

The Tree, the Egg and the Serpent: Psychosynthesis and the Esoteric

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exploring the practice of psychosynthesis as alchemy

I'd like to start by reading you some words that come from a transmundane entity, what is sometimes know as ET or extraterrestrial. Words that come from somewhere else other than this mundane realm, this earth. 'I am dealing with ... constructing thought forms which will embody the new techniques and ideas. These - during the next two centuries - will change the face of our civilisation and inaugurate a period in human history in which methods will be tried and principles established which remain as yet totally unknown to the majority. This period will lead the race into a civilisation and a mutual, co-operative interplay which will bring to an end the present era of selfishness and competition.'

This message is a communication dated July 1935 given to Roberto Assagioli from The Master Djwahl Kuhl who was described as an Ascended Master from Tibet who exists on a plane other than the human. Without going into the content of this message, what does it mean in the context of Assagioli's life? Why did he become so involved in Theosophy, with its 'spirit guides' and 'channelling'? What led him to involve himself in communications with supposed Ascended Masters from Tibet (that are, essentially extraterrestrial or transmundane entities)?

First and foremost, Assagioli was a spiritual seeker throughout his life. Many of the passing references in his books 'give him away' as it were. In the Psychosynthesis Manual alone, there are many references to Eastern mysticism: Hinduism, yogas of various kinds, Buddhism, and Tibet. There are even more references to subjects from the Western mystery traditions: Christian mysticism, Jewish traditions, influences from classical Greek philosophy, neoplatonism, Gnosticism, the Cathars, hermeticism and magic, meditation, rosicrucianism, freemasonry, occult societies, and alchemy. We'll return to some of these themes later. That Assagioli remained a seeker is shown through the books on the library shelves in his study in Florence - there is a Carlos Castaneda book, for instance, from the early 70s, not long before he died.

So where did Assagioli's seeking lead him? What did he consider the most important teachings, and with which of these teachings did he imbue Psychosynthesis? Firstly and most importantly Assagioli aligns Psychosynthesis with Gnosticism, particularly with regard to the importance of having direct experience, that faith alone is not enough. He says: 'Psychosynthesis definitely

affirms the reality of spiritual experience ... it appreciates, respects the necessity of [religions] but its purpose is to help to attain the direct experience' (Psychosynthesis Manual, page 195. All the subsequent quotes from Assagioli in this article are taken from this book.) The orthodox Catholic Church says that faith is enough; we should not need to have experience, that faith has to stand on its own. The Gnostics disagreed, and paid the price for this heresy through countless crusades sent to obliterate and destroy their message. The Crusades against the Cathars in the South of France, for instance, led to the slaughter of thousands of men, women and children, killed for their beliefs alone.

Assagioli embraces the Gnostic tradition wholeheartedly, putting it central to the vision of Psychosynthesis. He goes further, however, and quotes Goethe saying: 'Reality is that which is effective' thus aligning Psychosynthesis with hermeticism and magic. Indeed, will and imagination are clearly the most important elements of both psychosynthesis and magic (always tempered by love, of course.) Taking the hermetic position, Assagioli says '...in so far as phenomena whether termed spiritual, mystical or parapsychological change the inner reality and outer behaviour of an individual they are real.' This is again emphasising the importance of experience as well as faith.

In a rare moment of irony, or even mockery, Assagioli says (talking of modern man): 'His belief in a future heaven if he conceives of one, is altogether theoretical and academic, as if proved by the fact that he takes the greatest pains to postpone as long as possible his departure to its joys.'

Let's explore what else is at the core of all these teachings that Assagioli incorporated into Psychosynthesis. Of course, there is much anecdotal information, and ideas and connections we can glean from his unpublished papers. But what clues can we learn from his published work, and particularly from the Psychosynthesis Manual? What about, for instance, the Christian mysteries? Assagioli mentions Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits who are considered to exemplify the 'will side' of the Christian tradition. The methods of self-discipline devised by Loyola are most definitely aimed at strengthening the will. Assagioli also mentions Saint John of the Cross who is said to embody the love side of the Christian mysteries. The methods of St John are those often these days attributed to the feminine - love, surrender, forgiveness and so forth.

