

The Four Phases of the Core Energetics Approach: An Evolutionary Therapy

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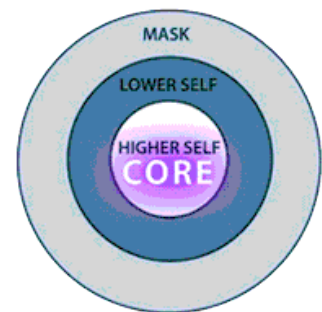
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*The sacred wound is the wound, the healing of which,
allows us to become the hero of our own life.
- Jean Houston*

Core Energetics, which was developed by the late Dr. John Pierrakos, MD, is often identified as an evolutionary therapy and as an approach that bridges body-psychotherapy with spirituality. An outgrowth of bioenergetics, co-founded by Pierrakos and Alexander Lowen, Core Energetics emerged from Pierrakos' vision that sought to integrate not only mind, body, emotions and will, but also incorporated the transpersonal dimension of the human being at a time when spirituality was often frowned upon in therapeutic circles. Pierrakos' view was that patients seek not only healing and relief from the personal and relational limitations that are a consequence of historical wounding or traumas, but also seek meaning and purpose in life and the evolution of the personality toward a more authentic expression of the individuals' innate qualities. He advocated the need to see each client as someone with essential qualities reflecting various degrees the universal qualities of love, power, and wisdom/serenity. Core Energetics views these attributes as the basic energies of our Core - the very essence of who we are and which we have incarnated in order to express. The vision of the work is as much about healing, as about opening to embrace an ever-expanding expression of our life force as evolving and fully embodied creative beings.

The Core Energetics approach is a four-phase process with one phase organically moving into the next over the course of therapy. While dominant blocks to the free flow of energy and consciousness are liberated, several or all phases of the work may form part of any given session. The four phases are: penetrating the mask, transforming the lower self, centering in the higher self, and connection to the universal life plan. Each phase invites us to explore deeper layers of our personality and to connect more authentically with our essence and the fullness of our energy.

The Core Energetics model posits three layers of personality out of which we act or react at any given moment. These are: the mask, the lower self, and the higher self. Each level supports a vastly different experience and quality of energy and embodiment. As the process unfolds we gain insight into these aspects of self and how they are currently expressed in the circumstances of our lives, consciously or unconsciously. Each phase affords us an expanded ability to contain energy as we own and integrate what was previously



disowned, and as we learn to ground and wield the energy that was previously used at the service of repressing unwanted emotions and maintaining blocks. In this way, energy and consciousness are interwoven and expand simultaneously in psyche and soma.

The Higher Self in Core Energetics

Before discussing the four phases and progression through them, it is important to define what is meant by the higher self in Core Energetics. The higher self simultaneously holds the consciousness of both our individuality and of our inherent connection with all life. It is neither good or bad, dark or light, but higher in vibrational frequency. It is that in the personality that can hold a larger container for reality and truth and therefore operates with a discernment not available to the mask and lower self aspects of our consciousness. It is from our higher self that we express ourselves authentically and with self-responsibility. The higher self is more than the observer self. Pierrakos (1987) saw it as the creative ego, which as opposed to the “little ego”—which is limited and driven by self-will, can facilitate and express the potential of the Core directly and has the capacity to replace and evolve old patterns of thinking and being into new expressions that support an expanded embodiment of the universal attributes of love, power and wisdom.

The Core practitioner seeks foremost to see the higher self of each individual initiating therapy, often before the client can fully acknowledge this in themselves. The client is not viewed as their character defense (the configuration of defensive patterns that manifest at the various levels of the personality), nor as a character structure (the configuration of physical blocks and energy leaks that can be observed in the body and that reveals the clients' frozen history). Every individual client is seen as someone with innate and unique treasures to unfold and express that are at their Core of being. The ultimate purpose of long term work with Core Energetics is to support and facilitate this expression in the world. Releasing blocks, grounding, work with energy through breath, charge and discharge, solving personal issues, are all parts of the process, a process of evolution for anyone who desires to take the work beyond symptom relief. Thus it is both a therapeutic process and a creative evolutionary journey.

