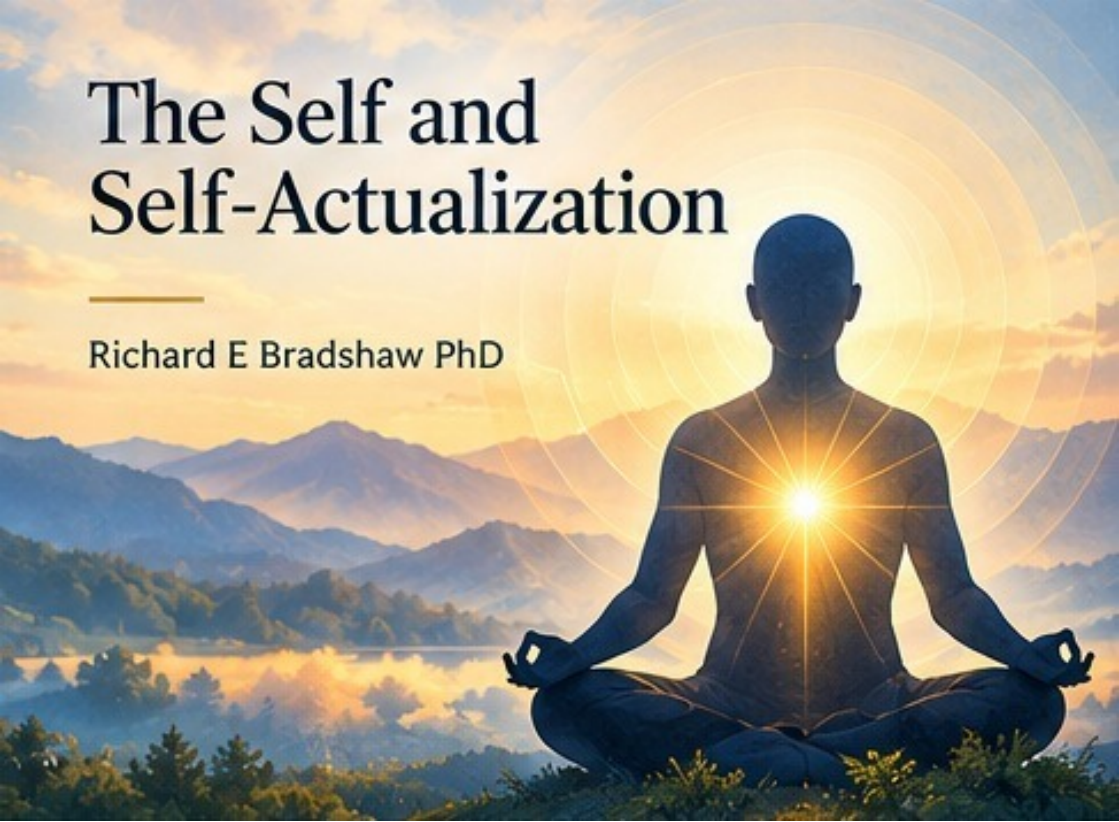


The Self and Self-Actualization

Richard E Bradshaw PhD



Self-actualization has been a topic in Eastern psychology and philosophy for centuries, and in the West for decades. It has also become a familiar word in everyday conversation. But even though the term is well known, most people have only a vague idea of what it really means, and even less sense of how deep that meaning can go. Any serious attempt to explore it has to start with a harder question: what is this self that is supposedly being actualized? Is it something stable, with an enduring core around which change happens? Or does the process of actualization itself define the self, meaning the self is less a state than a process whose only constant is change?

Buddhism offers one of the oldest and most detailed answers. The Buddha described five skandhas, or aggregates, as the processes that combine to

produce our sense of self. Form comes first: the physical body and its structures. Sensation follows, the five senses plus our emotional response to what we perceive. Perception is third, the labeling and conceptualizing of what has been sensed. The fourth skandha, the one most people identify with ego, is built from volition, the willful attitudes, morals, and habits, positive and negative, that we form and re-form moment by moment, generating what gets called karma. The fifth skandha is consciousness itself, the platform of awareness on which the first four rest and through which they merge into a single, individualized experience. None of these aggregates are fixed. Each is a bundle of attributes in constant flux, shaped by inner and outer conditions, and together they act as the tools by which consciousness hones itself toward higher states of perception.

Western psychology arrived at similar territory by a different road. The term self-actualization itself was coined by Kurt Goldstein, who described it as a basic drive within all living things to actualize themselves as fully as possible. Humanistic psychology developed the idea further, describing the self as the interaction of three components: self-worth, how we feel about ourselves; self-image, how we actually see ourselves day to day; and the ideal self, who we would like to become. Carl Rogers framed self-actualization as the process of the perceived self and the ideal self coming into congruence, while Maslow associated the actualized self with creativity, peak experiences, and moments of genuine transcendence. Gestalt therapy took yet another angle, distinguishing between subjective perception, colored by past experience, and objective perception of what is actually happening now. Freedom from illusion, in this view, comes from progressively deeper insight into the gap between the two.

Taken together, these traditions point to the same underlying picture: the self is a bundle of attributes embedded in a platform of awareness, constantly being reinforced and reshaped by experience. It is the process of change that molds the self, not the other way around. Viewed this way, the

only self there is, is an actualizing self, a dynamic, ever-changing act rather than a fixed thing. What gives it continuity is the innate drive toward actualization itself. The one stable aspect left standing is awareness, and even awareness keeps expanding its own capacity to perceive. Existence and self turn out to be inseparable, and that, in the end, is the mystery each of us has to work out through our own experience.

This is where meditation enters the picture. If you listen closely to the internal dialogue running constantly in your mind, you start to notice it is really a commentary on your current beliefs, reinforcing or revising your sense of self in response to new experience. Watching that dialogue carefully offers real insight into the bundle of attributes you take to be yourself, and can eventually show you how to rest in awareness alone, without the conceptual content that usually imprisons it. Awareness free of that content is able to meet whatever it encounters directly and objectively, rather than through the filter of old assumptions. That state, awareness merged with awareness, undistorted, is what meditation actually is. It is one of the most effective tools available for guiding the process of self-actualization, precisely because it lets you see the mechanism at work rather than just living inside it.

For further insights into the self, self-actualization, and consciousness, see *Freedom: What It Is and How to Achieve It*.

Continue the journey

The Freedom Series: what freedom is, and how to live it

The Clarity Series: insight poetry on perception and awareness

The Mandalam Series: a consciousness sci-fi journey

All ebooks: acosmicjourney.com/shop

© Richard E. Bradshaw, PhD. Free to read and share with credit.