Assagioli was always looking for synthesis, the central theme of his work. Regarding the Christian Mysteries, he found this through Dante's Divine Comedy. This work is a synthesis of the 'masculine/ will' and 'feminine/ love' polarities, where Reason (represented by Virgil) can only take the aspirant so far, then Beauty (represented by Beatrice) takes him further, to soul. The necessity of both is emphasised, thus stressing the twin poles of analysis and synthesis. All 'alchemy' whether called such or not, requires an analysis as part of the process, perhaps concurrent but often preceding the work of synthesis. Basically, the notion is you have to take something (or someone!) apart before putting them back together again.

A theme central to Christianity, and most esoteric traditions, is that of service. Assagioli clearly intended this as a major part of the 'Gnostic' tradition that Psychosynthesis would embrace. Talking about mystical experience, he says clearly: 'Mystical experience is limited and whatever value it may have is only one stage in spiritual psychosynthesis ... the mystical experience is not an end in itself but from it the subject has to draw down the fire, enthusiasm and incentive to come back into the world and serve God and fellow humans ' (Psychosynthesis page 207)

This leads us to the Rosicrucian tradition. Was Assagioli a Rosicrucian? Well, if he was, we would never directly know because part of the true Rosicrucian tradition asserts very strongly and adamantly that an initiate must never reveal this. Perhaps in keeping with this injunction, Assagioli is very discreet. In one place, however, he mentions 'the rose at the centre of the cross that forms the symbol of some religious orders.' He is of course talking of the Rosicrucians. The word gives us a clue to their understanding of soul and spiritual growth, and of its connection to Psychosynthesis. 'Rosicrucian' is made up of 'rose' and 'cross' and the notion is that when we accept our suffering (like Jesus on the Cross) then a rose blossoms in our heart. In other words, for the development of soul we need to include the darker aspects of psyche. It is vital we include the lower unconscious in our psychosynthesis work!

Assagioli, after mentioning the Rosicrucians, develops a beautiful exercise, one of the best known in Psychosynthesis - the blossoming of the rose. This is pure Rosicrucianism. Just as the cross needs to be planted firmly in the earth so the wood can 'bloom forth with a rose', so the rosebush in Assagioli's exercise needs to be firmly rooted in the earth to receive the nourishment required for it to blossom. The essential imagery of the rosy cross is a beautiful metaphor that lies at the heart of our Psychosynthesis way.

After discussing Christian Mysticism, we must include the tradition that connects Assagioli to his own family, collective and ancestral roots - the Jewish Mystery Tradition, and particularly the Kabbalah, based on the glyph known as the Tree of Life. The influence of Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah on Assagioli is considerable. The link with the Kabbalah is the main factor in Psychosynthesis being able to incorporate many other systems and techniques into its fold without being diluted or corrupted. The Psychosynthesis egg, like the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, on which it was modelled, is an excellent synthetic container for understanding and working with the psyche from an experiential perspective.

The wider Jewish mystical tradition also affirms the importance of experience as well as faith, and Assagioli, who was Jewish, was steeped in its warm, heart-full intentions. One of his friends was Martin Buber who has been called the father of Jewish Mysticism. Buber's masterful work expounding the importance of the reality and experience of what he called the I-Thou experience. The I-Thou experience is opposed to the I-it experience in which the other person in a

relationship is made into an object. The I-Thou relationship transcends the projective and reflective limitations of I-it existence (which can hardly be called relationship in comparison.) What Buber was describing is the same as the Cathars illumination experience.

Much has already been written about the relationship between the Kabbalistic Tree of Life and the Psychosynthesis egg diagram and their similarities. The work of Sheldon Kramer, and my own article 'The Qabalist' (Psicosintesi journal, Italy, April 1997) have explored this in depth. The Kabbalah (and its more modern update, the Qabalah) is the central key to understanding the Western approach to soul and spirituality, and therefore to really understanding Psychosynthesis. The Kabbalistic Tree of Life is at the core of the spiritual psychology in which Assagioli had a life-long interest. It is therefore not surprising that Psychosynthesis easily interfaces with the Tree of Life to create a coherent and effective synthesis.

