Psychology of Self

Three Reflections on Identity, Actualization, and the Present Moment

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The Nature of the Moment

Life takes place on a platform of time and space experientially perceived as a 'moment'. Each moment is a frame of film in a long filmstrip we perceive as a lifetime. Each moment embodies in itself the residue of all preceding moments indexed within your brain/mind into a structured reality suggesting the possibility of a past and future. But the moment itself is essentially 'timeless'. Reach out with your mind/awareness and try to capture a moment. Before you can grasp it it's gone, replaced by a new moment, which is gone...replaced.... The only thing you can grasp is the content of the previous moment, which resides in your mind. The moment you experience is also without content except for the content of your personal experience. For the moment is an artifact of awareness and as such the moment is a very personal thing. Without you, that moment, that is filled with your ‘reality stamp’ would not exist.

Thus, each moment has a dual nature, the first being of a linear nature, a platform of experience traveling from the distant past into the distant future via our awareness. This 'moment' is a conditioned, conditional moment, dependent for existence upon the brain/mind belief in past and future. The other side of this dual nature of the moment is of a timeless nature, a doorway into unbridled expansion, a state of total freedom. To catch the moment is to be timeless as the moment. To be timeless means to go beyond the place where time as future and past exist, to go beyond one’s own mind and the conditioning within that mind. When the belief structures created by your conditioning, i.e., those beliefs, fears, expectations and fantasies cease to hold your awareness, you then begin to experience timelessness and within that timelessness is unconditional expansion. One must remember at times of timelessness, that the only restraints upon consciousness is self-imposed.

Either of these two 'experiential modes' of the moment is available to all of us every instant, and every instant we make a conscious or unconscious decision on which way we want to travel. Do we want to continue traveling down the river of time, like Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer off on another adventure, filled with memories and expectations? Or do we choose to reside perfectly within this very moment through a strategy of being totally right here, right now.

This 'being right here, right now' is a state of meditation, a state which is the vehicle for infinite expansion in all directions, an expansion which takes us back to Who We Really Are, whatever that might happen to be. In this case the vehicle we are riding is not the river of time with its past and future and numerous memories and expectations, but the river of consciousness, whose only

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essential characteristic is unlimited, exponentially increasing expansion, a wild ride if there ever was one. For within unlimited expansion is found the truest ecstasy there is, and it's totally free, just waiting patiently inside you and me.

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The Art of Self-Actualization

There are two ‘temporal levels’ of self-actualization. The ‘overview’ level is the one where one projects into the future and decides the kind of person, the talents, achievements, the goals and accomplishments one desires for oneself. These are related to the ‘what’ of self-actualization, issues of self-esteem, contentment, safety.

The second is the more important and the more immediate level. It concerns the how of self-actualization. While the first is a vision, the second is a strategy, one that requires constant attention and effort. It is here that the real change occurs. Change on the immediate level, moment by moment, day by day, requires effort because the ‘self’ is of a conditional nature, conditioned by habituation, belief systems and attitudes and the expectations about present and future reality that are predicted by one’s conditioning. Conditioning creates mental boundaries that tend to be static and resist change, yet change is exactly what one is attempting to institute. Within this conditioned set of beliefs and expectation is a sea of habituation within which you are attempting to navigate to more expansive or at least newer states of awareness.

This requires a focused awareness of an immediate kind. By that I mean that within each moment that comes along, a moment filled with who you are at that present moment is the key to specific aspects of your present identity. Now that seems rather obvious, doesn’t it? That who you are at any one moment is who you are. But how many of us take notice of who we are being from one moment to the next as differing moods and outside phenomena impinge upon, and alter the content of our awareness? By carefully observing the content of each ‘personality moment’ you can come to know yourself more fully, and in knowing yourself, realize how and why you may want to change yourself.

What is it you observe within that timeless ‘character moment’ you are forever within? The train or chain of thought, in which each momentary segment is causally connected to the previous segment in a chain of meaning bounded by who you are at that moment and each succeeding moment. Who you are is an ever-changing flux of attributes governed by past inclination and present circumstances. There is a constant ‘screening’ process going on within you orchestrated through mind and emotions. This screening process is a process of rationalization in which you rationalize the qualities of each ‘character moment’ in terms of how you wish to see yourself. The constantly fluxing result of this ‘screening’ process finds expression as experience within your awareness, your consciousness, and that is who you experience as me.