The higher self is visible in the body, just as the mask and lower self facets of the personality are visibly discernible to the trained practitioner. The soul journey, however, intuited via implied in the characterological wound itself, is one, that if consciously taken, leads toward an integration that is both personal and transpersonal.

The following is a simplistic example to help elucidate this point. One might encounter a client whose energy is displaced upwardly in the body, identified by patterns of physical tension that cut off energy flow to areas of the body where tender vulnerable feelings are most easily accessed—the areas of the heart and belly at the front of the body. Instead, their energy is displaced toward the will centers in the upper back and head, where the will and thought process dominate. From the Core Energetics

perspective, the objective of the work would be, in this case, to help this client integrate their feeling centers, where denied vulnerabilities and tenderness can be accessed, and to surrender to these aspects of their humanity. Furthermore, by increasing their capacity to trust and let go of their defensive need to control things, they can begin to ground in the reality THAT IS, rather than the reality they insist upon through overuse of the will at the expense of the heart.

The integrative soul task of such an individual would be to unify the energy of their heart—of love, with the energy of their will. Truly, an individual who can stand grounded and harness the energy of love unified with the power of will, is an individual with remarkable leadership and inspirational qualities. Someone with this characterology has innate courage and a willingness to move things forward. Leadership, courage, forthrightness, among others, are the higher self qualities, the treasures within, of the person that is taking the journey of healing in and through a body that presents itself as upper-displaced.

The deeper truth of the higher self within each and every client, implicit in their characterological story, needs recognition by the therapist before the work to dismantle the somatic and psychological defenses can fully proceed. How many of us would be willing to release our ego mask if we believed that was all of who we were? Even fewer would venture toward consciousness of their lower self—far too threatening to the ego-ideal, without some awareness of themselves as much more than this.

The higher self serves then as the foundation on which the journey can be taken for those clients that would follow the process through all the stages. Working through the mask and lower self are the steps that make increased energy available for the expression of the creative higher self. The energy which was previously at the service of the ego defense and of suppression of the lower self.

Preliminary Steps

I have been referring to the Core Energetics process as a journey, as indeed it has been for me, for many of my clients, and for my colleagues on the path. It is important to note that not every client enters the office with this in mind. Clients come in with the desire to heal a broken heart, leave an unsatisfying job, or find a way out of chronic anxiety or depression. Work with the body offers powerful symptom relief, which is what certain clients seek at a given moment in time, which should be respected. Others, however, come in with an awareness of repeating patterns or themes in their life which they seek to understand, or have had previous experience in therapy and are ready to go deeper in a journey of self-development.

With Core Energetics, as with any other therapeutic modality, meeting the client where they are is fundamental. Early sessions are dedicated to receiving and getting to know the client, taking their history, evaluating resources and support system, assessing ego strength, ability to self reflect and self reveal, learning about general health, physical limitations, current circumstances and presenting issues. All these

are foundational steps in building a therapeutic container. In addition, a body reading is often conducted formally or informally in the first few sessions to assess grounding, where energy may be split, blocked or leaking, areas of over or undercharge, postural distortions, freedom of movement and breathing. Psycho-education is important to convey the importance of the body and body awareness for those new to body psychotherapy. During this preliminary stage, clients begin practicing increased attunement with their sensations, feelings, and the emerging movements from within, as opposed to the known stories and self-definitions they are often over-identified with. All the while rapport is built as the therapist connects with the clients' humanity, sees and empathizes with the wound, and holds and supports the awareness of the higher self that is the other side of the wound. It is from this place, from our own higher self, that we begin the work of penetrating the client's mask.