The purpose of the Tree of Life is to help us sort out different aspects of our psyches, and more clearly be able to work with heart energy rather than just with intellectual knowledge. We have minds, feelings and bodies so we can be incarnated here on the planet earth to do our work, whatever that work might be. If we tease our thoughts, feelings and sensations apart a little bit and start looking at what each of them means in relationship to the whole of us, then it is easier to start finding out what the energy is behind these -what's really moving us. The Kabbalah, being a way of the heart, says that basically it's always love that is trying to emerge. That's not to deny the importance of power, or all the other qualities and aspects of our lives, but when we move to our hearts and really ask ourselves what it is we are here for, in one way or another we find it is something to do with the expression of love.

When you first look at the Tree of Life it looks very complicated, but it really is very simple. Start by imagining an upright triangle. Now imagine two triangles, one upright, then underneath it an upside down one. This is a little bit harder but not terribly difficult. Just add one more, so you have now three triangles, one the right way up and two upside down directly underneath. The three triangles are the basis of the whole tree of life image. Of course, the Tree of Life is little more complicated than that. At each of the corners of the triangles there is a sphere. Then just to make it a little more difficult, there is one extra sphere between the top two triangles and one extra one inside the bottom triangle.

So what does this all mean? What's the point of these triangles and the spheres at the corners? What could they be about? Imagine you are in a room with a group of strangers and we all hold hands in a circle. No speaking is allowed, we are just holding hands in a circle. The longer time passes before anyone speaks, the more things are happening for all of us. We don't often hold hands with strangers, so as soon as we are holding hands with these people we have different responses and reactions. There is the physical sensation involved in actually touching another person. Secondly, there are different feelings and emotional reactions, such as:

what's it like to hold hands with this stranger here? What does this mean? What do I feel about this? Is it dangerous? Do I like it? So many different emotions can come up. Thirdly, we have thoughts about it, too. What do you think about holding someone else's hand? What do you think about some body coming along and telling you to hold someone else's hand?

The three circles on the bottom triangle of the Tree of Life represent these three different aspects of our relationship to other people and the world around us. The bottom one represents our physical presence on the planet. If we could hold hands without having any emotional reactions, feelings, thoughts, or any reactions at all, *just* the experience of sensing holding hands, that would be the pure experience of this sphere (which is called Malkuth, but you don't need to worry about these names, or the numbers of the spheres to be able to understand them.) When you spend even a moment aware of your physical presence and yet neither thinking or feeling anything - that is this sphere in its essential form. You might have experienced this if you walk, dance, go running or swimming, and have pushed your body until you are no longer thinking or feeling anything.

The two spheres above this sphere represent our feeling and thinking processes. So with these three spheres we cover the three modes familiar to us from Psychosynthesis: body, feelings and mind. Usually, however, we do not just sense something, or just feel something, or just think something. All three modes operate in combination. The field of awareness, also familiar from the Psychosynthesis egg diagram, offers us a good way to understand this. This field of awareness (like an amoeba) moves about, most of the time, between the three spheres that represent thinking, feeling and sensing. These three sensing, feeling and thinking spheres, taken together, represent what we have to experience life with and to express ourselves with, in the present moment. Here we are, here and now, with these three modes somehow or another activated within us and activating us. The sphere in the centre of these other three spheres then represents the past.<

Within any present moment we are always carrying the past within us. What happened to us in the past is affecting what's happening here and now. When we imagine holding hands with a group of strangers, the feelings, emotional reactions, thoughts, and senses we experience are unique to each of us, at least somewhat different from everyone else's experience. At least partly, each of us has different experiences now because of the different experiences we have had in the past. The other factor that affects us in the here and now is the future, our inner potential. Everything that is potential can happen in the future. The upper part of the Tree of Life represents the future; it is the potential we carry round in us, that is able to manifest at any moment. Most of the time, though, we are not aware of it. We might be so caught up with experiences from the past, or so busy in the present moment, we forget about our potential. It is still there, however, always manifesting.

The key to understanding both Psychosynthesis and the Kabbalah is through the

central sphere on the Tree of Life which exactly corresponds to Assagioli's notion of the 'self' at the centre of the egg diagram. As well as representing 'the I' it corresponds to both the heart at the centre of the human body, and the sun at the centre of our solar system. It is possible, through meditation and other techniques, to focus totally around this central sphere. The Psychosynthesis version of this experience is described with the words: 'I am I, a centre of pure self consciousness.' Nothing else: no thoughts, no feelings, no sensations. I have thoughts and I am more than my thoughts. I have feelings, and I am more than my feelings. I have a body and I am more than my body. I am I, a centre of pure self consciousness.

