

## **Abraham Maslow – Self-Actualisation and the Peak Experience**

Self actualisation is the desire in all human beings to fulfil their potential. Abraham Maslow, in ‘*A Theory of Human Motivation*’ (1964) defined it as: ‘*The desire for self-fulfilment and to become more and more of what one is and everything that one is capable of becoming.*’

He believed that very few people ever achieve self-actualisation and he gave examples of Abraham Lincoln and Albert Einstein. He highlighted common traits found in people who, he believed, had reached self-actualisation:

- prepared to face reality and the truth (reality-centred)
- spontaneous
- interested in solving problems (problem-centred)
- accepting of themselves and others
- lacking in prejudice
- happy their own company
- quite autonomous, but have a few deep personal friendships
- not likely to ‘follow the crowd’
- gentle-humoured
- very original and creative thinkers

**For reflection:** What does it mean to fulfil your potential and why is it so important?

### ***The Hierarchy of Needs***

Maslow said that self-actualisation cannot be attained quickly – firstly, a person has to go through and satisfy what he called the ‘*hierarchy of needs*’ before they could go on to achieve the ultimate - self-actualisation.

These needs are instinctive and Maslow believed that if the environment is right, then people will grow up straight and true and fulfil their potential. Some of the needs are basic and biological and these are the most strongest since, without them, nothing can follow.

However, they are also low-level needs, whilst the later needs, which look towards understanding spiritual and other issues, are higher-level.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs are:

- Physiological – the individual has basic needs and functions; food, water, oxygen, rest.
- Safety – a sense of security, shelter, employment, comfort
- Belonging and love – personal relationships, sexual intimacy, family, feeling welcome

- Esteem – a sense of recognition, achievement, respect and worth
- Cognitive – the desire for knowledge and understanding of the world
- Aesthetic - an understanding of beauty, order and symmetry.

**For reflection:** Do you agree that these are a person's most important needs or are there others? Why/ why not?

For Maslow, self-actualisers are people who have reached the summit of their potential – they are achieving what they were 'born to do' and they have a sense of humility and respect for others, linked to a strong ethical code.

**For reflection** Are we all 'born to do' something?

### **Peak Experiences**

Self-actualisers are the most likely people to have a peak experience, which Maslow saw as an experience that takes a person out of themselves and makes them feel eternal and in touch with God. They feel part of the infinite.

In 'Religions, Values and Peak Experiences' (1964), Maslow described peak experiences as sudden feelings of intense happiness and well-being, with an awareness of ultimate truth and the unity of all things. Those having a peak experience tell of a sense of control over the body and emotions, a greater sense of awareness and a feeling of awe and wonder at the oneness with the world. They have encountered the ultimate truth or the essence of all things:

*'...feelings of limitless horizons opening up to the vision, the feeling of being simultaneously more powerful and also more helpless than one ever was before, the feeling of great ecstasy and wonder and awe, the loss of placing in time and space.'*

He identified two types of peak experiences:

1. Relative – the person still feels and awareness of subjects and objects – like a gentle extension of their own previous experiences.
2. Absolute – a mystical experience without time and space and a feeling of unity with all things.

Maslow's investigations found that those who had peak experiences said that they were always positive, never negative or evil, they were timeless and accompanied by a loss of fear, anxiety and doubt. They felt blessed or fortunate and the experience reaffirmed the worthiness of life and changed their views forever. Maslow believed that everyone was capable of having a peak experience, but many denied having one.

**For reflection:** Do you agree with Maslow's views on peak experiences? Why/ why not? Is he right when he claims that everyone is capable of having one?