



# The self

Martin Schmidt

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Jung's thinking about the self separates Jungian analytical psychology from other psychoanalytical schools. He uses the concept of the self to portray his understanding of who we are and the concept of individuation to describe who we can become.

In the Freudian/Kleinian tradition, the ego, id and superego are the main agents but for Jung the self is the predominant driving force of the psyche. It is primary and present before the ego. Like Freud, he saw the ego as the centre of consciousness but he referred to the self as the Greater Personality, ultimately unknowable, linked to a universal sense of cosmic unity. We can never fully know or embrace it because we are dependent upon the inferior ego to perceive it. Perhaps this struggle in apprehension has led to very different understandings of the self's qualities. Jung portrayed it as a psychic structure, a developmental process, a transcendental postulate, an affective experience and an archetype. It has been depicted as the totality of body and mind, the God image, the experience of overwhelming feelings, the union of opposites, wholeness and a dynamic force which pilots the individual on his/her journey through life. This latter idea is quintessentially Jungian, for although other psychoanalysts have talked about the self in a similar way, classical psychoanalysis still largely uses the term as merely a way to describe the totality of the individual rather than a dynamic teleological agency.

## **Archetype and transcendental postulate**

The self not only transcends the ego but the individual. Jung equated it to the God image: *'It might equally be called the "God within us"'* (Jung 1928, para. 399).

He saw the self as not only personal but a collective phenomenon. It comprises the whole of the psyche and organises the personality. In common with Buddhism and Taoism, Jung believed life was not a series of random events but rather an expression of a deeper order, which he and Nobel physicist, Wolfgang Pauli referred to as the 'Unus Mundus' (Jung 1955, para 660).

In this model, all inanimate and animate, physical and psychological phenomena are seen as part of a continuum underlying all existence. Man is therefore part of a universal whole as well as having a subjective self.

The self is the: *'archetype of orientation and meaning'* (Jung 1963, para 224). Like all archetypes, he saw it as having two polarities: a material/physical pole and a spiritual/psychological one. At the physical pole, it is easy to see that we are connected to all matter as we are composed of the same atoms and held together by the same energy. At the spiritual pole, our meaningful connection to others is expressed in numinous experiences, the transference of feelings (a core feature of analysis) and synchronicities.

## **Individuation**

Individuation is the cornerstone of Jung's psychology and describes how the agency of the self manifests. He saw it as the process of self-realization, the discovery and experience of meaning and purpose in life. The goal of the self is wholeness and this depends upon the interplay and synthesis of opposites e.g. conscious and unconscious, personal and collective, psyche and soma, masculine and feminine, divine and human.

Analysis not only fosters but accelerates individuation, creating conditions in the relationship between patient and analyst which offer the possibility for rarefied experiences and transformation which otherwise may not happen. This is because the analytic situation allows both participants to join in a quest for the truth; to express and experience the self in ways which are often prohibited by the compromises made in the service of social acceptance in non-analytic relationships.

## **Ego, self and mid-life**

Jung saw the first half of life as a heroic task. Its goal is to develop a strong enough ego that can acquire sufficient independence to leave the gravitational orbit of the parents. This usually requires leaving home, finding a career and building relationships of one's own.

However, as well as strengthening one's ego, it is necessary to keep in touch with a sense of oneself to be alive to one's feelings and to be guided by one's intuition. Jung maintained that the psyche is a self-regulating system (like the body) and alienation from one's sense of self, of who one really is, can lead to imbalance.

A life predominantly directed by the ego can become identified with a narcissistic persona and lack meaning. One needs both a strong ego to manage tasks that require reason, as well as a sense of oneself to know who one is and which direction to take. The ego seems somewhat man-made whereas the self is a force of nature (Schmidt, 2005). It has a broader perspective which connects us to a greater truth. The biggest decisions in life, such as what career we should pursue, where we should live and with whom, require insight and gut-feeling which comes from the self.

Jung saw mid-life as a critical transitional period, for the goal of the second half of life is not to acquire further possessions and status, but rather to prepare for death. Now it is required that the ego surrenders its dominion (the narcissistic delusion that it is the self) and instead enters into service of the self. Jung considered individuation to be more than maturation or just growing up. It involves a confrontation with oneself where it is vital to integrate the shadow and contra-sexual aspects of one's personality. In so doing, one may become more able to truly make peace with oneself, play an active part in the wider world, support the next generation and formulate one's own philosophy for living and dying.

## **Experiences of the self**

Jung describes direct encounters with the self as full of awe. They can be awe-some when they take the shape of sublime, numinous or oceanic experiences and awe-ful if the unconscious overpowers the personality as we see in psychotic breakdown.

The self is rarely experienced as a unified whole but it is phenomenal i.e. able to be experienced. It appears in dreams, myths, and fairytales in the figure of:

*‘ the “supraordinate personality” such as a king, hero, prophet, saviour ...or in the form of a totality symbol, such as the circle, square or cross (or mandala)... When it represents a complexio oppositorum, a union of opposites, it can also appear as a united duality, in the form, for instance, of tao as the interplay of yang and yin...’* (Jung 1921, para. 790.)

## **To conclude**

The self is a true Jungian symbol in that it is saturated with meaning and remains elusive. In common with terms like mind, psyche, soul and spirit: *“the self is no more than a psychological concept, a construct that serves to express an unknowable essence which we cannot grasp as such, since by definition it transcends our powers of comprehension.”* (Jung 1928, para. 399)

The goal of Jungian analysis is to foster a relationship to this mysterious self (of both analyst and patient) that is authentic, embodied, coherent, continuous and transcendent. In this way, we may become more able to fulfil our potential and accept who we are.

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