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Consciousness expands or contracts in response to the valence of the experience. Expanding consciousness is an experience of increased well-being and levity, of bliss and happiness, of opening to the world around oneself. The opposite, a negative or difficult valence, is experienced as a diminution of awareness, a contraction of consciousness, a closing up to ‘outside’ awareness and perception. In expansion is found increased freedom; in contraction is found one’s own personal prison. The art of self-actualization is the art of expansion, of taking each moment and using what’s there, whatever it is, to become more expansive, more engaging with the life around oneself.

As you engage more deeply with whatever is in your environment, you may begin to find life where you previously thought there was none. As you hone and enhance your perceptions by approaching everything out there without expectation you begin to perceive it unrestrictedly, allowing it to fill you with its real essence, not the essence you have imposed upon it previously through your own conditioning. In knowing others, one expands oneself through taking in and understanding more deeply the essence of another. This is what all of us have been doing from the beginning of our existence as physical beings on this planet. We are constantly reaching out with our perceptions and inculcating some of what we perceive in another to be part of our own nature, our own character. This process is innate within us, first as an automatic function, but later, as we become more skillful at being a human being, a more intentional exercise. It is this level of intentional self-actualization that we must now hone to perfection as a strategy for becoming more expansive inside. It is the tool by which we may fulfill our greatest aspirations toward becoming more accomplished beings physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. May you expand forever; and remember, the only constraints upon consciousness are self-imposed.

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The Self and Self-Actualization

Self-actualization has been a topic of concern in the psychology and philosophy of the East for centuries and the West for many decades, and has more recently become a familiar concept within the general public as well. However, even though the term ‘self-actualization’ is well-known these days, most people have only a vague idea of its real meaning, and more importantly of the depths its meaning can be taken to.

Any attempt to explore the more profound meanings of the term ‘self-actualization’ would have to begin with a definition of the term ‘self’. What is this ‘self’ that is being actualized? Is it something stable with an enduring core around which change and transformation take place? Or does the process of actualization actually define the ‘self’? Is the ‘self’ not so much a state as a process whose only constant is change? Following are a few of the theories, from both East and West, which deal specifically with the idea of ‘self’ and ‘self-actualization’ which will hopefully answer some of these questions.

Buddhism and the ‘self’

The Buddha posited five Skandhas (aggregates of existence) as experiential processes or functions making up individual experience resulting in a sense of self. The first Skandha was form, physical structures including the human body, the second, sensation, containing the five senses, plus our emotional perceptions of something. The third, perception, entails identification (or labeling) and conceptualization of what we have sensed.

The fourth, and that which we usually identify with ‘self’ in an egotistical way, is embodied in mental ‘structures’ formed and perpetuated by volition, or personal willfulness toward specific attitudes, morality and habits, both negative and positive. Pride, desire, virtuousness, prejudice, and faith are examples of the fourth Skandha. It is the willfulness of the fourth Skandha which creates the positive or negative karma we are constantly forming around ourselves, moment by moment.

The fifth Skandha, consciousness, is the living platform of awareness upon which the first four Skandhas reside and which merges them together into a holistic, individualized experience.

Skandhas have also been referred to as ‘bundles of attributes’. Each ‘bundle’ is a unit of consciousness conditioned or molded into the structure and function of a specific Skandha, all five of which reside within an individual consciousness. These attributes are not permanent, but engage

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in a process of constant change in response to the environment (inner, psychological and outer, personal, social and cultural environs). The interaction between these attributes and their environment brings growing awareness and perception to the consciousness they reside in. Thus, these bundles of attributes might be seen as a set of experiential tools by which consciousness 'hones' its ability to expand to progressively higher states of being and perception.

The self, then, is consciousness or awareness engaged in experiential activities which condition it into increasingly expansive ways of viewing and expressing itself. But, above all the self is an awareness of being, an awareness of personal existence. As Buddhist theosophist Annie Besant states in *Thought Power*, the self is 'that conscious, feeling, ever-existing One, that in each of us knows himself as existing…both proof and disproof found themselves on "I am", the unanalysable Feeling of mere Existence of which nothing can be predicated but increase and diminution' (through pleasure or pain). All aspects, expressions or manifestations of this self arise from three basic processes: 1) knowledge (the first three Skandhas), 2) will, and 3) energy or action (the fourth Skandha), all of which take place within the wider, less focused consciousness of the fifth Skandha.

