The Psycho-Spiritual approach to personal development - Spring 2016 – Jim Robinson

Introduction
Psychotherapy is the work of healing ourselves. But are we all in need of healing? Are we all damaged or holding some sort of trauma? By trauma I mean a wound to the self that was too much to bear, so that some part of it had to be repressed remaining un-digested and un-healed. Well, due to the complexity and length of our developmental journey from infancy to adulthood, it seems that none of us emerge totally unscathed, especially in this ‘unnatural’ modern world of ours. I have never met anyone who was not carrying some scars from their conditioning which made them defensive in some way. This article is my attempt to show how the processes at the heart of the work of healing ourselves are the same as the work that is necessary for our spiritual development, especially to begin with. The aims are somewhat different, but the means, i.e. self-observation in the service of self-knowledge, are the same.

I will start by setting out my understanding of our psychology. Then look at how this relates to the profound paradox around choice and self-responsibility and how this is also a spiritual perspective. I’ll then explore and relate this to my understanding of spiritual development. As part of this, I will take a critical look at Ken Wilber’s “Integral” map. Then I will look in more detail at our developmental journey, from starting to ‘wake up’ and understand ourselves, to approaching our ‘spiritual’ potential.

Our Psychology - What needs healing
‘Ego’ is a difficult word, it means different things to different people, in different contexts. I’m using it in line with Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (PHG) (1951) were the ego is seen as the part of the self that engages and contacts our environment to get our needs met, from a crying baby needing to be fed, to someone wanting to rule the world. But no matter how dominant the ego appears, it is also clear that it is by no means the whole of the self, it is just the visible tip of the self above the water. Our growth and development are dependent on our ego, it is our inevitable separateness, it is our identification with our own needs and wishes which has its lawful and healthy aspects, as well as its compulsive and compensatory ones that emerge from our adjustments to trauma. The more the self gets wounded and traumatised the deeper and more fixed our compensatory structures are. We create defensive patterns of being, or ego structures, to manage the situation where a part of us has to be kept buried, out of awareness, and avoided. This is about the self making emergency adaptations in order to survive and it is obvious in children who are facing very difficult situations.

As PHG argued, in an ideal situation the ego is simply a functional aspect of the self that emerges and recedes in the process of getting ours needs met through the cycles of “contact and withdrawal” that characterise the daily rhythm of our lives. It is when the ego is stuck (fixed) because the self is having to defend and contain repressed trauma, that we develop problems in relating to ourselves and the world. Obviously there is no ideal, we are all on the continuum somewhere.

These resulting compensatory characteristics are sometimes called the “false self”. In Gestalt Therapy these reactions are called “confluence” (staying unaware, appeasing), “introjection” (self-blaming, swallowing down, resigned, defeated), “projection” (aggression, jealousy, pretentiousness, demanding, pride, arrogance, “retroflection” (withdrawing, passive-aggression, meanness, stubbornness, resistance, manipulative, and lastly “egotism” (avoidance of action, isolation, fear of risking). They are all defensive and fearful reactions that we use to “avoid contact” with the
underlying repressed “emergency”, each is a strategy to avoid re-contacting the hurt, distress or fear that was repressed in the trauma and held in the background of ourselves ever since.

We maintain this repression in un-awareness by splitting ourselves up so that our head, heart and body are all separate and not communicating with each other. With these basic aspects of our relating to the world not communicating we remain lost and de-sensitised to ourselves, to whatever degree is necessary for our survival. In doing this we also cut ourselves off from the integrative functions that come from the connection of these parts of ourselves. When head and heart combine they bring understanding and intuition, heart and body together bring empathy and instinctive wisdom, body and head together bring presence. We function towards our full potential when all three parts are active and relating to each other, this is what “peak experiences” are all about.

Our insecurity is our fear of being re-traumatised, once we have faced and healed our trauma we are no longer need to be insecure. All our negative behaviour is this. No one was ever born evil, and this is the basic humanistic standpoint, that people are fundamentally good and that our negativity comes from trauma of some sort.

When we experience trauma, especially as a child, the only way we can make sense of the experience is to interpret it as meaning that we must be wrong, bad, or inadequate in some way. We don’t have the resources to allocate responsibility where it belongs and our need to make sense of the experience is so overwhelming that we blame ourselves. This feeling of being a victim gets deeply entrenched so that when a situation occurs that resembles the old trauma it is as though a button has been pressed and we revert to that old pattern of response. We are caught back into our particular negative response, caught under the cloud of reactivity, we are confused, depowered and frightened. We then call this “fear”, “anger”, “anxiety” or “depression” and these reactions can also get projected into manifesting as illness or pain, and all sorts of “acting” out in the form of addictions, compulsions and obsessions designed to avoid the underlying pain.

The automatic (un-conscious) need to defend and avoid our wounds causes us to create all the insistent, constantly distracting, fearful and un-faceable reactions that keep us trapped inside our habitual self-stories. They cause us to rationalise our plight in a variety of forms of identification with these stories around how awful life is, with all our victim ways of being. From there we can get caught into vicious circles of thoughts, feelings and tensions reinforcing each other in self-destructive circles.

It is the self that needs healing, and when it does, our stuck or “fixed” ego aspects simply dissolve away. Often there are deep scars and sensitive areas left, but the self’s relationship to these is fundamentally different afterwards. Then the wounds are known and held with compassion and appreciation, rather than avoided and identified with, which causes constant inner conflict. More on this later.

The process of maturation is about our ability to increasingly hold our ego in its rightful place in us. This is why having children usually plays such a powerful part in the process of our own growing up. We hopefully learn to put others first in the service of love. This is putting aside in a creative and conscious way the identification with our own needs and is partly why parenting can be so tough.

