers they show little understanding of the psychological dynamics of the whole process. It is precisely here that Assagioli felt contemporary psychological insights could contribute. They could clarify the relationship between these two dynamics as they come together in the psyche. They could also help clarify commonplace psychological disturbances that often accompany spiritual awakening. Such disturbances include not only well documented pathological and psychotic distortions of spiritual materialism,

ego-inflation, narcissistic altruism, spiritual escapism and other regressive psychological tendencies. These confuse spiritual developmental with prepersonal and personal psychological dynamics. (10)

In addressing this level of human experience Assagioli was hopeful that empirical psychology would at length incorporate in its science the study of the whole psyche and of its levels of development. The whole psyche for him meant the person, a bio-psychospiritual being, unified as the personal centre of all its experiences.

The practice of conventional therapy is somewhat modified within this wholistic view of the person. Connecting with the person as a bio-psychospiritual being, will always involve a context of meditative practice. The process of any one individual, of course, will relate to issues of prepersonal and personal stages of development. But the whole person, as unified centre of body, feelings, mind, soul and spirit, will be the ground on which the therapist meets the client irrespective of specific issues in their dialogue. Such meeting and dialogue does not and cannot, of course, depend on the level of self-realisation in either therapist or client. But for the therapist it depends on the practice of meditative presence to self and to the self of the client who may not be able to hold his/her own personal centre. At the level of spiritual synthesis the therapist will become guide more than therapist. The guidance will relate to the way of presence to inward, embodied life-experience and its expression in daily life activities.

Conclusion

The idea of psychosynthesis centres on the dynamic of unity within the psyche. This dynamic is as much a philosophical as it is a psychological stance. It represents the deepest insight of the great philosophies of existence. In the psychological order unity becomes a project of personal consciousness emerging from a personal unconscious stage of life. It further presses the psyche from within towards its own deeper transpersonal possibility. Assagioli's well-known map of the psyche highlights the various levels and stages which this emerging unified psyche involves. As has been noted here, the details of the psychological dynamics of these levels and stages may be expanded in the light of more recent studies on the subject. This would include not only insights of psychodynamic developmental theory but also insights and developments of transpersonal theory.

Psychosynthesis, as practised in Eckhart House, includes as an ongoing project both these areas of development. It also extends its idea of spiritual life to include a dialogue with the spiritual traditions of our culture. The idea of meditative practice has its roots in these traditions. It provides an approach to spiritual experience which Assagioli did not develop but which is in harmony with the essence of his thought.

Footnotes

1. In this Buber and Assagioli had similar ideas. See, for example, Friedman, "The Healing Dialogue of Psychotherapy" (1985: Jason Aronson Inc., NY and London), pp 5-6.
2. Assagioli, R., Transpersonal Development. (English Translation 1991: The Aquarian Press, London); pp 19 -20.
3. Ibid.
4. Assagioli, Op.cit, p. 31
5. Assagioli, Op.cit., passim. Also Wilbur, K. "The Pretrans Fallacy', Journal of Humanistic Psychology 22 (2): pp 5 -43.
6. Psychosynthesis, as practised in Eckhart House, approaches subpersonality theory with this psychodynamic developmental basis in mind.
7. The principle of meditation is central to psychosynthesis. But the idea of meditative practice as practised in Eckhart House is a development of this.
8. For a full development of this level of meditative practice, see Karlfried Graf Von Durkheim, "The Way of transformation", (1980 Allen and Unwin, London).
9. Such practices include embodied presence to self, to others, to nature, work, play and to all forms and expressions of life.
10. See note 5 above. Also Wilbur, "Eye to Eye, (1983, Anchor Books, NY).

Josephine Newman is a lecturer in Moral Philosophy at University College Dublin. She is also a member of the team at Eckhart House, Institute of Psychosynthesis and Transpersonal Theory.