Assagioli added a vitally important extra into the formula. To 'I am I, a centre of pure self consciousness...', he added, '...and of will.' When we move into that central place, when we connect to our heart energy, to the central aspect of our being, there is also a push, an energy, a will, a transpersonal purpose, or spiritual thrust - one can call it all sorts of names - something that pushes us back into life. It is as if, when we enter into the energy of the heart, something says: hey well, fine, we made this connection, very good, now do something with it. Activate it, make it more manifest on the planet. From a Kabbalistic viewpoint, people use the Tree of Life to meditate, and will focus on their spiritual centres, but always with that idea of being able to bring this energy back to earth. Like Psychosynthesis, the Kabbalistic system, as well as being a way of the heart, is also a way of service. The focus is on manifesting soul energy back into everyday life to 'serve God and our fellow humans.' The danger for many spiritual seekers is that they like it on the sun so much they never want to leave there. They become so involved being the sun, being a light source, that they forget the shadows they cast. In terms of the solar system, in terms of our heart energy, if we stay just there, there aren't any shadows. Absolutely, and that's a wonderful place to experience. But often it is the shadows, the dark places, that reveal to us more things about how we are going to manifest. If everybody existed in a place of no shadow, there'd be no need for relationship, for contact, for service. We need places with shadows to remind us of our mortality *and* our totality.

The diagram shows an overlay of the Psychosynthesis egg diagram with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. How well they overlap is astonishing, although perhaps not so astonishing when we remember Assagioli's interests. Spend some time now studying this diagram and seeing how it increases your understanding of the egg diagram. Notice, as you do this, a third overlay in the diagram a human body. The Tree of Life is most definitely not just an abstract map of the psyche but also, through its system of correspondences, a map of both the structures and energies within a body. Consider the implications of this for the Psychosynthesis egg diagram, which also corresponds to the Tree of Life!

The use of the Kabbalah as a tool in psychotherapy allows the practitioner to develop a style in accord with more universal principles, develop relationship in line with these principles, and apply techniques where and as appropriate to each relationship. This three-fold understanding of the process, principles,

relationship and techniques corresponds exactly with the three triangles on the Tree of Life. The aim of Psychosynthesis, from a Kabbalistic perspective, is to bring a client into relationship whilst holding connection to underlying spiritual principles (the top triangle on the Tree of Life.) How far this happens depends upon the type of therapy being practised, the individual practitioner's aims and abilities, and the relationship. Psychosynthesis aims to include the whole Tree (as represented in simplified form by the egg diagram.)

So we've been talking about the tree and the egg, what of the serpent? Perhaps the two best known 'serpents' are firstly, the serpent of knowledge (from the Garden of Eden story) and secondly the 'serpent power', also known as Kundalini, which resides at the base of the spine and which is always ready to uncoil and bring illumination to an individual who activates it. The Western mystery traditions include a third serpent, one that is described as coiled around the egg of life. Imagine the egg diagram with a serpent coiled around it, its tail at the bottom of the egg, its head reaching the heights. The serpent in this 'egg girt with a serpent' (as it is called in esoteric literature) is an appropriate synthesis of the two better known serpents mentioned before, and an ideal metaphor for our psychosynthesis work. Interestingly, the image corresponds to the rosy cross - the egg can only crack and release its potential new life when the serpent is activated on all the planes.

Basically, we have to get to the ground or the earth and invoke the serpent energy within our bodies - then the awakened serpent makes the connection for us between the different realms of the unconscious, expanding our field of awareness, or our knowledge. A bridge is created between the areas of the unconscious and our conscious intent. Divine and human will are aligned. This is identical to the Eastern notion of working with energy centres in the human aura (chakras) to awaken the serpent energy (kundalini.) Of course, knowledge can be dangerous if either we do not know how to utilise it or if we misapply it. (Thus the injunctions against prematurely awakening kundalini energy.) Kabbalists assert that we can use knowledge most effectively when we connect to the higher spheres of wisdom and understanding. Our task is to connect with the wisdom and understanding that enables us to use (with will and love) this knowledge. The work of Roberto Assagioli is intended to guide us towards this wisdom and understanding. As Ferrucci so succinctly puts it in the title of his book, Psychosynthesis leads us towards 'what we may be.'