Also Richard Rohr (2012) (and Jung) describe well how the first half of life is about developing and healing the ego, in the second half it needs to be increasingly let go of. It is easier to let go of something that has flowered and completed its role. This is why the late thirties and the forties are good ages to start therapy, there is still plenty of time.
Choice and self-responsibility

Surrendering our self-responsibility is the enemy of psychological health, whether it is through the panic of anxiety, the defeatedness of depression, or the slow self-deceptive giving into the negative, avoidant, destructive tendencies within us (leading to addictions, compulsion, etc.). This is not about blame in any way, we do the best we can, when we can. But there is a profound reality about our lives that we come to at this point, which is that as humans we have choice. It may be only a tiny, tiny amount, but there is always some choice. Otherwise we would not be ‘human’ we would be automatons. Because of this we are either on an evolutionary spiral of development where fundamentally we are saying “yes” to life, or we are on an involutionary one of saying “no”. These spirals can be very slow, with the appearance of stasis, but over time the truth is revealed. For instance, when people move into old age they mostly mellow, but some become more deeply entrenched in their victim way of being, deeply stuck in their “no”. For some, sadly, the choice towards saying “yes” comes after such an historic weight of “no’s” that the struggle is very tough, sometimes unsurmountable.

There are also a few who turn their backs on their humanity in a big way, going against their conscience, or there are those who seem to have no conscience to start with (not sure about the implications for genetic psychopathology here??) who entrench themselves in the negative, seemingly committed to the destruction of others. But there is a real mystery here, how come only a few of those who suffer profound trauma end up this way? For the vast majority, the human spirit is amazingly and incredibly resilient, which is merciful, because otherwise we would have been even more self-destructive. Crime, violence, extortion, the power of gangs, etc. has diminished enormously over recent centuries in many societies.

Most people’s journeys are for a long time a dance between “yes” and “no”. We often only know the ‘right’ path by going a distance down the ‘wrong’ one. I certainly know this was true for me, several times I caught myself and realised that I did not want to go where I was headed. This also works on the everyday level of ordinary life for most of us. Whenever we are caught into “victim mode” (Jill Hall 1993) with its compensatory behaviour, we are in effect saying “no” to life, turning our back and giving up, giving up our self-responsibility. This can be in tiny or large moments, routine or random reactions to our ‘buttons’ being pressed. It comes down to the possibility of working on facing ourselves in a moment by moment way, using our ability to be aware of ourselves in the here and now in order to have some choice.

This saying “no”, is at root, simply not being able to face the pain in the trauma that is being re-stimulated. There is obviously no blame in this, for most of us these reactions are an engrained part of our lives, but our development and freedom depends on us working to take increasing responsibility for ourselves, however small the steps may be. This is the difficulty at the heart of this paradox around choice, there is no blame, because ‘right and wrong’ do not exist in any objective sense, the universe is unfolding as it is. Blame is just the expression of compensatory negativity (shoulds & oughts) so has no real value whatsoever, but there is self-responsibility and choice. This is the paradox at the heart of how both the perspectives of support and challenge always seem to contradict each other, yet both are true and necessary. On the support side is the humanistic perspective that knows that our negativity, our “no”, is always an un-conscious act! On the challenge side we are responsible for ourselves, self-responsibility is real at some level however ‘un-consciousness’ we are.

The fact that we do have choice means that development is possible, that our journey is towards freedom and that there is Truth, that we are part of the teleological force of evolution and the unfolding of Consciousness. Logically and intuitively there has to be some ‘Absolute’ meaning
towards which we are headed. This is also why taking responsibility for ourselves is such an enormous life-long task, which at the point of its completion is the same place as ‘enlightenment’, a place where it is redundant because we have eventually accepted and embodied that we are simply a part of, and an expression of, the Consciousness, Love and Energy that makes up the universe.

**Our Innate Wisdom and The spiritual dimension of life**

This brings us to looking at what it is we are developing towards, what we are opening and connected to. As I see it spirituality is about our connection to the transpersonal, to the Absolute, to God, or whatever words you choose for that which is un-definable. It seems that we perceive this absolute through the “three faces” of the head or cognitive awareness, the heart or emotional awareness, and the body or energy awareness.

These three modes with their own perspectives are reflected in the worlds spiritual traditions with each emphasising a different one. Zen Buddhism for example is focused on the body through meditation, but “enlightenment” is seen as a shift in consciousness within the mind, as is much Eastern / Hindu spirituality. Christianity and Islam are much more focused on the heart, with devotion, faith and prayer aimed at divine Love (the irony here is that the supposed followers of these religions have created such violence in their names). Yoga and the Chinese martial art traditions are more focused on the body and mind, with the latter developing “Chi” energy. As Wilber (2006) argues, each great spiritual tradition has huge experience of the possibilities that come from developing ourselves, whatever the combination of head, heart and body. From today’s perspective though, I agree with Wilber (2006) that if they are to develop further they need to incorporate the relatively new understandings of psychology (last century or so). Some are trying to do this but the weight of their traditions and institutions make it difficult.

This is why I am so enthusiastic about this evolving psycho-spiritual approach to human development that is emerging. Be it Wilber’s “Integral” theory or Claudio Naranjo, Hameed Ali, Amit Goswami, Richard Harvey, Pema Chodron, Paul Barber, John Welwood, Jack Kornfield, Gangaji, Robert Masters and many others. Gurdjieff’s “fourth way” was a huge early influence for this approach, as was Fritz Perls and Gestalt Therapy, and Humanistic Psychology generally. All are saying that our journey needs both psychological and spiritual dimensions.

I like the quantum physicist Amit Goswami’s (2008) definition of spirituality as “cosmic” or “quantum consciousness”, he argues that “consciousness is the ground of being”. He calls for a new science based on the understanding of “downward causation”, that it is Consciousness that creates the world with the collapsing of the quantum wave into a particle through observation. Potential into actuality. Scientific materialism is all about “upward causation”, with consciousness as an epi-phenomena that emerges from matter, which he argues, does not fit all the evidence.