Phase 1: Penetrating the Mask

Core Energetics calls the most superficial layer of our personality the mask. This is the layer of ourselves we most often present to the world. Here we find the defenses and adaptations developed as a survival strategy to compensate for, and escape from, the hurts, humiliations and unfulfilled needs of our past. Here too is the part of our personality that is always striving to live up to an idealization of whom we think we are supposed to be. Often it reflects a role we adopted in our families — the responsible one, the peacemaker, the tough one, the clown, etc.

Our ego becomes identified with our mask, meaning that we start believing this is who we are. The stronger our ego identification with our mask, the less we are able to tolerate the consciousness and energy of everything that it was created to hide. Increasing energy or life force is diverted toward perfecting our mask(s), as we often wear several. This is an enterprise that can never really succeed. I have had clients over the years initially come to therapy with the hope of getting their mask to work better: the man employed in the metaphorical shark tank wanting to become tougher and less sensitive; the perfectionist woman seeking to be better at doing more — a struggle with which I personally identify. The struggle becomes endless as we can never truly satisfy the idealized image of the person we think we should be.

We all invest energy in our mask in the belief it will gain us love, approval, control, power, or safety. The false promise of the mask as the solution to suffering can never be fulfilled. Even when we manage to get what we want from this place, it fails to satisfy. Why? Because we cannot genuinely receive the love, approval or power we are given when we have gained it through our mask places. Something deep within us knows that we came by it through a kind of deception. Internally we remain feeling undeserving and empty and the striving continues. In addition, the mask frequently distorts what is our real need, for a false one. The real need for love becomes the demand to be seen as special or perfect. The

real need for connection becomes the false need to be the life of the party, or to adopt a submissive attitude in fear of alienating someone.

The energy of the mask is stagnant energetically. It lacks vitality because it is not authentic. It is difficult to feel in real connection with a client when they in their mask because it's nature, is inauthentic and therefore creates separation.

The mask can be identified in the body in our character armor (the somatized patterns of energy management that shape our body) and in our character structure (the constellation of behaviors and beliefs that reflect our worldview and are intimately connected with how we allow energy to flow or not flow through our bodies). For example, a collapsed chest that doesn't receive sufficient breath perpetuates an "I can't get what I need" place or the chronic tension in a jutting jaw that expresses "I am tough and determined," but keeps energy locked in that part of the body and away from the vulnerable sensations of the heart and belly, or the posterior pelvic tilt that expresses a submissive stance in life.

Every mask is some form of distortion of the individuals authentic higher self qualities — of love, power, or of wisdom and serenity. Each of the character structures tends to favor one mask over another. What is noteworthy is that the characterological mask is always a distortion of the actual higher self qualities that the individual possesses. The presentation of the self via the mask is inauthentic, and therefore there is a notable quality of insincerity that comes through, potently different in quality than when we express our authentic or higher self.

A client who, for example, has what is known as a fragmented or schizoid character defense, may wear a mask of wisdom and serenity, perhaps manifesting as an ivory tower intellectual superiority, or as an above-the-fray serenity of spiritual loftiness. These serenity masks are however fear driven withdrawals from our messy humanity, our embodied energy, and our feelings. Someone with this defense tends to have multiple energy splits in the body and will withdraw their energy away from the periphery of their body—where contact with others is made, instead, drawing inward toward the center of the body. This individual essentially holds themselves away from contact as it feels safer for them than being fully present and in contact-full relationships.

The mask of serenity can be difficult to maintain when too much is happening and often the facade of serenity cracks. This individual can become blaming, hostile, judgmental, demanding, prickly, or confused. These expressions are further aspects of the mask layer of personality. Core Energetics posits that someone with this defense really possesses at their Core, true and profound wisdom and serenity which can be accessed once the fear of contact and embodiment, and the painful early traumas that created this defense, are worked through. Thus the mask is penetrated, and the lower self can be transformed to reveal the Higher Self.

