

A Thesis Presented to  
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Self-Actualization

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## Introduction

I need to dispel the notion that this paper is truly my thesis. It is fitting that even now (11:38 AM, May 14, 2013), on the very day the thesis is due, its true nature as a process, rather than an end or means, is making itself ever clearer. For a long time, I thought the project was myself (regardless of the lack of an established way to express that). But in fact “myself” is just one complex element of an infinitely more complex process that we know as the universe. There is nothing truly definitive about this paper; it is not an indicator of my scholarship, nor my accomplishments, and most of all, it cannot represent self-actualization. Right now, it is a living thing like any other- truly an extension of my conscious mind; it is alive throughout the writing process. Once the process ends, the paper dies. Likewise, we die continually and are reborn in every instant.

Thus it has been difficult for me to write about self-actualization, as words are so concrete, and self-actualization is not; above all other definitions, it is foremost a process, likely without beginning or end- and in that vein, it does not fit well on a page or confined to any other traditional format. It is something we cannot fully understand with our senses, nor our conscious thought. The project has always been our process; it is my journey, and yours- self-aware, ever metamorphosing, and flawed. It almost seemed suitable to represent this with a journal, spanning several months- but even that could not nearly adequately represent the true nature of the process; this cannot as well, yet it is an attempt at doing so, and an artifact of the process (of writing, living, self-actualizing, etc.). To the best of my ability, I will explain what I can about this process

and why it matters. You may learn something about yourself- something you knew all along.

A tenet of self-actualization is ability to resolve dichotomies, or dualistic schemas, into a more liberal, holistic view; things considered separate and/or conflicting instead seem interwoven, or at the very least complementary. While this quality is rather beneficial, as well as an alleged marker of health, it nonetheless may create a gap disallowing the communication of ideas. In the face of a world that is infinitely vast and interdependent, it would seem that communication of any idea would be a futile attempt. This may help explain the existence and characteristics of introverts, such as myself.

One dichotomy in particular that I actively resolve is that of work and play. Many consider work the bane of their existence, citing its necessity as an excuse so that it need not be enjoyable, but rather a means to future rest and recreation. Yet, even the rest and recreation, once secured, cannot be fully savored, with impending work and other “troubles” in mind. I have gradually been able to transcend this dichotomy, interweaving work, play, and rest, as well as means and ends, with the necessary also indistinguishable from the unnecessary. Whatever is, is. We can choose not to label our perceptual worlds.

On that note, it is immensely important to me that this piece serve a purpose greater than fulfilling a requirement (so that I may be designated an AU Scholar). It is a necessary part of the process enabling my growth, and the simultaneous growth of others in this endlessly actualizing universe. On a cognitive level, I believe that in understanding our true nature, we may rid ourselves of much of the stress and suffering that are pervasive, and instead we may lead fulfilling lives characterized by compassion

and joy. In the spirit of pragmatism, I will wait no longer to divulge some simple guidelines that will enable you to embrace your inner goodness and live the life you are meant to live. These are the result of years of contemplation and a wide range of influences, from which I've managed to pick out the most important elements and lessons.

While self-actualization isn't about doing or being anything or anyone other than how you naturally are, we also cannot remain stagnant. In short, always do good and be the best person you can be.

Stop and pay attention to your breath,  
your posture, and your surroundings.

Walk silently;  
step so that you don't scrape your feet on the ground;  
take note of your pace.

You may be in a hurry, with a destination,  
but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy the walk too.

Consider others, and how you could improve their happiness;  
you will find your own happiness comes easily.

Continually use and challenge your body and mind,  
so that they may grow rather than atrophy.

Treat them well. Be conscious of what you ingest,  
and whether it may be damaging or enriching.

Be conscious of how you influence your environment,  
and how it influences you.

Treat yourself and others with respect and sincerity.  
Be committed not to harm others, without exception.

Consider that we are all interdependent;  
we are all children of the universe,  
equally valid and important.

Be happy. Be loving. Be aware.