He argues that there is form in ‘un’-consciousness (the un-manifest cosmic consciousness), which is revealed by the laws of nature, laws of growth and development, stages of consciousness, states of being that we can ‘tune into’, creativity itself. Everything in the process of manifesting has to obey certain laws and processes. The ‘blueprints’ are embedded in the universe, (Sheldrake’s “morphogenetic fields”), in evolution, in biology, chemistry, maths and physics, psychology, spirituality, they all surely express this purpose of Consciousness manifesting itself, the unfolding of the universe since the Big Bang. The ‘laws of nature’ exist in the emptiness of the un-manifest, configuring manifestation, as does our creativity. Our creativity is always a gift from the un-manifest that we bring it into existence.

This idea of structure in the un-manifest is something that Gestalt Therapy recognises with its understanding of the huge innate wisdom within the self. Despite profound obstacles at times, at
some level, our sub-/un-conscious is always struggling towards health. Our inner conflicts come about because of the difference between this force within us and our ‘negative’ compulsions that emerge from our repressed trauma. Part of this wisdom is often called our “conscience” which I see in essence as our ability to know the difference between truth and lies. Our deep resonance with this underlying form of nature is reflected in our ability to know the direction that healing and growth have to take for us. It is there in the way that we value our experiences and how we make meaning. But this directly implies that Consciousness since the Big Bang has “Goodness, Beauty and Truth” deep in its structure. Something affirmed by how Nature is so amazingly, beautifully perfect. Our inner wisdom knows so much, which is itself miraculous.

What I find so amazing is how there is always meaning in our feelings. There is always, albeit often in indirect ways, an attempt to process what needs processing on the journey towards psychological and spiritual health. If someone is angry at a perceived attempt to de-value them there is the opportunity to see the anger as defence. To see and allow into awareness the deep wound of having been de-valued in the past which still needs healing, because it had not yet been possible to face it and bring it fully into the light. Or perhaps someone is really enthusiastic about an idea, say around blaming some ‘ism’ for the world’s problems. If they are prepared to look at the feelings behind that enthusiasm they might see that it has arisen because it justifies their projective “blame” which in turn exists as defence against them taking responsibility for their hurt which comes from their wound of having been squashed or defeated in their past, being poked.

If we can look at the motivations behind our feeling reactions, we can see that through the process of bringing our wounds into awareness and facing the pain that we could not previously face, we can understand, forgive and have compassion for ourselves. This enables us to heal and be freer than we were. The wisdom of the self and path to freedom are there in every ‘reaction’, each is an invitation to work through what is “in the way”. The wisdom is also there in how, for the vast majority of time, it only allows into consciousness what can be managed at any one time. This all seems to me to point again towards how “Cosmic Consciousness” has embedded within it, the aim of unfolding our consciousness towards the freedom in Being, provided of course that is what we choose. We are not alone, but connected to the unimaginable vastness of the universes’ Creativity.

I think as therapists we need to be clear about what the process of therapy is leading to, what is the developmental goal of the journey that we are facilitating? We need to take responsibility for clarifying what our philosophy is. It is clear to me that as human beings we are capable of finding profound freedom, with levels of ‘being’ that we do occasionally glimpse from within our ‘normal’ life. As we heal and become freer and our ego takes a less and less dominant role within us, we can increasingly open to our deep connectness. For this we need to increasingly let go of our attachment to our ego, this is in the end about reconciling ourselves in the face our death, right now. For those who manage to embody this reconciliation, it seems that it brings a deep letting go, after which it is possible to live for whatever remaining time there is, be it hours or decades, more deeply connected to ‘Being’, to the “Goodness, Beauty and Truth” of the universe.

**The here and now is the gateway to the spiritual**

Choice is the ultimate here and now quantum phenomena, the collapsing of potential into actuality. Our creativity is there in the milliseconds before we choose (not choosing is also a choice of course). Experientially I know that life is vital and alive when we are in touch with the here and now, when we are more present to ourselves in this very moment. It is only here that we can tune into the miracle of how life is unfolding right now, that I am alive and the quantum wave is collapsing into particles as I type these words. This moment is the boundary between the past and the future, between what is potential and the choices that I make in creating this continuous now as it
transforms into the past. I have never written this before, or will again, it will be part of what defines my past and future. Being present to ourselves is to touch consciousness itself, touching what is beyond time and space.

As I see it all types of spiritual experience have this alive here and now quality, be it awareness, love or energy orientated. The more we integrate all the three basic ways that we relate to life, the fuller the experience will be. Any sense of being able to control, or ‘do’ this aspect of life is suspect. It is not in our power to do ‘Being’. In the earlier stages of our healing we don’t have the power to even consciously open ourselves towards it, which only comes from much practice in connecting up our head, heart and body. To paraphrase Rumi, our task is to remove the obstacles, the repressions and splits in our self that we put in the way of being able to connect Being. It takes a long time to get close enough to the depth of what is really motivating us right now, to see honestly down to the bottom of our ego. It is this awareness that heals the trauma down there, which is bearing what we could not bear when our trauma was created. Bringing it into consciousness takes the sting out of it and so the need to defend is diminished. It takes a long time to be able to discriminate between the compensatory drives coming from our wounded ego (e.g. our narcissism) and the more ‘authentic’ insecurity in our core.

Most of us, most of the time, need to make a conscious effort to be present to ourselves and whilst we all receive ‘gifts’ from time to time, there is inevitably a lot of work to this in terms of training our attention to forge a more accessible connection to our presence. This presence comes from the work of connecting up our head, heart, body and this is essential if we are to develop this capacity of “separating ourselves from ourselves” (Gurdjieff 1973), or as Robert Kegan (1995) put it “making what we are subject to into an object “. It is this work that enables the possibility of self-observation. It is the depth and honesty of this self-observation that is essential for therapy to be effective, as well as for our spiritual development.