In the early stages of the work, the therapist will need to tolerate the clients mask while finding ways to support the clients' awareness of its existence and of its intra and interpersonal effects. The therapist can

make use of themselves by offering feedback. An example is a client who comes in with everything figured out and uses the session to report on their insights. The therapist might comment on how it doesn't appear the client has any need for the therapist's help or support. This can be very effective, in particular when followed by asking if the client often feels they need to figure things out alone. When done with sensitivity this can open the door to an examination of how the client rejects their need for support from others and observe how this is anchored in the body as character armor. Important to acknowledge is how this mask was likely created out of necessity and effectively "worked" for the client at a particular moment in their history. Most importantly, to recognize how this mask is likely not working very well in the present to satisfy their real needs.

Attention to the mask aspect of the personality in a manner in which the client will not feel diminished by its acknowledgment is key. Every single one of us has created masks as ego adaptations defensively in order to cover our wounded-ness. We must also recognize that despite how conscious we become, we may find ourselves at times operating from this place, even though it doesn't serve us.

The prospect of dismantling the mask is more easily undertaken if the client understands that their mask distorts their inherent higher self qualities. The higher self quality of love, for example, becomes distorted into acts of disingenuous giving, self-effacing behaviors, and acts of submission or self-denial by the mask. The higher self quality of power is converted into pushiness, aggression and the need to control. The mask takes the higher self quality of serenity and wisdom and distorts these qualities into various forms of withdrawal. Submission, aggression, and withdrawal being the pseudo-solutions adopted during development to survive or attempt to master the difficulties encountered in childhood. In each of us, one of these pseudo-solutions tends to predominate and directly influences how energy is processed in our body and are visible in our character structure and character armor.

Many types of physical interventions are used in Core Energetics to release energy blocks, unify energy splits and support access to new feelings, sensations, and awareness. Ongoing work to build grounding, the ability to be fully embodied and present, through exercises that support a more flowing distribution of energy throughout the body, increase the capacity to contain new feelings and sensations. Behavioral dynamics are examined energetically in sessions through movement, posture, expression and role play and new movements supported. The Core Energetics practitioner further supports integration within psyche and soma in the clients daily life, by helping the client frame and utilize that which has occurred in the session and practice application of this in day to day events as what I like to call, "little experiments." The creative experiment of making a new choice, for example, saying no or let me think about it, before agreeing to something automatically from a submissive or falsely generous place, is possible following energy and consciousness work. Step by step the client's capacity for authenticity, increased awareness, containment and empowerment are built.

Every area of life and every relationship where dissatisfaction is experienced is an opportunity to explore how the mask is in operation by opening awareness of what lies beneath.

Step 2: Transforming the Lower Self

It is important to evaluate a client's readiness or ability to engage this second phase of the work. There are some clients who are prone to using new-found awareness and energy against the self. Others, suffering with PTSD, with its characteristic nervous system dis-regulation, will require gentler work to heal and sustain improvement in this area, before work with lower self is initiated. Clients that tend to dissociate, or who are unable to contain their energy and act out in their daily life and relationships, will need more work with grounding and containment before considering work with lower self energy.

The lower self is the disowned energy that hides behind the mask. Unlike the mask, whose energy is low, dull and stagnant, the lower self has energy and power. Like the mask, the energy of the lower self is in the service of separation. The lower self has an intention to stay separate and persists in the illusion of separateness from others. The lower self is not another word for anger or hatred. Rather, it is our attachment to the destructive aspects of our personality, our *investment* in staying angry, staying special, or staying separate. It is our investment in keeping our hearts closed. It is the life stream, that because it has been wounded, has become a destructive current of energy.

Our lower self comes from the ego's attempt to avoid pain at all costs. Avoiding pain, though it feels like a life saving decision, creates numbness. We cut off areas of our body and distort our feelings to not feel our pain. This takes us out of connection with ourselves. Numbness to ourselves creates numbness to others. This in turn creates cruelty where we become blind to our true power and in which our creative life force becomes an unconscious destructive current.

