

# Bio-psychosynthesis

Will Parfitt

## *Exploring psychosynthesis and the body*

Psychosynthesis is not, at first glance, an obvious body-oriented therapy, with its transpersonal slant and use of mental reflection and imagery. In practice, however, it is impossible to work in a deep, meaningful way with spiritual or transpersonal energies without being able to ground the work in the client's body, and without such grounding the work of personal development can be arid and disconnected. Assagioli (1967) stressed this when talking about the development of Psychosynthesis. 'The practice of psychosynthesis very soon revealed the necessity of including the body, that is to say, of recognizing and making use of the close ties that knit body and psyche, and the reciprocal actions and reactions between them. This has received full acknowledgment from both the theoretical and the practical standpoints, and for this reason the proper name of psychosynthesis is bio-psychosynthesis. In practice it is usually more convenient to employ the word 'psychosynthesis'; but it must be understood at all times that it includes the body, the bios, and that it always stands for 'bio-psychosynthesis.'

As aware therapists, but not specifically body-workers, we always have to consider the place we assign the body in our work. Do we ever touch our clients and, if so, why and how? Do we give lip-service to the notion of including body awareness then shy away from its powerful symbolism? How do we inhabit our bodies in a way that allows the client to inhabit theirs? Taking neither Freud's stance of denial and avoidance nor Reich's stance of total involvement, Psychosynthesis stresses it is important to find ways in which we can both stand our own ground and acknowledge the position our clients take regarding their bodies. An excellent description of the importance of body in transpersonal work is from Jung (1934, 473) who said: 'When the great swing has taken an individual into the world of symbolic mysteries, nothing comes of it ... unless it has been associated with the earth, unless it has happened when that individual was in the body... And so individuation can only take place if you first return to your body, to your earth, only then does it become true.'

From our earliest experiences onwards, each of us builds a unique relationship with our body, repeating patterns, sometimes consciously, sometimes not so. In therapy it is important to investigate a client's relationship with their body and their physical presence in the world. In fact, some of the formative experiences in an individual's development might only be approachable through the body. As Clyde Ford (1989, 5) reminds us that: 'Our body remembers even when our conscious mind forgets.... It stores our past, present and our potential.'

Focussing on body story in terms of past and present day experiences, and how their attitudes to their bodies change as they grow and develop, we reflect on how the client's body expresses their personality, historically as well as in the present, and how armouring (physical and psychic barriers to wounds) is set up. There are many different ways of approaching such awareness and issues such as armouring, breathing and touch taboos. In practice in Psychosynthesis this usually takes the form of body observation and appropriate body-related interventions. Always, however body awareness is approached, Psychosynthesis emphasizes the importance of boundaries and respect, and always works to create containment (as distinct from suppression.) Containment in this sense means to understand a client's body as the primary container for their process. To contain what emerges requires both the client and therapist to be able to feel it deeply, bear the discomfort, and find ways to express it (at least symbolically.) True containment holds the tension of the opposites and allows development to occur.

Polarities play an important part in Psychosynthesis, and a primary polarity we all experience, particularly in modern Western culture, is that between mind and body. Ford (1989, 140) comments that 'Classically a synthesis represents the unification of two opposing positions.... Body and mind are two such opposite elements.' Assagioli (1967) said that we can see two opposing attitudes regarding the body itself. He considered that the majority of people identify themselves so completely with their body and give the pleasures and sufferings of the body such an exaggerated importance that they become enslaved by it. 'Their materialistic conception results in a tendency to attribute physical causes to all their disturbances, without recognition of the psychogenesis, partial or total, of many of them.'

The other category is found in individuals in whom the contrary occurs, and includes what Assagioli (1967) terms 'many studious and cultured people — the "intellectuals" whose lack of interest in the body may lead to neglect, especially when they regard it as a limitation or burden. This lack of bodily attention and indifference to physical activity leads, in Assagioli's view 'to debility of the body and the emergence of functional disturbances of various kinds.' He suggested that the most effective exercises for acquiring body-consciousness of the body and its gradual control are relaxation techniques. These of course can be directly taught to clients when appropriate.

A basic concept in psychosynthesis is usually called the body, feelings, mind model. Our body (and our physical senses), our feelings (and emotions), and our mind (both concrete and abstract thinking) are the three basic functions we use to experience the world and to express ourselves. Simply, we recognize who we are through our body, feelings and thoughts, and through exploring these functions, we find our place within the world (rather than trying to transcend it in some way.) These three functions are not really separate and are truly interrelated, and how they are interrelated within us tells us a lot about ourselves. If we look for example at our thoughts, then feelings and sensations will be there

too, but it is useful to view them separately to help us understand them and when appropriate to separate from them.

Body awareness can be promoted through stillness (whether lying, sitting or standing) both from a conscious viewpoint (finding and allowing position), and from the unconscious (outworn holding patterns), through movement awareness (particularly bringing what is unconscious into awareness), through breath awareness, and through supportive and inductive touch. Where touch is counter-indicated, or where a therapist is uncertain of their own comfort with touching techniques, self-touch is most effective. There is palpable joy when a client who has previously been unaware of their body sense learns it is okay to touch themselves. The arising effects – images, feelings, emotions, sensations, memories – that emerge through self-touch are always ripe and ready for inclusion and transformation.

References: Assagioli, R. (1967) Psychosomatic Medicine and Bio-Synthesis, Lecture given before the Plenary Session of the International Psychosomatic Week, Rome.  
Ford, Clyde. (1989) Where Healing Waters Meet, Station Hill Press, USA  
Jung, C.G. (1934) The Vision Seminars Vol. 2, Spring Publications, USA

[www.willparfitt.com](http://www.willparfitt.com)