## Part I: Theoretical Considerations

### A. Self-actualization?

It is through the work of Abraham Maslow that some of us have come to know the term 'self-actualization.' Self-actualization is known within the field of Psychology, and thus assumed to fit within the paradigm of empirical sciences, yet it was never intended to be so; this term was merely the result of Maslow's desire to understand two of his teachers that he greatly admired. He quickly noticed similarities between them and many other "healthy" people, and from these similarities continued to develop the conditions for psychological health. All the way, he acknowledged the unscientific nature of his work (Maslow, 1971, p. 42).

Fittingly, my attempts to study self-actualization have followed the same path as Maslow's, as most of his developments were derived from his own self-exploration (Maslow, 1971, p. xvi). Maslow (1971), considered a humanistic and positive psychologist, sought to discover humankind's psychological potential, studying healthy people- those who embodied and expressed "full humanness" (p. xvi), as well as the conditions necessary to achieve such a state. These conditions he deemed man's "hierarchy of needs." His original published hierarchy consists of four levels of "deficit needs" that we are compelled to fill, followed by the state of self-actualization, characterized by a variety of "being needs," found to be common among the healthy people Maslow studied. According to this model, man's most fundamental deficit needs are physiological, such as the obvious needs for food, water, sleep, breathing,

excretion, and overall homeostasis. Past this level of basic needs are progressively more sophisticated deficit-needs: safety, belonging, and esteem (Maslow, 1970, pp. 15-22). Once the need for esteem is satisfied, one is then able to focus fully on embracing the being-values of truth, goodness, beauty, wholeness, dichotomy transcendence, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection, necessity, completion, justice, order, simplicity, richness, effortless, playfulness, and self-sufficiency (Maslow, 1971, pp. 133-135). Though Maslow's schemas are plausible, and largely abide by common sense, they are nonetheless subjectively derived, and thus have been criticized as unscientific as well as culturally biased (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). As a self-actualizer himself, Maslow had little concern for asserting his theories as fact, for the sake of recognition or self-esteem; in each of his books, he makes it clear that his endeavors are merely an expression of his playful curiosity and desire to improve the lives of others (1971, p. 42).

## B. Parallel conceptions

Maslow was not the first to introduce the notion of self-actualization to the West; decades earlier, in his 1939 book, *The Organism*, Kurt Goldstein stated, "This tendency to actualize its nature, to *actualize 'itself,'* is *the basic drive, the only drive by which the life of the organism is determined*" (p. 196). Goldstein particularly referred to the actions of a sick organism, and its natural tendency to use its remaining capacities in an effort to actualize itself at all times (p. 197). All other apparent drives, such as hunger, he claimed, were merely components of the organism's fundamental drive for self-actualization.



Although the term appears less than a century old, the notion of self-actualization seems to have originated millennia ago in both Buddhism and Taoism, and likely even before that. While Maslow referenced Lao-tze, commonly regarded as the founder of Daoism, as a self-actualizer, it is Buddhism in particular that I have found entirely relevant to my own self-actualization process, as well as Maslow's depictions.

### C. Building vs. Stripping

My own conception of self-actualization is actually derived much more from Buddhism than from Maslow. While Buddhism is a religion, it contains elements of philosophy that may stand alone, to be adopted by agnostics, atheists, and practitioners of other religions. Proclaimed by the Buddha after his enlightenment more than two millennia ago, the primary doctrines of Buddhism are known as "The Way." As I have come to understand and accept it, the Way is not separate from our lives; it is a path we are already on, attempting to simply be as we already are, to fully embody and manifest our Buddha-nature. As I see it, this is no different from self-actualization.

So what is the self, then? Our individuality seems undeniable, with our bodies and countless thoughts clearly belonging to the self. We seem to be cohesive, autonomous units, or at least like to see ourselves that way. This is our self-image, or ego- an entity assumed to exist based on evidence that is hard to deny. In the West, the belief in duality- or the *self* as separate from the *other*- is ubiquitous to the extent that alternatives are barely even acknowledgeable. Yet some manage to step outside the

paradigm; still residing within the framework of our conscious minds, we may realize that the self is just one possible schema.