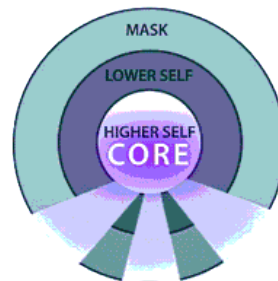
It is important to set a positive intention and to enlist the aid of our higher self in becoming more conscious of this aspect of ourselves. Clients need to be reminded that everyone has a lower self, and that the individual who is willing to look at, to own, and take responsibility for, their destructive current, is truly a more trustworthy and courageous human being. This is the truest sign of spiritual integrity and commitment to consciousness. This is real and brave spirituality, as opposed to the *whipped cream on garbage* illusory type of spirituality that avoids or denies the destructive aspects of our complex human nature.

As is the case with the mask, each of the various character structures will tend toward their own distinct expression of lower self. These will relate to the individual's particular "*no's*" to life that are configured in the arrangement of defensive armoring in the body. For example, the mask expression/statement of a collapsed chest and contracted belly, such as predominates in the oral structure, might be "there is not enough for me." The lower self statement hidden below this mask however, would likely be along the lines of "I will never receive, I am committed to my state of emptiness and I will punish you with my

spoken and unspoken demands that you fill me.” There is as you can sense, a profound difference in the quality of energy between the Mask and the Lower Self.

Awareness of the Lower self tends to blow the idealized image we insist upon holding of ourselves right out of the water—one reason why working with the lower self is so threatening to the ego. It is crucial however, to advancing consciousness of the hidden dynamics that create so much pain and separation in our lives. Lower self work can proceed once the stage has been set and the therapeutic alliance is strong.

The therapist will need to remind the client who seeks to understand and take responsibility for their lower self, that this is most certainly not all of who they are, that there is much more to them than their lower self, and that it is indeed an act of courage and integrity to explore this and the will of the Higher Self to transform this separative energy which we all have to different degrees, because all of us have been wounded in some way.



Caveats about appropriateness and timing are important to heed, but having said this, it is not that difficult to engage the lower self therapeutically and most clients respond powerfully and positively to the work at this stage.

To see how the judgements, blame, or self-righteousness we so often hold in our mask all have an inherent cruelty and a negative intention toward separateness in them, is not a big leap for the client that is ready. It becomes easier to see how, behind our judgements and blame, there is a place that is really saying, *I will see you as less than me*. If we energize this and allow ourselves to fully feel this place, it opens the door to a deep knowing that is something that comes from the very wounded place in us, a place where we were unseen, or were treated as less than. We discover here that we are no longer just the victims, but also are perpetrators of the same injustice. Only in recognizing this can we take responsibility for the suffering we cause and the damage we do—*not with guilt*, which tends to send us right back to our mask—but with deep remorse for the pain we have inflicted. Remorse is a restorative emotion that holds a deep awareness of the interconnection between us all, and in it we recognize the price that we too have been paying for our disowned negativities.

An enormous amount of energy is liberated when the ego no longer suppresses consciousness of the lower self. This newfound energy offers increased stamina and can be put to creative purposes. It offers us the felt sense that we have done something radically heroic and powerful by taking full responsibility for the destructive currents in us previously hidden below the mask. With this, new conscious choices are available and have the energy to back them up. The body feels deeply energized and the psyche experiences a sense of cleansing and relief from the guilt and shame that we carry because so much energy has been invested in denying the existence of, and keeping the lower self unconscious.

Phase 3: Centering in the Higher Self

Consciousness of the lower self is imperative for anyone who is seeking true self-acceptance and self-love. Awareness of the lower self and its origins brings us new insight around our early wounds through exposure of our most negative reactions to those wounds. As already stated, his owning of what was previously disowned allows us to tap into a trove of energy, energy previously bound in our unconscious lower self, which can now be directed toward creative instead of destructive use.

