

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

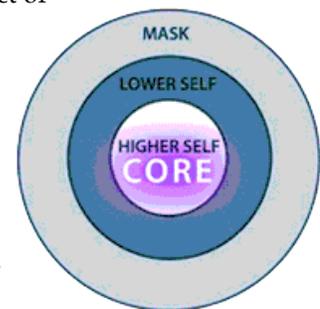
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*The sacred wound is the wound, the healing of which,
allows us to become the hero of our own life.*
- Jean Houston

Core Energetics developed by the late Dr. John Pierrakos MD, is often identified as an evolutionary therapy and an approach that bridges body psychotherapy with spirituality. An outgrowth of bioenergetics, co-founded by Pierrakos and A. Lowen, Core Energetics emerged from Pierrakos' vision that sought to integrate not only mind, body, emotions and will, but also 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 trauma, but also to find meaning and purpose in life and evolve the personality toward a fuller and more authentic expression of the individuals innate qualities. He advocated the need to see the client as someone with innate qualities that reflect 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 what we have incarnated to express. The vision of the work is as much about healing, as about opening to embrace an ever-expanding expression of our individual life force as evolving and fully embodied creative beings.

The Core Energetics approach is a four phased process with one phase organically moving into the next during the course of therapy. In addition, as the dominant blocks to energy and consciousness are liberated, several or all phases of the work are frequently 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 connects us more deeply 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 being 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 earlier being 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 begin with and 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 terms of vibrational frequency. It is that in the personality that holds a larger container for reality and truth, and can therefore operate with a discernment not available to the mask and lower self within us. 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 - limited and driven by self-will, can facilitate and express the potential of the Core directly. This is achieved through 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 - sometimes before the client can fully acknowledge this in themselves. The client is not seen just as a *character structure*, nor is their body seen only from the perspective of frozen history. The client is seen as someone with innate and particular treasures to unfold and express. Someone that already has these at the Core. 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, but are not the final end for the individual that would use this process as a path of ongoing evolution, if they choose to take the work beyond symptom relief.

The higher self is visible in the body just as the mask and lower self reveal themselves. The journey implied in the characterological wound itself, is one, that if consciously taken, leads toward an integration that is both personal and transpersonal. A simplistic example to help elucidate this point - the person with upper-displaced energy, the characterological psychopath, is identified by holding patterns in the body which serve to cut off energy flow to areas of their body where tender vulnerable feelings might be accessed. Energy is displaced toward the will centers in the upper back and head. From the characterological perspective, increasing capacity to trust, let go of the need to control, ground in the reality that is (rather than the reality they insist upon), and learn to surrender and integrate their vulnerabilities, is the objective of the body and energy work. Implicit however in this structure, where the will is overused at the expense of the heart, is the task to unify the energy of the heart, of love, with the energy of the will. 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.

For Pierrakos, 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 defenses can fully proceed. How many of us would be willing to release our mask if we thought that it was all of who we are? Even fewer would venture toward knowledge of their lower self - far too threatening for the ego, 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 makes increased energy available for the expression of the creative higher self, energy that was previously at the service of ego defense and lower self suppression.

Preliminary Steps

I have been referring to the Core Energetics process as a journey, as indeed it has been for me, many of my clients, and many of my colleagues. We need to acknowledge of course, that not every client enters our office with this in mind. Clients come in desiring to heal a broken heart, leave an unsatisfying job, or find a way out of chronic anxiety. Work with the body offers powerful symptom relief and for many that is what is sought in a given moment in time. That of course must be honored and respected. Others come in with awareness of repeating patterns or multiple experiences in therapy and are ready to go deeper.

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 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 session 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 for those new to body psychotherapy and support is given as clients practice increased attunement with their sensations, feelings, and the emerging movements from within, as opposed to the known stories and self-definitions they may be over-identified with. All the while rapport is built as the therapist attunes and 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, our own higher self, that we can 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 part of our self which we frequently 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 who 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 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. The attempt then is to invest more energy toward perfecting our mask(s) - 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.