This movement to becoming present to ourselves is always a profound shift. It is the movement from being lost in reaction, identified with something or lost in daydreams, to becoming aware that I am alive and participating in this moment of life. Gurdjieff called it “self-remembering”, we remember that we are alive and have a body, that we are feeling (and feeling are always meaningful) and that we able to think and find meaning.

As we heal and get to know ourselves well, we live ever closer to this dimension of ‘being’ where choice is more possible. In one way, conscious choice only ever exists in the present moment (as above it also seems to exists in another way in the sub- or un-conscious depth our being). For conscious choice I have to bring something of the whole of myself to the moment to support the effort of integration required. For this we need to open more and more to our wish for being, which can only come from a deep level of the self, from a level where really value, Being, Presence, Connection or whatever you call it. This is about being able to bring sufficient force of attention to hold the space open enough, for choice to be possible. But we are back to the deep paradox here because we cannot choose without self-support and there is no self-support with choosing, the paradox of support and challenge. But it is clear that without this separation of self, our choices are not really choices, they are just the acting out of our automatic and projective preferences. As Gurdjieff put it, there is no ‘I’ present without this separation. This self, aware of self.

De Salzmann (2010) emphasises how, for our ‘I’ to choose freedom, we need to open ever more deeply to the desire for beingness and silence and emptiness in the depth of ourselves, whilst necessarily continuing to let go of our ego. This is towards the profound levels of freedom to be found in ‘enlightenment’ (and / or in the process of dying) that is described by those who have transcended their egos in finally letting go into the unity of ‘oneness’. 
Wilber’s Integral Theory - Stages, States, Lines and Quadrants

Stages

I think Wilber’s (2006) analysis of developmental “stages of consciousness” is an invaluable contribution to establishing this developmental perspective. He presents an analysis of many scientific studies that support the idea that our developmental journey is through a series of recognisable steps. I have interpreted these for both levels of understanding as well as very rough ages of development. They are “Archaic” (early infancy) the desperate imperative to have basic needs of food and unconditional love met, as adults we can revert to this desperation. “Magic” (toddler / young child) the world is a magical place without clarity about the extent of our powers, as adults we are sometimes still prone to “magical thinking”. “Mythic” (early adolescence) we introject the values, beliefs, rules and morals of our parents and culture and become identified with them, as adults we are full of oughts and shoulds from this phase of our lives. “Rational” (early to late adolescence) development of and belief in rational / logical thinking, as adults we can dismiss and ridicule anything that is not absolutely rational. “Pluralistic” (twenty to thirty) postmodern belief in the subjectiveness and relativity of everything, as adults we then reject the idea of hierarchies of any sort, let alone any concept around “absolute” meaning. “Integral” (thirties onwards) is able to hold many perspectives, aware of both the relative and absolute nature of meaning and development, there is still work to do terms of taking responsibility for choices, but life is lived more from our ‘authentic self’. Then there are further stages of deepening self-responsibility, letting go of the ego and connecting increasingly to the fullness and emptiness of ‘God’.

It is one of the tragedies of modern Western life that there is no accepted understanding of the potential for ongoing adult development. Our dominant cultural expectations are that you become an adult, and then die without there being any meaning to your life. This comes from our dominant “Rational” and “Pluralistic” (Postmodern) world views. But I do see this as steadily changing, especially with the increasing speed and depth of communication and availability of information, especially information about human growth and development. I do trust in the deep wisdom of the human psyche that I have come to know in myself and see every day, in my clients.

It seems clear to me that it is not until the “Integral” level of consciousness is established that we become capable of really taking responsibility for ourselves. Because by then self-knowledge is established and motivations known, there is a more ruthlessly honesty, more consistent and ongoing self-reflection, self-observation, self-questioning within “self-remembering”. Before the Integral stage the different levels of consciousness are descriptions of various forms of attachment, different forms of identification where self-awareness and consciousness are only possible to certain degrees. The earlier the stage the more un-conscious or un-self-aware, the person is.

Wilber’s levels of consciousness before Integral, refers to adults with very fixed world views. They are not about people who are able to appreciate different frames of reference, who may call themselves ‘religious’ or ‘rational’ but who may have a postmodern or integral or higher level of being. There are many people who call themselves ‘religious’ or ‘scientific’ who embody remarkable levels of development as shown by their openness and wisdom.

But all the stages before Integral, if they are the dominant feature of an adult, they can be seen as description of ‘stuckness’. They are levels, as discussed earlier, where trauma has fixed the ego in whatever patterns of protection against insecurity that has occurred. The implication of this is that in theory “Integral” is the ‘natural’ developmental level of an ‘ideal’ un-traumatised adult. It is obviously impossible to expect a child to have a “Pluralistic” perspective, and it is very worrying to come across an adult who is stuck in a “Magic” perspective. A fundamentalist religious person can be seen as identifying with an all-powerful God to compensate for deep doubts about their own
validity. Someone committed to rationalism can be seen as avoiding feelings around their vulnerability. The postmodernist may have faced much of their insecurity including their relativity, but is still afraid to take responsibility for themselves in terms of the meaning of their life, in some way.

All these stages have nothing to do with judgement and blame, but are an attempt to describe the reality that emerges from many different studies that Wilber reviews. He makes clear that there is obviously validity and value in the consciousness of every level, with each including and transcending the previous ones. So, someone at an “Integral” level of consciousness still has the previous levels active within them, but it is the Integral level that is in charge.

Before the Integral stage, and due to the levels of identification involved, people will fight those of different perspectives. This can take all forms, and from my experience this can be from the violent to subtle passive aggressive undermining, from denigration to ridicule, to manipulative accommodation. It is so clear here that our “philosophy reflects our pathology”. Because we are always making the most integrated whole of ourselves, our lives and our understanding that we can, (we are highly tuned meaning “making machines” after all), so what we think, inevitably reflects the level of our consciousness. (Heaven knows what I will think of this piece in ten years’ time!)