Our newly sourced energy strengthens our capacity for deeper feeling and acceptance of the original pain of our wound, around which we had previously constructed myriad defenses to avoid. In facing our wounded-ness without defense we discover we do not die as we thought we might, we do not disintegrate, or become less than. Quite the contrary, we find ourselves relieved to emerge from our defensive postures and our numbness. Less defended, we find ourselves more alive and connected.

Our greatest pleasure, our sense of vitality and meaning now comes from the experience of deep connection, rather than from the negative false pleasure that existed when our energy was held captive by our ego mask—our righteousness, our pride, and the self-will that in the end, only keep us separate and alone.

It is a paradox that the energy of our lower self, when responsibly owned, will lead us more directly to our higher self—the expression of our wholeness. In recognizing our courage, our will to truth, our willingness to surrender our ego masks and to open our hearts with the will to love, we surrender to the flow of life in us and as us, without the same investment in defensive postures. Self-responsibility brings deeper trust in ourselves and in life itself, from which we need no longer hide. The natural expression of our innate higher self qualities—wisdom, courage, love, clarity, open-ness, in our everyday life, brings joy in being.

Phase 4: The Universal Life Plan

At this stage the client holds a deep knowing of the interconnectedness of all life, and that we are not separate. It is here that we sense that what we experience as personal also touches the universal. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1965), who inspired Pierrakos said:

“Human Energy presents itself to our view as the term of a vast process in which the whole mass of the universe is involved. In us, the evolution of the world towards the spirit becomes conscious. From that moment, our perfection, our interest, our salvation as elements of creation can only be to press on with this evolution.” (p. 67)

Inspired by Teilhard's vision, Pierrakos (1987) spoke of the principle of *Reciprocity*, wherein the more we open ourselves and allow the expression of our Core, our essence, to emerge, the more we are also vitalizing the universe and the stream of all life of which we are a part.

Our commitment to growth and to the healing of our character defense when consciously and seriously undertaken, is evolutionary work, sacred work. The journey of healing the energetic splits within ourselves, that are a result of our characterological wound, is a movement to unify and integrate what has previously been disowned by the psyche. This is what is known in Core Energetics as the *Life Task*.

The Life Task of each individual is revealed through their original character wound. So, for example, an individual with a fragmented or schizoid structure is someone who has not yet fully embodied their energy, given that their primary defense is to fragment, leave or dissociate from the body. The wound in this individual occurring during the very earliest most tender stages of life, when the infant was still in the process of *incarnating*. The rejection of the infants very *being or existence* at such a moment creates a defense that sends energy out of the material body, which represents painful experience. This person as an adult thus often lives a life in their mind or feels safer on the spiritual plane where they are away or above the fray of painful existence. The work through the various Core Energetic stages would support this person to contain and embody the fullness of their energy in the body. In effect, to complete the interrupted process of incarnation and to bring their intellectual or spiritual wisdom to physical reality by making it *matter* by creating connections within and without. Thus, the life task, the deep archetypal movement to unify spirit and matter, is accomplished within the being of each individual.

Each structure has their life task. An individual with an oral collapsed defense does work that leads to unifying the polarities of giving and receiving through entering the void and finding fullness. Someone who works through a masochistic defense has come to study the forces of pleasure and pain, and to find freedom and movement through the gateway of confinement. An individual with a displaced defense comes to unify the heart and the will, power and love, as well as to find strength through the gateway of surrender and vulnerability. The person with a rigid structure comes to unify the energy of love, of the heart, to the force of sexuality and make them one and to embrace both chaos and order.

Thus we see that by doing our individual work we simultaneously participate in a much deeper universal process, a sacred process that unites archetypal polarities or dualities, a process in which every individual matters because the personal is also the universal.

Thinking of character from this perspective imbues profound meaning to the work we each do as individuals who ourselves seek to heal, as we also hold space as therapists to support the journey of healing, growth and evolution of the clients we serve.

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Pierrakos, J., (1987). *Core Energetics: Developing the Capacity to Love and Heal*. Mendocino CA: Life Rhythm Publications.