We 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. We cannot genuinely receive the love or 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 the real need for another. The need for love becomes the demand to be special. The need for connection becomes the need to be seen as perfect.

The energy of the mask is quite stagnant energetically. It lacks vitality because it is not authentic. It is hard to feel in real connection with the client when they in their mask, because it's nature creates separation. It can be identified in the body in our character armor and in our character structure. The collapsed chest that perpetuates the "I can't get what I need" place, the chronic tension in a jutting jaw that says "I am tough and determined" the posterior pelvic tilt that expresses a submissive stance to life.

Each of the character structures has it's own versions of mask and every version is some form of distortion of the person's real higher self qualities of love, power, wisdom and serenity. It is important to emphasize that the mask is a distortion of the actual higher self qualities that the individual possesses - but the quality of energy is vastly different. An example would be the client with a schizoid or fragmented defense who might wear a mask of serenity - the ivory tower attitude of the intellectual or the above-the-fray serenity of spiritual superiority that belie a withdrawal from contact. Someone with energetic splits in the body and withdrawal of energy from the periphery -where contact can be made, might experience difficulty in maintaining particular masks. Energy in the form of blaming, hostility, judgements, demands, confusion, prickliness, or pride, may leak through. These expressions are also considered part of the mask layer of the personality and are ways that lower self below is expressing itself indirectly and surreptitiously.

In the early stages of the work the therapist needs to tolerate the clients mask while finding ways to support the clients awareness of it's existence and of it's intra and inter-personal effects. The therapist can

make use of themselves in some interventions with verbal feedback. For example, the client who comes in with everything figured out and uses the session to report on their insights might be served by hearing the therapist comment that “it doesn’t appear the client has a need for the therapist’s help or support.” If done with sensitivity this can open the door to an examination of the clients rejection of their needs and how this is anchored in the armoring of their body. An examination of how the mask may once have worked but how it is not working now to satisfy is important. Attention to this part of the personality in ways the client will not feel diminished by its acknowledgement is important, as is normalizing that each of us have masks, which though created for a reason, may not be serving us in life any longer.

The prospect of dismantling the mask is more readily undertaken when a client understands that their mask distorts their own inherent higher self qualities. The higher self quality of love becomes distorted by the mask into acts of disingenuous giving, self-effacing behaviors, and acts of submission or self-denial. The mask converts the higher self quality of power and converts it 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 which were adopted during development to survive or attempt to master the difficulties encountered in childhood. One of these pseudo-solutions tends to predominate in each of us and directly relates⁵ to how energy is processed in our body through our character structure and character armor.

Many different kinds of physical interventions are used in Core Energetics to release energy blocks, unify energy splits, and support the access to new feelings, expression of emotion, and to self-awareness. At the same time ongoing work with grounding builds the clients tolerance for increased levels and flow of energy, as to the new feelings and sensations. In addition, the Core Energetics therapist supports integration within the psyche and soma by working with the client to frame and name what has occurred in the session and what new choices may be possible following the energy work. Step by step the client’s capacity for containment increases.

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

Step 2: Transforming the Lower Self

It is important to evaluate clients readiness or ability to engage this second level of the work. There are particular clients with certain character structures who are prone to using and turning awareness and energy against the self. Clients with non-characterological trauma - PTSD nervous system dis-regulation which renders even their previously ego-syntonic character defenses non-functional, require work toward healing and sustaining improvement in this area before work with lower self be initiated. Clients that tend to dissociate, or who are unable to contain their energy and are acting out in their daily life and

relationships, also need more time working with grounding and containment before considering working with lower self.

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 becomes a destructive current.

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 our creative life force becomes an unconscious destructive current. It is important to set a positive intention to know the lower self and enlist our higher self in knowing this aspect of ourselves. Clients need to be reminded that everyone has a lower self. The person that is willing to look at and own this current within themselves is more trustworthy and more courageous. True ownership of our own capacity for destruction embodies a much deeper integrity and spirituality than any whipped cream on garbage illusory type of spirituality.