**States**

Wilber puts these stages into three “Tiers” which correspond to the form of the basic developmental series of “States of Being” which the world’s great spiritual traditions have some schema around. The stages before Integral are all what he calls, “1st Tier” or “Gross”. Integral is “2nd Tier” called “Subtle”. The “3rd Tier” or “Causal” state is more closely in touch with, and drawn to, Being.

Richard Harvey (2013) also presents a three tier model and also makes clear that there is a step change in the self on reaching the second tier (Integral), which he calls the “authentic self”. Here there is still the need to work towards healing the last of our victim modes of being, the need to find greater “authenticity” and connection to Being, but there is no longer the getting lost in victim mode, in identification with ego projections and defences. With this stage comes a greater freedom to be and trust in oneself. The depth of the trauma that needed to be faced, has been faced, self-responsibility is accepted, choice is known to be the here and now expression of this responsibility and there is solid ground to stand on.

Wilber makes the important point that whilst these states are related to the persistent levels of consciousness of the “stages”, states are temporary. So we can have a temporary spiritual state experience which might be related to very ‘high’ stage of consciousness, but it is only a glimpse of that stage and importantly it is *inevitably interpreted from within the stage we are currently embedded*. Problems emerge from this when our ego gets attached to the temporary experience and claims it for prematurely for itself, i.e. with evangelists or fundamentalists of all sorts. The hallmarks of real spiritual attainment seem to be much more in the direction of embodied presence, openness, compassion and love.

**Lines**

Wilber also talks about “lines of development”, by which he means the various aspect of human functioning that can develop through the above “stages of consciousness”. These lines are the Intellect, feelings, body, as well as moral, interpersonal, psychosexual, etc. However, he incudes here a “spiritual line”, which I have trouble with, it suggests that our spirituality is simply another aspect of our ourselves that needs developing. I think it is clear from the above that to me, the spiritual is the always connected ground of our being. It is there dazzlingly in a baby, it is there in the openness and joy of contact of toddlers and young children. It is inevitable that as we grow and our ego
develops we that we lose touch with it to whatever degree and then, as adults we have to find how to open to it, but consciously this time. So this aspect of Wilber’s theory does not work so well to me. The ‘higher’ stages of consciousness can be seen as being largely about stages of dis-identification with our ego and deeper realisation of our embodied connectedness to consciousness itself, to love and to energy.

I also disagree with Wilber here, when he says that any of these “lines” can develop independently of each other up the spiritual level. As above, is it clear to me that uneven development means we end up getting stuck. We need holistic development to support ourselves if we are to find our path and wish towards letting go of our ego.

Quadrants

I can see that Wilber’s “quadrant” model of “I, We, It and It’s” is very useful in expanding our field of view and encouraging a much more holistic understanding. It is impressive how every possible perspective can be seen as fitting somewhere into this map. We can look at the world through the lens of personal experience, relational and cultural experience, we can look through the scientific lens of how ‘things’ work as well as that of how systems work. This article obviously focuses on personal experience, but this is not to deny the importance of the other three “quadrants” in a fuller appreciation and understanding of the issues discussed.

Whilst I admire much of Wilber’s Integral philosophy my main struggle with it is comes from my understanding of the central importance of the holistic perspective that emerges from the integration of head, heart and body, and how this does not quite fit with it. Part of this is because I disagree with his “three faces of God” model. This comes from a simplified version of his “Quadrant” model (“I, We, plus It/Its”). Whilst there are many similarities with the head, heart and body model (head can be seen as “first person” or “I” aspect of God, heart/love can be seen as the relational “We” aspect of God, body/energy can be seen as the objective “It/Its” aspect of God), the fit between these two models does not really work. It seems to me he is forcing an intellectual consistency that does not work that well. If anyone has any insights into teasing this out more, please let me know.

“We” Quadrant

Much of our experience of being able to ‘be with ourselves’, of being able to “separate ourselves from ourselves” and be present to this moment, is about entering into relationship with ourselves. It is also this that enables us to be present to each other. If we are caught in defensiveness of whatever form it is hard to meet the other. Relational intimacy, i.e. Buber’s “I-Thou” depends on an open and meaningful exchange (not necessarily with words) where there is little fear. Here our underlying insecurity is transcended and there is an affirmation of the self along with a deep contact that supports both parties to move into presence and connection. This is felt as deeply nourishing and satisfying and a situation where an ‘objective’ form of Love (Orage 1966) can be felt.

I think however this may be why Wilber interprets “We” as one of his “Three Face of God”, but as above, this seems to me to be a miss-interpretation. Love exists independently of whether our perspective is individualistic or relational or scientific. We are relational to our very core anyway, this moment is only as it is because everything in the universe is as it is, right now. At the very depth of our being we are connected to the same consciousness, love and energy as everybody else, whether we are aware of it or not.
Our psycho-spiritual journey

How we can start healing

Having established some ground to stand on, I would like to explore the process of our healing and development towards our spiritual potential.

From a practical point of view, the first issue here is about the degree to which we are identified with our ego and how any journey of awakening is started. Because when the ego is defensively fixed (neurotic in old language) the identification is entrenched and there is an agenda to avoid the pain, fear, hurt distress that is waiting in the background needing attention. The movement to becoming self-reflective is often a mysterious or difficult transition, whatever the level of repressed trauma there has to be some opening deep in a person’s psyche. Be it from the addicts ‘rock bottom’, a personal crisis of some sort, or a gradual awareness of wanting meaning. This is important because it seems to me that even those with relatively little trauma in their lives still have this fundamental choice to make about whether or not they ‘wake up’, become self-aware and engage in their development. However this journey is started, it is a significant step.

