

Contemplative Psychosynthesis: a personal exploration

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Preamble

As I planned this article, I gathered all the books and resources that would help me build this emerging theory of contemplative psychosynthesis. I had stacks of books from the great masters of Eastern and Western traditions. I planned to track psychosynthesis as it has shown up in the field of psychology, proving, yet again, its enormous value. I had a surprise I intended to add, noting where contemplative psychology has made it into a text book that I use to teach graduate students in the field of psychology. Then, I knew, I would tie it all together. It would be grand. It would be thorough. It would be inviting... and maybe even moving.

I played, "And this bit of psychosynthesis theory is contemplative because..." Every piece of theory does, in fact, lend itself to contemplative practice, so no proof needed. I pondered and solved the riddle of what to do with Assagioli's line about psychosynthesis taking us to the doors of the great mystery but not taking us through. (Assagioli, 2000)

I know how to write. I can do this. It is important to the field. I write academic articles frequently. Citation, citation, citation. Grab a quote to validate a point. Reference list as long as the article.

I called on my favorite Contemplative (noun, not adjective) for his resources and he gladly complied.

I watched the snow fall and stared at the books. I didn't go for a walk.

I forced myself to make an outline.

I doubted my capacity to write this article.

I began the internal story of why it didn't make sense to do this article.

I jumped on the ever-present subtext of my need to learn to say no.

I opened up the arena and watched the subpersonalities do battle, some in outright combat, others in serious debate, the weak ones on the side hoping for their voices to be heard.

I felt awful.

Late last night I wrote a note to Steve Simpson (editor of this book) saying sorry, can't do it. Good luck, blah, blah, blah.

In the quiet of the morning, snow falling again, I breathed a little more deeply. I knew there was no right or wrong about this. I took a walk.

Home again, I sat quietly, settled down and in.

My 40 year practice of watching, sitting still or walking, quieting, stepping back and going empty, kicked in. It is, I admit, a raggedy, unconstructed, practice, informed by many traditions: years of Zen; many more years of martial arts practice; mindfulness (Vipassana) training; a much earlier lifetime of Christianity, exoteric and esoteric; a brief foray in my twenties into gurus; and reading, of course, most everything. What I do practice, now, regularly, formally and informally is almost solely informed by psychosynthesis: psychosynthesis contemplative practice.

I have just come to my computer, more peaceful than I have been in some days. I came to check my email. I began to write instead. If you are reading this, I must imagine that over the next days and weeks I will continue to write.

If you are not reading this, it doesn't matter. I found my resting place, in this moment, on this issue. *The great way is easy for those not attached to preferences.* (Seng-Ts'an, trans. 2001)

I have a 'psychosynthesis evangelist' subpersonality. She wants to save the world through psychosynthesis. She wants to save psychosynthesis from the tight jaws of psychology. She wants psychosynthesis to be a household word. Her whole professional life has been psychosynthesis. *I have this part of me and I am not this part.* I have an 'academic' subpersonality, building her resume, playing her Professor role, making offering after offering to the gods of higher education, slipping psychosynthesis into their midst all the while. *I am not the academic.* I have a pleaser sub. *I am not that pleaser.*

The resting place I am in (however briefly it may stay) comes from dis-identifying from my subpersonalities and their particular agendas. My 'academic' usually owns the keyboard. My 'psychosynthesis evangelist' finds her place in teaching. My 'pleaser' slips in so often 'I' may not notice her presence, until she says "yes" when the truth is "no".

But right now, they are quiet. I am in my hara, (my belly). My eyes close between thoughts. Awareness and will move with my breath. Purpose guides me. I am imminent in this world, at my computer, aware of the coldness in the room. I am transcendent, more than that, content-less. *I am a center of pure consciousness and will.*

Contemplative Psychosynthesis

The act of contemplation is as old as human history. We exist in a reality, and by nature, we are inclined, when we can, to understand that reality. We are called, as philosophers, theologians, poets, artists, explorers, scientists and every other man, woman and child, to explore and come to terms with both our outer and inner reality. Assagioli reminds us that the “action of one who is endeavoring to perceive inner reality is called ‘contemplation’ or the ‘contemplative state’ ” (2010, p.166). We are perhaps all called, in one way or another, to contemplation.

Psychosynthesis contemplative practice comes from within the very theory and practices of psychosynthesis. Whether we follow Assagioli’s quiet wisdom and work with exercises he designed, like the *Blossoming of the Rose* or *Evoking Desired Qualities*, the daily practice is even more basic. Everything in psychosynthesis points to accessing **Self** and to the process of Self-realization. Everything.