As with the mask, each of the character structures tends toward particular expressions of lower self that relate to the particular "no's" to life configured in the body's arrangement of defensive armoring. An example, if the mask statement of the collapsed chest and contracted belly predominant in the oral structure, might be "there is not enough for me," the lower self statement would be more along the lines of "I will never receive, I am committed to my state of emptiness and will punish you with my demands that you fill me." There is a profound energy difference in the two.

No one really wants to own their lower self, the ego finds it too threatening. Lower self awareness tends to blow the idealized image we insist upon holding of ourselves out of the water - one reason why working with the lower self is so important once the stage has been set and the therapeutic alliance strong. The therapist needs to keep reminding the client that this is 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 be willing to explore this.

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.

The step between seeing how the judgements, blame, or self-righteousness we hold in our mask have an inherent separateness and cruelty in them, is not a big one for the client that is ready. Finding the place

within our judgements and blame that is really saying, *I will see you as less than me* -when energized and allowed to be fully felt, opens the door rapidly to the awareness that understands how this comes from the wounded place in us where we were unseen, or treated as less than. Here we can discover that we are no longer the victims, but have the capacity to also be the perpetrators of the same injustice. Here we can take responsibility for the suffering that we cause, and the damage we do - *not with guilt*, which tends to send us right back to our mask, but with remorse. Remorse holds a deep awareness of the interconnection between us all and recognizes the price that we have been paying as well. The addition of newfound energy liberated from the lower self gives us the stamina, the sensed capacity, of doing something differently and making new more conscious choices. The body feels deeply energized and the psyche experiences a sense of cleansing from the guilt that we carry precisely 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 seeking to find lasting self-acceptance and self-love. The movement through lower self takes the client to the wound. Now however, it is accessed with the large quantity of energy that was hidden in our unconscious lower self. This brings a more embodied and energized experience and expression of the pain of our characterological wound - which somewhere along the way our psyche decided never to feel again and carried out through the armored body. The energy carries us there and we discover we do not die. Quite the contrary - we open to more life force, come out of numbness with an increased capacity to feel more alive and more connected. Our pleasure and vitality is drawn from this experience of connection, rather than from the negative pleasure that exists when our energy is attached to our masks, our righteousness, our pride, and our self-will.

It is a paradox that the energy of our lower self leads us to our higher self. Clients can't help but recognize their courage, their power, the strength of their will to love and to surrender to the flow of their feelings. More creative energy is available. Self-responsibility brings with it greater trust in oneself and in life. The client that expresses more of their higher self qualities in everyday life will experience greater satisfaction and joy.



Phase 4: The Universal Life Plan

The universal life plan is not a job description or career path. At this stage the client holds the consciousness of the interconnectedness of all life. It is here that we sense that what we experience as personal, meets the universal. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1965), an inspiration for 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, the more we are also vitalizing the universe and the stream of all life.

There is something sacred when we consider the primary work of each character structure from the viewpoint of a great movement to unify universal archetypal polarities - energies which also express themselves within each individual. The primary wound within each character structure invites a process of healing that is attained through unification of different kinds of energy splits. For example, an individual with a schizoid structure can be described as not having fully embodied their energy. Their energy tendency is to fragment, leave or dissociate from the body. In the work of embodying the fullness of their energy and creating connection within and without this particular life task can be viewed as the archetypal action of unifying spirit and matter and embracing the universal movements of falling apart and coming together. A person with an oral defense is working to unify the polarities of giving and receiving, of entering the void and finding fullness. Someone who manifests 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 to embrace both chaos and order.

Thinking of character from this perspective imbues a profound meaning to the work we do as individuals seeking to heal our own wounds, while also holding the space as therapists who seek to support the journey of healing, growth and evolution of the clients we serve.

Chardin, P. T. de, (1965). *Building the Earth*. University of Michigan: Dimension Books.

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