Now we have the tree, egg and serpent, we have the essential components of alchemy, a life long interest of Assagioli's that is also central to the Mystery Traditions. The work of Jung on alchemy is well-known and invaluable. Whilst not all Jungians follow this line, the tendency in the Jungian approach is to psychologise our view of alchemy. The notion is that alchemists were really talking about the inner world, our intrapsychic manifestations. Turning lead into gold was a metaphor for the process of individuation. Whilst this is true, it misses the fact that many alchemists were talking in guarded terms not just intrapsychically but also about physical and sexual alchemy. They weren't just

working with transforming psyche -inside, they wanted to do this through the sexual gnosis. Central to this 'Great Work' is the inclusion of what in Psychosynthesis we term the lower unconscious, as is made very clear in Assagioli's written work. For instance in Psychosynthesis he states:'we have first to penetrate courageously into the pit of our lower unconscious in order to discover the dark forces that ensnare and menace us..' We have already talked about the importance of grounding, of being in the body, of 'coming to earth.' But what about the importance of working with sexuality from a Psychosynthesis perspective. What of the serpent of desire, another aspect of the serpent energy both from a kundalini viewpoint and its role in the Garden of Eden story?

Assagioli had what some people might describe now as a rather old-fashioned attitude towards sexuality. The core of what he wished to express, however, was that we need not suppress or repress any aspect of our energy. Instead we can learn to regulate and appropriately express ourselves, including through sexuality. This may be summarised by his statement: 'No drive, emotion or desire needs to be repressed or should be condemned on its own account; it is the skilful *regulation* of its use and manifestation that is needed.' (Psychosynthesis manual, page 74.) The Psychosynthesis approach to transforming sexuality is simply putting it into perspective. Rather than sexuality 'having us' we can learn to have it. I have sexuality so I can use it (not that sexuality has you so it can 'use' you!) Of course, as always disidentification should not be used as a means of avoidance - to 'have sexuality' you must be coming from a genuinely disidentified place or you cannot choose to let go and surrender to it when that is appropriate.

To end, let's perform an alchemical ritual together to embody the energy of the Tree of Life.

Stand holding hands comfortably, then let go. Be aware of your own egg, individually surrounding your space, and overlapping with the energetic egg of the other people in this circle. Connect to the ground: imagine you have roots that connect you deeply into the earth Visualise the energy of the earth flowing up your legs, into your lower body - your genitals and lower abdomen - as you do this, get a sense of openness freedom pervading you.

Visualise energy rising up into your belly, your solar plexus and whole trunk - as you do this, feel your centredness in life, how you are rooted in earthly existence Visualise energy rising up into your heart, see your heart glowing with energy - as you do this, feel yourself filled with courage and compassion Visualise energy flowing from your heart, down your arms and into your hands - without opening your eyes, physically reach out with courage and compassion, feel yourself reaching out to the person on either side of you. Feel how courage and compassion in your heart gives you the power to link with other people.

Visualise energy rising up into your throat and mouth, and into your voice - feel this connected energy giving you the power to speak out your truth. Without

opening your eyes, make a sound to express your own inner truth, (don't force it, but keep making the sound until you feel complete.)

Visualise energy rising to your eyes - open your eyes and see the truth of who you are and where you are. Then close your eyes, visualise the energy ascending to the top of your head and feel the presence of the divine within.

Connect now with the courage and compassion to let go of those either side of you, still aware of their presence but no longer linked with your arms and hands. Imagine yourself as the Tree of Life: your roots deep in the earth, your trunk filled with energy, your branches stretching up into the sky, connecting with the light of the sun and stars.

Draw down the energy of the sun and stars into your body - keep drawing energy through your body and bring this energy right down to earth. Bring energy right down into your roots, supporting you in expressing who you are, your own truth Ask your inner guide now to give you a word, short phrase, image, symbol and/or gesture, movement that encapsulates what is the next step for you on your journey in life.

As said earlier, the work of Roberto Assagioli is intended to guide us towards the wisdom and understanding necessary to manifest our knowledge on the earth, clearly and in service to others. Through this we are constantly turning our old 'leaden' nature into a new 'golden' embodiment of our deeper truth, that we are always becoming Self.

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