Psychosynthesis gives us the guiding truth about Self: that it is a center of content-less awareness and will. There you have it. The technology of contemplative practice is designed to take us right there. **Self-identification** “is the inner experience of pure self-awareness, independent of any content or function of the ego...” (Assagioli, 2000, p. 99). This is the invitation to contemplative practice. It is to be the Self that we are that is not ego, not story, not subpersonality, not psychological functions, not the outcome of our past, not the fantasies of our future, not a product of our culture, not a this or a that. And it is a practice. It is a life’s practice. It is based, on what I consider to be the defining practice in psychosynthesis: Identification, Disidentification and Self-identification. This is mindfulness. It is meditation. It is practice, seated in full lotus and practice in the heat of an argument. It is the experience of Self, knowing, honoring and accepting all aspects of our own personalities and our world at large and returning to content-less awareness and will. This is the ground.

Psychosynthesis, freed of its relationship to any religion, and equally freed from its primary current modalities in psychotherapy, coaching and education, becomes unto itself a contemplative practice. This practice could be manifest in many ways.

Imagine that you don’t know psychosynthesis, in whatever way you know and use it now. You have entered a retreat setting where you are invited to sit comfortably, time taken to share, context set, leader introduced. The next hours are contemplation.

Sit up straight, alert and relaxed, feet on the floor. Breathe into your belly. Notice your thoughts as you settle in. “I have these thoughts and I am not these thoughts...”

Continually return to “I am a centre” and allow all content that wants to define that center to slip easily away. Move to simply “I am.”

Stay with your breath and the mantra, if you will, of “I am.”

As our psychosynthesis contemplative retreat moves on, that exercise gets deepened, and personalised as each participant notes their deepest ego based

attachments: to roles, to people, to ideas or beliefs, to survival subpersonalities, to preferences. The dis-identification continues, each attending to and dis-identifying from their unique attachments. This clinging is the stuff of ego, protecting itself from all threat.

Become defenseless is the invitation. An old story, with Zen Buddhist roots, tells of the ronin (renegade samurai) running through the village threatening people with his sword. As people flee up the mountain, they warn the old priest to run. The priest continues to sit. The ronin approaches, rage and power in his hands. Sword at the throat of the quiet priest he yells, "Don't you know I have the power to run you through with my sword?" A breath. A moment. A quiet response, "Don't you know I have the power to be run through by your sword?" Lost, then found, the ronin becomes enlightened. All stories, all identifications, all the props of the ego, dropped away.

Who are you, if you are not all of these passing contents of consciousness? All of these semi-autonomous subpersonalities, holding for dear life to their stories? Who are you if you are no one?

We have our stories, our subpersonalities, our thinking, feeling, impulse, imagination. We have our bodies. We have our plans and expectations. We have our attractions and aversions. We have our names and our sex and our religion. They are all the swords we hold so tightly.

"He not busy being born is busy dying" reminds us of the bookends of a life, but also, what we attach to, between those ends: busy-ness. Bob Dylan, sometimes the modern sage, calls it like it is. If we can imagine *defenseless*, can we imagine *quiet*? *Empty*? *Slow*? *Unattached to outcome*? *Without preference*? Can you feel who you are beyond your story?

But our retreat continues.

Imagine now the blossoming of the rose, from bud to full blossom.

And from this space of just growing like a rose, just evolving in ways known and unknown, unmoored from old themes, sit in the now, as if it were the only now, no past, no future. What qualities of being do you carry that are simply the color of your rose?

This retreat could go on and on, based solely on the principles, themes and exercises of psychosynthesis. Assagioli's own writing on meditation could guide us: receptive, reflective, creative (2010). His work with images, colors, shapes, visualization could guide us. (2000) His work on the will, so very practical, is also an introduction to a spiritual life, a training in contemplation. Never confuse meditation with awareness, only. It is always awareness and will: the functions of Self. The direction to train the will, one of Assagioli's great gifts to us, might be the very next piece of this imagined retreat.

Please now, in the quiet of your presence, take the box of matches in front of you, and with all consciousness and no attachment to outcome, without counting or making designs, simply take each match out of the box. Breathe. Stop now. What pulled at you as you took each match out? What subpersonalities got activated? What psychological functions, pulled towards dominance? What did the monkey mind do with this 'useless' exercise? Take a moment. "I have all of this and I am not this." Notice what it is in you that attempts to take ownership of your consciousness. Then step back. Breathe. Adjust your posture. Let your body's alignment be the container for your emptiness.

Put each match back in the box, without thought or impulse or assessment or trying. Without conversation, without being in the future or the past. Breathe. Just putting matches in a box.

Such a simple act, as Assagioli's 'useless' will exercise (2010), trains us in contemplation. As traditions from time immemorial have done, psychosynthesis offers us help along the way of contemplation. Mantras, koans, symbols, movement, mudras, body alignment, breath, inspiration, direction. Roberto, like any good Teacher, shows us the many paths (and many pitfalls) in developing our contemplative practice.