It is often the difficulties that arise from our unsatisfactory relationship to our lives that provide the motivation. People often start therapy because they are confused and fearful about whether they are ‘mad and bad’. But every stick has two ends. Many people who have transcended their significant trauma have described their journey in terms of appreciating that the level of their wisdom, compassion, freedom etc. has come from the hard work of reconciling and healing their trauma. Every ‘problem’ really is an opportunity on this road.

Our psychology is about how we relate to ourselves and our world, and about our need (indeed our responsibility as human beings) to take responsibility for ourselves. It is about how we heal ourselves and grow towards finding ever more satisfying ways of being. No one else can do it for us, there is a reality to our existential aloneness here. We cannot escape the fact that we are both alone and separate, as well as being profoundly connected. This is a paradox we have to come to terms with. Excluding either is hopeless, if we deny our self-responsibility we don’t grow up, let alone realise our potential. If we deny our connectedness we remain stuck in the prison of our individuality, increasingly disconnected from the meaning that can only come from the connected (spiritual) ground of our being.

So, for whatever reason and from whatever place, we arrive at wanting to change the way we are. To begin with we are very context dependant, we have very little choice and tend to get caught for long periods of time in our subjectivity, in victim mode of one sort another. One of the few areas of control, or ways of taking responsibility for ourselves we do have at this stage is around choosing the influences we live with. This is about choosing to change our external conditions so that they are more supportive. This can be a very important early step, whether it is friends, where we live, what we do and all sorts of other influences we can choose in our lives.

But much is beyond our control, we can’t control many of our reactions, how others are towards us, the accidental nature of much of life, or the ‘madness’ of the society we live in (e.g. available jobs, housing costs, lack of community, entrenched materialistic culture, etc.). Obviously the major thing we can start to address is our relationship to ourselves and the world. But how to do this?

As Gurdjieff emphasized, until we “wake up” we are “asleep”. Whether this “sleep” is the consequence of our compensatory adjustments to trauma and the need to keep it repressed, or some other ‘existential’ aspect of human consciousness, does not really matter. The great question is how to ‘wake up’?
This starts, as with any scientific undertaking, with an honest phenomenological exploration of what is. Looking anew at the what and how of our functioning, our thoughts, feeling and tensions helps us to re-establish some of the lost connections between these parts, whether this is greater awareness of feelings, cognitive clarity, awareness of sensation and tensions. This brings new ‘data’ which enables the deep inner meaning making wisdom within us to re-start. It also provides the necessary support for being able to start “separating self from self” in order to “make what we are subject to into an object”. All this enables us to gradually see more clearly and objectively how we are actually functioning, what we are doing. Importantly we can start to see underneath the surface of our habitual self narrative to what is driving us to be the way we are, our motivations for being stuck in reacting to life in the way we do. As PHG (1951) made so clear, awareness itself is the most powerful agent of change, it allows sense making and healing and opens the door to choice.

The deeply habitual stories we tell ourselves of, “I can’t”, “It’s impossible”, “I won’t”, “It’s unfair”, “It’s too much”, “It’s wrong”, etc., etc., are all expressions of our victim place of being. They are expressions of un-faced trauma and the self defeatedness inherent in being a victim of trauma. These stories need challenging in order to see that they are false and that the reality, on an emotional level, is about avoidance of the hurt, fearful, distressed, parts of ourselves that we have not yet faced. Usually we can only start doing this with help, help which also supports us to “separate ourselves from ourselves”, to dis-identify from our victim part so that we can see a little more of the reality of ourselves.

Again, the extraordinary mystery is how this development of our consciousness depends upon our choice for it to happen. It is this that closes the circle of psychology and spirituality. Choice is at the heart of our psychology and our spirituality. In the earlier stages of our waking up this mystery of choice is around how, as a deeply wounded person, we can make the choice to choose life over identifying with the negative self-destructive forces within us. This has something to do with seeing the unreal, or fantasy nature of our negativity.

This work is often about challenging our entrenched ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’. Behind every one of which there is a wound of some sort that we are stuck in “victim mode” about. Every one represents a possibility of taking responsibility for ourselves and choosing freedom, by bringing into the moment, the choice of whether to act or not. Shoulds and oughts are about the conflict between two unaware parts of ourselves. On the one hand is the avoidance of the re-activation of our repressed wounds of inadequacy of some sort (punished for getting it wrong, for not doing the ‘right’ thing) and on the other hand is what another part of us wants. If we bring the choice into present awareness we can then decide based on a more holistic assessment, there is an ‘I’ present with which to choose, which then means that whatever we choose, we are the author of our action and no longer a victim, either, of our introjected shoulds, or just the one part of ourselves. Some people equate ‘shoulds’ with a sense of “over responsibility” but I am trying to make a clear distinction between any sense of moral obligation which only exists in our compensatory ‘dream world’ and the objective act of being able to accept, own and choose how we are and how we behave.

When, as is so often the case, we are unable to find our choice and self-responsibility in any particular situation, we need to firstly forgive ourselves. This really is the “first rule”. Then we need to try and understand the defeatedness, the reaction, the hurt, the anxiety etc. that was too much to bear and so caused our refusal. This is about trying to understand the trauma behind it, what the un-bearableness is about. We need to accept that we will have to go around the spiral another time before we have the opportunity to again find ourselves in the present facing that difficulty, with the possibility of choosing something different and take responsibility for ourselves. Thankfully the human spirit is extraordinary in its ability to return to hope and keep trying again and again. This is
Indeed fortunate, because often the depth of our trauma makes us very slow learners, with maybe decades going by before we hopefully manage to face the depth of our un-faceable hurt.

I can fully understand those who reject, even vehemently reject, this developmental perspective. If someone has been profoundly defeated by their conditioning, then the idea of being developmentally ‘stuck’ or ‘crippled’ with a sense of failure and victimhood can be huge. Then being presented with “you can realise your potential” is understandably intolerable.