Derived from the alleged words of Buddha himself, the Four Noble Truths are considered a primary doctrine of Buddhism. In short, they state that man is afflicted by suffering, yet this suffering is preventable. In pursuing self-actualization, we may escape suffering, but the question is: how do we do that? The fourth Noble Truth addresses this question, claiming that following the Eightfold Path will prevent suffering. This consists of moral action, speech, thought, and concentration. As a Western Buddhist modernist layperson, I attempt to practice mindfulness during each moment. These practices allow us to simultaneously see and manifest our true selves. While these activities are not dependent on the ego to manifest, many of us are stuck to the ego, and carry them out within its framework, essentially bolstering the ego rather than letting go of it. This largely counterproductive process of accumulating merit on the ego is known as spiritual materialism (Trungpa, 1973, p. 5).

In the West, and surely the East as well, the challenging, enigmatic journey of self-actualization is barely considered, relative to the tangible journey of self-improvement. While self-improvement is commendable, and may result in increased compassion, overall wellbeing, and increases in other self-actualizer traits, it is fundamentally different from the process of self-actualization, and largely only perpetuates suffering.

Self-improvement is a bottom-up approach, focused on the cultivation of a range of positive traits, such as appearance, agreeableness, wealth, sense of humor, and even the traits of the Bodhisattva, or “he who is brave enough to walk along the path of

[awakening]”: generosity, discipline, patience, energy, meditation, and knowledge (Trungpa, 1973, p. 170).

Self-actualization can be envisioned as a stripping away rather than a building up. It too is partly about cultivating traits, but there are several important distinctions to note: the cultivation of traits is merely coincidental to the actualization of the true self, and the traits are identifiable not as characteristics of the ego, but manifestations of the true self.

What we must attempt to strip away, through increased awareness, are all the negative influences hindering the true self. We do not usually consciously acknowledge these as hindrances, but rather we ignorantly allow them to torment us. Most of these negative influences could otherwise be described as unnatural. Things like junk food, drugs, social conventions, and reliance on technology can all impede the manifestation of the true self. This is fundamentally different from self-improvement, although we may not recognize it as so, as self-actualization is not reliant on our ability to conceptualize. Conceptualization is largely an activity of the ego-self. Luckily, the primary negative influence causing our suffering seems to be within our control; this is our tendency for attachment. We are attached to our apparent possessions, our apparent individuality, the way things were, the way things are, and the way things “should be.” We must learn to embrace change, as it is inevitable.

D. Actualizing vs. Actualized

It is customary in our culture to assume every process has an end point, and the extent to which we reach our goals is the measure of our success. We can easily conceive of the past and future, but the present seems rather elusive, as it is continually changing. The nature of the present as a process seems more readily accepted in Asian cultures, where non-dualism is an aspect of the religions that remain prevalent, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism. This view is also present within the post-modern paradigm- rooted in existentialism- that is slowly gaining a foothold in the United States. It is incredibly liberating when we accept that there is no end-point on the horizon, that to give meaning to our lives may very well not rely on reaching a goal, but in continually doing, or even just being.

Knowing that self-actualization is a process with no end, it appears formidable and difficult- surely a source of frustration. But to think of it this way is to totally disregard its core meaning. It is in fighting self-actualization that we find difficulty, frustration, and suffering.

#### E. Beyond self-actualization

While self-actualization consists various types of transcendence, such as the transcendence of dichotomies, negativity, striving, and the Freudian superego (Maslow, 1971, pp. 269-279), later in life, Maslow divided self-actualizers into two subsets: transcending and “merely healthy” (pp. 280-295). Transcending individuals are those whose lives are characterized by their “peak experiences,” or moments of clarity, bliss,

and selflessness. While nearly everyone has the potential to reach such a state, very few manage to do so.

