

The Stages of Self-Transformation

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I. Why Self-Transformation?

We all grow up with fragmented personalities. Many of our habits, conditionings, worldviews, attitudes and learnings contain internal contradictions because these were put into us by parents, elders, schools, media and society, which have different and even incompatible values. A lot of these acquired qualities are counter-productive and make us dysfunctional, such as fears, temper or biases. We don't realize, for example, that if we want to be loving, the habits of anger must first go. Anger and love are incompatible. The instinctive tendency of anger is to hurt another, while love is never to hurt another deliberately. We develop the fear of making mistakes, of being rejected, or of being a failure. As a result, we are unable to rise up to our highest potentials because we don't dare take risks. We pick up narrow views in life such as what constitutes success (commonly associated with wealth, fame or position), thinking that they can make us happy. Then we find many decades down the road that we are not happy or at peace.

An adult is a conglomeration of all such conditioned characteristics, many of which are unwholesome and harmful. They hamper growth toward self-actualization and spirituality. They cause ineffectiveness in life, such as the absence of inner equanimity, having problematic relationships and being ineffective at work.

To correct these malconditionings becomes a very important part of growth, education and life planning, no matter what we would like to become in life. In addition, we need to be clear about what in life is really worthwhile to pursue. These are important facets of self-transformation.

II. Four Aspects of Self-Transformation

Self-change has four basic elements. They also constitute the stages of self-transformation.

1. *Review of the Map of Reality*

A good understanding of what life is about is a basic foundation for life design. Without such a well-founded understanding, our plans may pursue wrong goals and values. Is money truly important in life? Do we go to school in order to just have a good job and stable income? Is this what life is essentially about? What is the purpose of life? Where do we come from and where are we going? Who are we really and what are true needs deep inside?

Our map of reality is based on what society, our parents and teachers tell us. What they told us were usually what they were told by society, their parents and teachers.

If their map of reality is correct, this world would have been a happy, harmonious and warless place. Unfortunately, much of it is not.

We need to review the maps given to us – religious beliefs, social norms, human nature, human destiny, etc. It requires an open environment to be able to review the maps freely. In an oppressive society or an intolerant religious culture, such a review is very difficult because people will be ostracized once they start questioning basic assumptions about life and the world.

For purposes of self-transformation, we need to know who we are – the nature of a human being, our true needs and growth direction. The ageless chart about human constitution, popularized by theosophy, is a very helpful starting point for self-understanding because they let us understand our needs. Supplement this with scientific researches in the past hundred years, such as Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, then we gain a more confident understanding of what we are and what we really would like to become in life, regardless of where we have been born. The modern scientific validation of the ancient teaching on reincarnation has become another important aspect of life's map since it tells us about continuing growth opportunities that do not stop in just one lifetime. This leads to another age-old insight about human perfectibility – that all of us, sooner or later, will reach the apex of human maturity and growth.

2. Clarification and Integration of Values

Assuming that we have a clearer view of what human life is about, then our next task is to be clear about what are the most important things or values in life. Just like knowledge, attitudes and habits, we also acquire our values from our environment. If we are not aware of such subconscious inculcation of values, then our destiny will be heavily influenced by such unchosen values that, deep down within us, we don't even agree with.

There are three kinds of values:

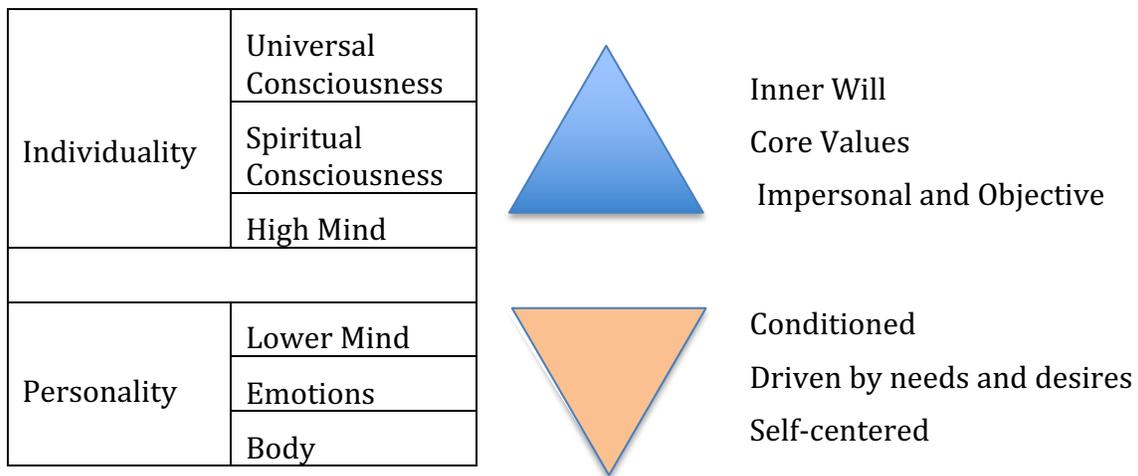
- a. Universal values – those cherished or considered important by all human beings, such as happiness, inner peace, love, truth, harmony, etc.
- b. Cultural values – those adopted by society and which often are imposed upon individuals, such as religious beliefs and cultural practices.
- c. Personal values – those preferred by the individual, such as becoming a musician, engineer or one's choice of leisure, friends, etc.