The ego is so clever at twisting what is true in us, manipulating our talents and our connections into attachments that serve our compensatory processes. Towards the beginning of our journey we inevitably come from a place of still being deeply enmeshed in our identification with our ego’s various compensatory processes. This insecurity inevitably means we are on a ‘narcissistic see-saw’ somewhere, which leads to all sorts of projections and attachments with all its ‘ups’ and ‘downs’. The ‘downs’ are, as above, about getting caught into our victim ways of being. With the ‘ups’ come excitements as we grasp at the possibility of liberation of some sort from our prison, whether this is through achievement, money or power, or some temporary spiritual connection. Whatever the projection, our ego tends to claim it for itself, make ourselves ‘special’ and then use this to carry on avoiding our trauma. Sometimes it is simply excitement itself which is the distraction, sometimes there is projection onto a ‘guru’ or religion, or something that represents “the answer” and off we go on a “spiritual”, or some other form of “bypass”.

Again, the need is to move into being present to ourselves, to be with how all this compensatory up and down process works, knowing that the ups have that ‘manic’ quality, trying to open more and more to the underlying wounds that force us into endless doing in order to avoid them. When we cannot find even a small amount of presence / separation we are in danger of getting stuck and then of moving further and further away from our self-support, destroying it even. As above, this leads to all sorts of ways of getting lost, one of which is illness, physical or mental. One way of looking at this is to see it is giving up in front of self-defeatedness. It starts with “I can’t stand it”, “I can’t cope” or “I give up” as acts of capitulation. If this is in front of anxiety or depression or some compulsion which only leads to their exacerbation and further fractures of the self. The overwhelmed-ness of the experience is about the unconscious trauma being too much for the available self-support to face it. Again though there is always choice. The soul destroying nature of the self-defeat can make the sense of inadequacy, powerlessness, anger, shame hard to bear. Yet there is still always some choice, no matter how small.

The ‘benefit’ of sliding into a negative cul-de-sac is the possibility of recognizing powerlessness which can be the start of recovery, but the risk is self-destruction. There is always a slippery slope and if we let go at some point the force of entropy can create such a momentum that it can be hard to stop. But before that moment there is at some level the giving up of self-responsibility as a choice. It may be choice that is heavily conditioned but nonetheless there is some collusion with the process of ‘giving up’. This is not about any critical judgement, but it is about discernment and telling the truth and facing the reality of the situation and recognizing the self-responsibility that has been refused. The experience of being defeated can make it tough to re-find the self-agency of self-responsibility again. It can also be the platform for recovery and change that needed to happen. Life often works in mysterious ways, having to go backwards before going forwards.

Taking responsibility for our ourselves is a tough lifelong process, not a one off event. This can be seen in more detail by looking at the three basic ways we relate to our world, that is head, heart and body. With our heads we need to take responsibility for our thinking, challenging our prejudices and pre-conceptions in the hard work of ‘chewing over’ and making clear what our values and philosophy are. This is the work of understanding ourselves, our history and our relationship to the
world, our connection to the meaning of our development, as we increasingly move towards becoming aware of Consciousness itself. The heart work is about really facing what we feel. This bringing into the light what we have repressed heals us, it helps us find compassion for ourselves (and others). It is by going through the heart of our insecurity and facing our broken-heartedness that helps our hearts heal and our development flows as we become ever more conscious of Love. With our body we again our need to take responsibility, for our health, for our body’s need for attention, knowing our tensions and developing self-care. It is through our deepening awareness of sensation and breath that we connect increasingly to our embodied presence and the energy of Life itself.

As above, uneven development reflects our stuckness, the self is naturally holistic and integrative. If we are over reliant on our thinking, or our feelings, or using our bodies, alone, then our lop-sidedness detaches us from the wisdom of the self. This wisdom needs some integration in order to work. Being “one centered” is like being one-dimensional and then there is insufficient ‘data’ for the self to access its innate wisdom. This is partly because the mechanism of maintaining unawareness of our repressed trauma, needs our head, heart and body to stay separate and not communicate. A split self will always be insecure and repression can only function in the darkness of not being seen. When this happens we develop one aspect of ourselves at the expense of the others, we become over intellectual, over emotional or body obsessed. The incessant creativity of the self goes wherever we put our attention. But we need all the three aspects of us to be active and connected to some extent in order to provide us with the level of self-support that can help us to dis-identify and be present to ourselves, to enable the self-observation necessary for healing more of our trauma a little at a time. This is crucial.

Without this ability to look at ourselves as if from the outside, our self-referencing ego takes up our whole attention, we are caught in the illusion of no choice and victim-ness that sees no other possibilities. We avoid our repressed trauma or “emergencies” through being identified with our habitual self-stories about how hard, limited or awful life is. However, there is something really magical in this movement into greater here and now presence and self-observation, it immediately frees us to sense that we are not totally stuck in the dreamlike illusion and fixedness of our self-stories. Through making this movement into the more real world of engaging in the here and now, we are no longer so trapped and can sense how change is possible.

This is the work of therapy, to support this process of breaking the ‘spell’ of our victim illusion again and again and again. On one level this is simply a matter of supporting the investigation of ‘what is’, through helping the head to understand, the heart to feel and the body to sense, all in the service of facilitating the wisdom of the self to function and enable self-observation. But it is also about helping to make clear that choice is possible, that self-responsibility is real. Again the paradox at the heart of therapy and life, that we are responsible and not responsible both at the same time, we need support and challenge and yet they often seem contradictory. This paradox polarizes so much of our perception of life and is most graphically seen in the left (support) and right (challenge) of politics.

Most of us have to live with this impossible situation, where we know we are responsible for ourselves, we know we need to think for ourselves, to not be a victim, to be connected to our bodies, whilst at the same time being unable to fully embody that knowledge. This is why the “first rule” of this journey is always to forgive ourselves, otherwise this knowledge nags at our soul and turns into destructive ‘shoulds’. Also life is amazingly expert at rubbing our noses in our hypocrisy, our wounds and our refusals again and again, we don’t need to add to our chagrin. We know we need to choose, but until there is enough self-support, self-awareness, self-compassion and spiritual connection, we simply don’t have the resources to bring ourselves sufficiently into the here and now to be able to make the choice for life all the way down to the bottom of our being.