This notion was a cornerstone of David Hawkins' theory, addressed in his book, *Power vs. Force*, in which he describes the "map of consciousness," with levels ranging from shame to enlightenment. Hawkins is notable for his highly unconventional albeit allegedly scientific and objective methods- namely *applied kinesiology*, the testing of muscles to measure truth- from which he derived a logarithmic scale from one to one thousand, on which people and all other things can be calibrated. According to Hawkins' testing, while enlightenment (levels 700-1000) is possible in humans, it is extraordinarily rare, with the highest level having been attained only by Jesus Christ, Krishna, and Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, whose lives, real or fabricated, have impacted countless millions, and could easily be characterized by their peak experiences of selflessness and transcendence (Hawkins, 2012, pp. 276-277). The preceding levels of consciousness, peace and love, at 600 and 500 respectively, as well as the remaining levels, down to 200 (courage- the threshold between positive and negative states), may be parallel to Maslow's non-transcending self-actualizers (Hawkins, 2012, p. 72). Similarly to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we self-actualize by progressing through the levels of consciousness. In order to progress to reach our potential, it is critically important to act righteously (with kindness) without exception (Hawkins, 2012, p. 132). Every moment of one's life is essential to self-actualization, which may very well be our ultimate purpose; as the past is fixed, and the future is illusory, we must actualize our potential in the present.

## Part II: The Journey

Every moment throughout the span of time in the universe has contributed to my current state. I could speak of how I came to be, from the probable lens of evolution, but it seems more appropriate to speak of my personal endeavors, grounded in the belief in humankind's free will. While I am not convinced of free will, or even the existence of an independent self, there is nonetheless an undeniable chain of thoughts and behaviors exhibited by my mind and body. For all practical purposes, I consider this my own journey and life. Also, to distinguish periods of self-actualizing from periods of lower functioning (such as self-improvement) is perhaps impossible as well. In the interests of convenience and comprehension, I will put my philosophical musings aside to describe my process in tangible terms.

The initial intent of this project was to embrace a self-actualizing lifestyle, in which I would attempt to exhibit the characteristics of a self-actualizer, and seek means to improve those characteristics, and also simultaneously work to redefine my sense of self- effectively giving my own meaning to self-actualization. It is not particularly difficult to make choices that are aligned with positive growth; two activities in particular that seemed beneficial were brain training and exercise.

The importance of exercise was first made blaringly obvious to me in one of Dr. Lichtman's neuro-psychology lectures during my sophomore year (he cites that not exercising is akin to smoking a pack of cigarettes a day). From that point onward, I have gone through several phases in which I highly value and exuberantly partake in exercise, yet it still hasn't stuck as a habit, despite my awareness of its benefits.

Likewise, in the past school year, I started regularly engaging in daily brain training games on Lumosity.com, but after several months, I stopped (largely due to my computer's inability to process the games).

Other practices I have tried that have seemed aligned with self-actualization were Hatha Yoga, T'ai Chi, and meditation, in my last three semesters, respectively. From each of these I faced some frustration, but overall they have been invaluable practices to try; the frustration is actually a mark of their value.

Other endeavors I have pursued include learning guitar and piano. Learning these instruments by the traditional methods seems to be an example of self-improvement, yet with the piano, I have been drawn to practicing improvisation, which seems to be in tune with self-actualization, as this sort of playing appears to be a manifestation of my true self- producing beautiful phrases despite very limited practice. Similarly, my passion for ceramic sculpture- although I have sculpted infrequently in the past four years- seems to be aligned with self-actualization. I found I was able to tap into my subconscious or inner self to manifest beautiful abstract organic forms.

Perhaps the most enduring practice of the past several years has been my appreciation of music. I am ever-seeking the best possible music to immerse myself in. To date, the best music I have found is mostly instrumental. Classical music and jazz in particular, as well as some modern 'indie' bands (i.e. Balmorhea), seem the most refined, and somehow related to self-actualization.

I believe the newfound lifestyle element most closely linked to self-actualization is my diet. It is only within the last six months that I have made a substantial shift in this dimension- from moderate to pronounced focus on nutrition and overall health. It is not

difficult to see how health and self-actualization are related, particularly from the lens of orthomolecular psychiatry, or the process of treating the mind by controlling the body's nutritional intake. After all, the mind and body are inarguably both no more than a matrix of chemicals themselves; our thoughts and behaviors are precise chemical releases within the brain and elsewhere. It should not be surprising that we may influence not just our health, but even behavior, with our nutritional intake. Through increased intake of many naturally occurring foods, and decreased intake of many synthetic and adulterated "foods," we may create a more hospitable internal environment in which the brain and body function optimally.