As our imaginary retreat ends, we are reminded of our practice. Disidentification, Assagioli tells us, "serves also as a technique for acquiring pure self-awareness, the pure sense of self-identity." (2000, p. 62) He invites us over and over to move towards the "direct experience" of Self, the end point of all contemplative practice. Self: content-less awareness and will. "The mystics of all times and places have realized and expressed the joy and bliss which are inherent in the union of the individual will with the universal will." (Assagioli, 2010, p. 144) And there we glimpse the transpersonal, transcendent nature of contemplative practice. And as we practice day to day, we equally find our contemplative practice anchoring us into the here and now, worldly, imminent, experience of Self. (See Firman & Gila, 2002, for an elaboration of the idea of "transcendence-immanence.")

Inventing one step further in the blossoming of the rose, we might end our retreat.

And watch the rose as its beautiful blossom fades, petals curl up and drop off. Leaves become brown. The barren bush remains, thorns revealed. Has anything changed? With blossoms or without, in summer or winter, roots or branches or flowers? All are the rose. The earth in which it is firmly seated, the sun which nourishes. Is there a rose that is not inevitably part of this larger whole? Even unto its death?

A Little Theory

Though it is tempting to dip into other contemplative practices, from both the East and West, it is enough, for now, to briefly propose a theory of contemplative practice based solely on psychosynthesis. Very briefly.

The 'I' or Self is a center of consciousness and will. It exists in the midst of levels of unconsciousness that span from the lower to the higher. It exists as an internal unifying center (Assagioli, 2000) waiting to be freed from conditioning that overshadows it and ensnares the human being in the power of the personality. The Self exists at all times and each human being directly experiences that Self at some times. Mostly we experience our subpersonalities, the really difficult ones and the really cool, ego supporting, highly functional ones.

Self is available at the kitchen sink, in the middle of the personality's daily life. It exists on the mountaintop, or on the cushion, or in love or peak experience, at the moment of transcendence, when there is no personality left at all. It exists in the dark night of the soul, when the personality has been shattered, when darkness surrounds.

The Call of Self is the reality of Self's eternal presence. And whether we hear it or not in any given moment, Self always calls. Sometimes it is clear. Sometimes it is hard to decipher. Sometimes we hear and ignore. Nonetheless, Self stays. In tracking a life, mine or yours, at whatever age we are now, we can look back through the lens of the many wounds and losses or we can look back through the lens of this very call. Was it ever not there?

Do you remember your favorite childhood game or activity? Hero? Your particular friends? What spaces, in nature or your home you most preferred to inhabit? Can you remember where you found solace? Joy? Inspiration? Your biography, written through the lens of your Unfolding Self (tip of that hat to Molly Brown's *Unfolding Self*, 2004) is a very different story than the one we take to our therapist's office!

The theory, then, is that Self has one purpose and that is to manifest itself as You. And, if my years of studying psychosynthesis are more or less on track, every piece of theory in psychosynthesis points to Self. There is no other work in psychosynthesis, though the winding road towards Self is complex and difficult. Psychosynthesis provides a masterful guidebook.

A Practice

Assagioli's psychological functions map is the ground for this one, hopefully useful, contemplative practice.

Sitting straight, breathing into the hara (belly/dantien), imagine that the center of the star diagram is your belly. Always return to it.

Breathe into your thinking and welcome whatever thoughts appear. Let the thoughts go.

Breathe into your sensations and experience your body fully in this moment. Leave these sensations and return to your breath.

Smile and know your emotional world, as it is. Whatever feelings present, accept them. Return to your smile. Return to your breath.

Notice your desires, in the moment. Let the 'wanting' of impulse and desire be full. And know there is no need to act on the wanting.

Return to the image of the star diagram, centered in your hara. Enrich it with color and depth. And let it go.

Stay with your breath, emptying the space and invite intuition to enter. However it presents, if it presents, hold it, for just a breath, and let it go.

Over time, this practice, perhaps, will serve to create larger openings to Self. It is no more than a dis-identification practice, but it shifts its emphasis to the self-identification end. It invites the space, between all identifications to grow. Perhaps, in our contemplation, the psychological functions will each release more easily, more quickly and the empty space between the steps of the practice will be longer. Perhaps this is, as Assagioli describes it, the "state of perfect repose, an inner silence, taking the form of pure consciousness." (1991, p. 36) Perhaps one day, the breath and the silence, the pure consciousness, will be all there is...

and then the doorbell will ring.

With a smile, we will welcome our personality back, knowing that it has remembered where the car keys are, knows where the cheque book is, has already planned dinner. Self, manifesting in your unique personality moves from the cushion and gladly welcomes the guest who rings the bell.

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