13
Therapy is largely concerned with mending our wounded hearts (with head and body playing a supportive role) and this is supported by the acceptance and care modelled for us by our therapist, which to some extent is a re-parenting process. But in the end, this is towards helping us find, through opening our hearts to our wounds, our own self-acceptance and self-compassion. Getting to know the deep ‘objective’ love and acceptance that exists in the depth of our here and now presence can also be very supportive, whether this comes through therapy or from experiences of spiritual connection.

**The movement from working psychologically to working spiritually**

The ‘magic’ of the “authentic stage” (2nd Tier Integral) is that as part of living closer to the here and now choice becomes a more fluid and everyday aspect of life. Each small moment of choosing ‘yes’ to life has the quality of a tiny celebratory affirmation. The final third stages of opening to the ‘yes’ of enlightenment undoes, it seems, the (necessary up to this point) subject-object split within the self, this is towards living the profound connectedness of spiritual wholeness. This must be something which ‘just happens’ when the time is right, no ego here.

The goal of enlightenment is distant for the vast majority of us because there is much work to do in “removing the obstacles to love” (Rumi) which takes time. We need much patience and determination, but as with every long journey we can only start by putting one foot in front of the other, slowly building our freedom as we dismantle our defences and open our mind, our heart and our body, along this long road. But perhaps, as with many tasks in life, we fit it into the space available.

There is another necessary paradox which is relevant here, about how at the heart of this process, whilst development takes time … enlightenment only happens right now. This is the Zen paradox of wanting and working towards change, but change only happening when we let go of wanting, let go into the here and now acceptance of myself and how I am now.

Again, this is about how interconnected the psychological and the spiritual are. To start with, the weight is with the psychological, with seeing and taking responsibility for all the ways we close ourselves down. Over time the weight can shift to the spiritual with the desire to live with ever more ‘openness’ and connection to the ‘Zen like’ quantum miracle of here and now life. Some start the other way around with the spiritual, but when this happens people often get stuck through using the spiritual to avoid the needed psychological work (see Jack Kornfield “After the Ecstasy the Laundry”). Then there is the need to plunge into the psychological work of facing our insecurity before returning to the spiritual. But this is why this approach is called “psycho-spiritual”, the two go hand in hand throughout our development.

It is only when we know ourselves well, when we have fully faced our suffering, faced the reality of ourselves and accepted all our human frailties, that I think it starts to be possible to approach choice in a more direct way. As above, this is the “Integral” stage where it is possible to maintain a level of self-awareness and embodied presence, through the long hard work of freeing ourselves together with our deep wish and determination. This is about working hard to remember to return to the here and now, through actively working on our habitual patterns that express our insecurity, gently tussling with all our habitual distractions. If this effort gets high-jacked into ‘shoulds’ it has to be let go of, as nothing useful can come from that place. But with increasing contact with this present moment we can hear more clearly our desire for contact with connectedness, with aware energy, with love, understanding and freedom.

This ability to live closer to the ‘quantum’ edge of our here and now being, enables us to live closer to choice and responsibility which exist powerfully in this present moment. Here there is a more
coherent sense of ‘I’ able to take responsibility for maintaining a more consistent of self-awareness. In these later stages the word “surrender” is perhaps more appropriate than “choice”. But the work of letting go of the ego still needs our deep wish and millions of choices along the way.

As De Salzmann so well articulates, the work towards the “third” stage (or “Tier”) has to come from our deep wish for ‘being’, it cannot be ego-generated and has to emerge organically. It seems that it is the work of moving into the emptiness of the here and now and increasingly letting go of our ego.

To me life is not a random event in a random universe, it is, as many have said, about God wanting to express and see itself by become conscious of itself. Ultimately, in this tiny corner of this unimaginably vast universe, this is through us human beings fully realising and embodying Consciousness, Love and the Energy of Life. It seems that we do have the amazingly possibility of consciously letting go of our ego and embodying Being in the fullness and emptiness of Cosmic Consciousness itself.

Closing thoughts

There are a number of forces acting on us and in us. There is accident and chance, which includes our genes, our culture and our environment, which all have their influence. There is our trauma with all its compensatory defensive processes. There is the creative force of the universe towards health and consciousness with its lawful stages and processes. Then there is our self with our own authentic wishes, needs, choices and self-responsibility. To me, accidents are accidents, but there is a continuum here from no self-responsibility, to there being quite a lot. I do not think though that we totally “create our own life” but we do play a significant role. Especially it seems that the further we go along our psych-spiritual developmental road the more we come under the synchronicous influences of the universes’ unfolding agenda. As this happens we can increasingly let go of our insecurity and trust life to bring what it brings. Inevitably it will bring death, but as we find reconciliation that too can be faced without fear, even welcomed.

This inevitably tough long journey is about taking ever more responsibility for ourselves, for our feelings, for our emotional life, together with accepting our potential for love. For our thinking, for understanding what our life is about and the possibility of living in tune with it. For our bodies, attending to its needs at all its many levels. This is the aim that Gurdjieff was clear about, that we need to develop an “I” which is the author of our life, and which can only be forged through the work of taking responsibility for ourselves. This task has been given to us, fundamentally, because we have been given the extraordinary gift of choice, and therefore of self-consciousness. This gift makes us human, but with it comes a responsibility to realise the consciousness it engenders, which means accepting the challenge of our extraordinary developmental journey. Just as each of us is a unique glint of Cosmic Consciousness, so each of our journeys is unique, only our self can find our path. I hope that this description of some landmarks that I have seen along the way helps you with your journey in some small way.

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