Serendipitously, I was fortunate enough to encounter the Bulletproof Diet online one day. It is in this diet, perhaps more so than any other, that the optimum expression of health is the primary focus. As this diet is radically different from the more typical American diet I was used to, it took me several months to ease into it. The most essential element of the diet is what not to eat, namely sugars, grains, and "processed foods." Beyond that, there are hundreds of additional nuances of the diet- many of which are based research published in peer-reviewed, scientific journals, with forty such studies cited beneath the concise one-page display of the entire diet (Asprey, 2011).

Although at times inconvenient, adopting the diet has been rather enjoyable and rewarding. The foods that have become staples for me- avocados, coffee, butter, eggs, fish, grass-fed steak, and raw milk- are all delicious. My mind and body have both seemed healthier than ever, and my immunity has seemed particularly strong as well. Even my pulse and athletic endurance seem to have been affected by my high-fat, high-protein, low-carbohydrate intake.



It is important to note that causation cannot be implied when looking at the things I have tried and the seemingly resultant effects. My self-studies are rather unscientific, and more focused on obtaining concrete results, without necessarily knowing the simple effects of each treatment, although it would be nice to know these. To live well seems more important than to know how to live well.

Although there are countless instances, behaviors, and thoughts I could address, I will only touch on one more: reading. How lovely it would be to absorb every book. It is only recently that I have come to appreciate books again- I had not been an avid reader since early in high school, and I still have not managed to catch up to my old habit. Recently, in being exposed to a wide range of books, as well as situations and people, I have been able to take note of commonalities that serve to illustrate the fundamental nature of life. Everywhere I look is a relevant piece of the puzzle. Everything has a lesson to divulge.

### Part III: A Look Back & Ahead

Is it possible to gauge one's self-actualization? Likely not, but I have been trying. The Personal Orientation Inventory is a standardized test designed to measure self-actualization by comparing one's answer selections to those of self-actualizers. Curious as to what my results would be, I took the test. On my results page, I was presented with several bar graphs indicating my scores within fourteen traits, and the criteria to judge whether they were comparable to the pool of self-actualizers. With every trait, my scores came close to the means for self-actualizers. Even if all my other work fell through, I could always fall back on this promising result. Yet I could not put much stock in this status-marker; to do so would surely mean succumbing to spiritual materialism. Self-actualization had to remain fresh; there was infinitely more to do.

While self-actualizers may consistently show certain traits, do the traits necessarily indicate self-actualization? I cannot judge if this is true. In fact, my lack of knowledge is one of few things I really can feel sure about. In the words of my dad, "there are things you know you know, things you know you don't know, and things you don't know you don't know." I think what he meant by this is that despite our strengths, conscious knowledge is limited; we are simply unable to know most things. Analyses of the cognitive sort do not lend themselves to simple matters like goodness, which is best explored in practice. In evaluating goodness rather than simply living it, we are trying to know that which need not be known- effectively shying away from our potential to self-actualize, despite our intentions to reach that point. In terms of being and doing, we should simply try to be and do.

I will continue to reap the fruits of many disciplines, and sow action back into my environment. I am merely one vessel among many- a composite part of a grand machine or organism. I will continue to explore and challenge my assumptions, as well as those of others, and those that systematically oppress the masses, yet remain accepted.

I think it is important to note the limitations of words; in talking, reading, and writing about self-actualization, I have come to be rather fed-up with it. It is just another schema that I don't need to hold on to. What's truly important is beyond words, thoughts, and even actions. It is the reality of the present that we must be receptive to. This simple insight is perhaps the best measure of my self-actualization.

I do not know where my path will lead, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I acknowledge and trust the process of being, the sanctity of the present, and the beauty that is boundless.

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