A Few Western Perspectives of the 'self'

While the idea of self-actualization is many centuries old, the term 'self-actualization' from a Western perspective was first used by Kurt Goldstein, who defined it as a 'basic drive' within all life — the tendency for some living entity to actualize itself as fully as possible. Depending on the level of life and awareness, this 'basic drive' might operate on varying degrees of instinctual or intentional levels.

Humanistic psychology developed this theory further, seeing the innate drive of self-actualization taking place through the interaction of three components making up the concept of self within each individual: 1) self-worth/self-esteem, how we think and feel about ourselves, 2) self-image, how we actually see ourselves on an ongoing basis as we interact with our environment, and 3) the ideal self, who we would really like to be. 'Self-actualization' is a process of the perceived self and the ideal self coming into a state of congruence (Carl Rogers), creating an actualized self in which creativity, peak experiences, and mystical/spiritual experiences are common (Maslow).

Gestalt Therapy (Fritz & Laura Perls) defines the self in terms of subjective and objective perceptions of immediate experience. One's sense of self is a result of the interplay between 1) subjective perception (colored and distorted by past experience) and 2) objective, undistorted

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perception of present experience.

Gestalt therapy encourages the individual to gain insight into the difference between subjective and objective realities by perceiving the situation as it actually is, unaltered by beliefs and expectations born of past experience. The Perls theorized that most people formed a self-concept based upon past experience, thus lacking any present reality. Freedom from this illusory reality (and the pain it causes) is an act of self-actualization which occurs through progressively deeper insights into the difference between subjective and objective realities. These deeper insights come about through studying the nature of awareness and how to be aware of awareness itself as it goes through the process of perception.

Relationship between Self and Consciousness

Basically, all the concepts of self and self-actualization described above entail sets or bundles of attributes embedded in a platform of awareness/consciousness. These attributes are constantly going through a process of being reinforced and re-molded in response to experience on this physical plane of existence. It is the 'process' of change that molds the dynamic 'self,' the ever-changing 'bundle of attributes' from which consciousness or self-awareness acquires the sense of self. This ongoing transformation of beliefs and attitudes in the face of experience is the 'self' in 'self-actualization'.

Viewed from this perspective, the only self there is, is an actualizing self. The process of actualization is the 'self', a dynamic, ever-changing 'self'. That which gives life and continuing existence to this self is the underlying, innate impetus toward actualization. Thus 'self' is the act of actualization, an ongoing moment-by-moment transformation of beliefs and attitudes by which individual 'selves' continuously define, redefine and find validity for their momentary realities.

It would seem then that the only stable aspect of self is awareness itself. Yet awareness, through its constant experience with this bundle of attributes it permeates and perceives as 'self', is itself constantly expanding its ability to perceive on higher and more expansive levels of existence. That leaves us with only existence as a stable aspect of self. Yet, existence and self seem inextricably intertwined and inseparable. Therein lies the mystery, a mystery only solvable by each one of us through individual experience and effort toward inner as well as outer actualization.

Self-Actualization and Meditation

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Each individual has his or her own way of guiding the self-actualization process. Some blunder through life, learning through haphazard, kneejerk emotional and mental reactions to life's interactions. Those at the other end of the spectrum carefully analyze their experiences in life, consciously guiding the inner growth process toward greater awareness and capability.

If we look closely at our daily lives and listen to the internal dialogue constantly going on inside our minds, we soon realize that the inner dialogue is a running commentary on our current beliefs and realities, as they reinforce or introduce change into our view of ourselves in the face of new experience and information. If we watch this inner dialogue carefully it could provide invaluable insights into the nature of the bundle of attributes from which we derive our sense of self.

What is the advantage of this? Awareness devoid of content is forever ready to merge in an objective, realistic way with whatever it is focused upon, instantly knowing the nature of that object. When an individual is quiet inside, and awareness is in a state of rest, the individual is much more able to react to momentary situations with spontaneity and objective perception, seeing the situation as it truly is. This state of awareness merged with awareness and devoid of content is a state of freedom commonly known as meditation.

The process of meditation is one of the most efficient strategies for guiding the inner growth process. Meditation helps the individual detach their awareness from the ever-present mental monologue awareness is usually absorbed in. A state of detachment allows awareness to perceive more expansively and see clearly the nature and reasons behind the inner dialogue and belief systems, and with that insight, guide their experience in life more wisely and beneficially for themselves and all they interact with.

For further insights into the self, self-actualization, and consciousness, see Freedom: What It Is & How to Achieve It, Volume 1: Freedom and the Self, and Volume 2: Freedom and the Ecology of Relationship — available at acosmicjourney.com.

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