Universal values are impersonal. They are there whether we choose them or not. They are also non-negotiable. When cultural or personal values clash against them, they do not budge. One may choose to pursue a political career and violate the value of integrity. In the long run, such a corrupt career will be the loser. The politician will be regarded contemptuously instead of being admired. Or he may even go to jail. In the end, when there are such conflicts in values, it will be cultural and personal values that will have to change. It is important that cultural and personal values should harmonize with universal values, otherwise, the former will reach a ceiling where they cannot go farther. A parent cannot be a great parent; a politician cannot be a statesman; etc.

3. Self-Mastery

Assuming that we know what are the important and valuable things to do or pursue in life, the next question that we need to ask is: Can we do it? Can we change our habits? Can we remove our fears or hatred or depressiveness? Can we do daily exercise or change our diet?

This brings us to the need for self-mastery. To understand this, we need to be familiar with the two major components of our human constitution. We have a higher and lower nature. We are, in our early years, primarily our personality, composed of our body, emotions and ordinary thinking mind. But higher than this, we have an impersonal mind, a spiritual consciousness and a universal consciousness. They are represented by two triangles in the following manner:



We have in effect two selves.

One is the product of conditioning called the personality, which can be a jumble of mixed-up or incongruent habits, emotions or thoughts. This personality is the real source of human problems and unhappiness when it is not wisely nurtured.

The higher one is the individuality, consisting of one's capacity for abstract and impersonal thinking, leading to one's spiritual and transcendent consciousness. This is our more authentic self; its perceptions and values are more valid and enduring.

The problem is that these two selves clash against each other. My personality may desire to eat cake, but my higher mind tells me that I should not do so because I am diabetic. I may inwardly know that I should do exercise for my health, but my body is lazy and unwilling to move.

The capacity to let the higher self control the lower is what is meant by self-mastery. To do so, we need to awaken and strengthen our higher faculties, and then we must know how to cleanse our personality of its unwholesome conditionings and thereby master it with the higher.

This task of self-mastery is multifaceted because the personality is a complex mechanism. It has physical habits that must be re-educated. It has unhealthy

emotional reaction patterns that can be cleansed by what is known as self-awareness processing, where conditioned push-button reaction patterns can be extinguished without suppression. This process is taught in the Self-Transformation Seminar conducted by the facilitators in the Theosophical Society. Many people have found that they are able to remove life-long phobias of snakes or heights or failure in less than thirty minutes. They are able to put an end to hatreds that they may have harbored for decades. They are able to significantly diminish stress in work and daily life.

The untamed monkey mind can be re-educated through meditation. It brings about equanimity in life and the capacity to focus and be disciplined in one's thinking.

In addition, one needs to develop life skills that enable an individual to be effective in one's tasks and affairs as well as be effective and harmonious in one's relationships. For example, one has to learn communication skills that will prevent conflicts and quarrels with other people.

3. *Transcendence*

The fourth aspect is the realization that beyond our ordinary needs and activities, we also have higher capacities and faculties that transcend the mind and emotions. This is the realm of the mystical and spiritual. They are the peak-experiences that Maslow speaks of. We transcend the limitations of the mind and enter into a new realm of insights and way of living that transcend the many contradictions in life brought about by harboring narrow psychological and social assumptions. Such transcendence goes beyond such dichotomies as liking and disliking, desire and aversion, or good and bad. These are the roots of disappointments, frustrations and unhappiness.

Without the first three stages, it is difficult to live the transcendent life. The self-transformation process, therefore, is a necessary foundation of the spiritual life.

III. The Pursuit of Self-Transformation

The self-transformation process is not a new invention. It has been known in various garbs since the ancient times, whether east or west. Sages have learned how to resolve the many incongruities of human life by the four stages mentioned above. It just requires a decision to harmonize one's life by effectively integrating the fragmented pieces of our mind and personality. The steps are not difficult to understand, but they require a willingness to undergo temporary discomforts and the willingness to stay on the path of self-transformation.