



WHY GROWTH Is GOOD

The Case for Personal Growth, Self-Help, and the “New Age”

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For more information about Chris Edgar's writing on the case for personal growth, visit www.DevInContext.com. Other works by Chris include his first book, *[Inner Productivity: A Mindful Path to Efficiency and Enjoyment in Your Work](#)*, and the accompanying blog [Work Consciously](#).

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Introduction

Do personal growth techniques like meditation, affirmations and psychotherapy really have practical benefits? Is self-development nothing but self-indulgent navel-gazing? Can intelligent people engage in it with a straight face?

The essays in this collection are part of my effort — and, as far as I know, the only effort being made — to answer these questions, and to make a systematic, compelling argument for the value of personal growth ideas and practices.

By “personal growth ideas and practices,” I mean perspectives and techniques for working with our *inner*, or *subjective*, experience — our thoughts, emotions and sensations. Because this definition is obviously broad, I’ll illustrate what I mean with a few examples:

- *Psychotherapy* works with our inner experience by, among other things, helping us become aware of the unconscious beliefs and emotions that shape our behavior and life circumstances.
- *Meditation* affects our inner experience by, depending on the practice we engage in, helping us cultivate attentiveness, calm, insight, or some other state or

- capacity.
- *Yoga* reduces stress and increases our ability to concentrate, in addition to offering “external” benefits such as blood pressure reduction.

“Personal growth,” of course, is only one of the common terms used to describe these ideas and practices — others include “self-help,” “personal development,” “the New Age,” and so on. I’ll get into categorizing various types of personal growth, and distinguishing between activities that amount to self-development and those that do not, further below, but hopefully this will suffice to give the reader a general understanding of what I mean for now.

Although there is a less than clear understanding of exactly what personal growth is, even among its teachers and critics, one thing that’s clear is that it is coming under attack.

In recent years, [several books](#) — most notably, [Barbara Ehrenreich’s Bright-Sided](#) and [Steve Salerno’s SHAM](#) — have been sharply critical of various facets of personal growth. Self-help has also garnered (usually hostile) media attention over the last two years, due to an October 2009 incident in Sedona, Arizona, in which three died in a sweat lodge held as part of a self-improvement workshop. The upcoming February 2011 trial of James Arthur Ray, the workshop’s leader, will bring this issue back into the public consciousness.

Thus far, these critiques — to my knowledge — have largely gone unanswered. Maybe this is because personal growth is such a vast and amorphous field, and it’s hard for any individual “teacher” or “student” to understand whether the attacks are aimed at them. Or, perhaps self-development teachers see their ideas as so widely accepted that no defense is necessary.

Whatever the reason, we’ve seen no public response to the critics yet, and the purpose of these essays is to change that. I think many of the personal growth ideas and techniques out there have much to offer us, and I want to encourage people to avoid

hastily dismissing them as woo-woo, flaky, or impractical.

What Do The Critics Say?

The critics have attacked self-development from many different angles, and these essays will not attempt to comprehensively review or rebut every critique. However, a review of the anti-personal growth literature reveals a group of general themes, four of which I'll address in this collection:

1. Radical Responsibility

The idea that we have the power to shape our life circumstances is a common underpinning of self-development practices. Whether we're conscious of it or not, personal growth teachers often say, each of us is ultimately in control of our finances, relationships, and other aspects of our lives — and, perhaps, our thoughts and emotional states as well.

The critics' main quarrel with this notion is that it invites us to blame ourselves for, or “beat ourselves up over,” the problems we face in our lives. If we find ourselves in debt, for instance, that must mean we're irresponsible, lazy or stupid. After all, *we* — not external factors such as government policy — are responsible for our own financial fates.

What's more, the critics charge, if we're in control of our own circumstances, it follows that others must be in control of theirs. This implies that people who are poor, ill, or laboring under some other misfortune are unworthy of compassion. If they have the ability to solve their own problems, any failure to do so on their part must be “their own damn fault.”

“[Radical Responsibility: Self-Efficacy and Self-Blame](#),” the first essay in this collection, deals with these and similar issues.

2. A Dangerous Distraction

Many people see self-development as nothing more than a harmless distraction, much like Sudoku or reality TV. Not surprisingly, these aren't the people who spend time writing critical books and essays about personal growth. The vocal critics tend to see self-development as a socially destructive force.

A common reason for this view is the notion that self-development practices distract people from pressing social problems. If we develop too much happiness or inner peace by, say, meditating or saying affirmations, we may rob ourselves of the indignation that would otherwise have us act to combat poverty, disease, and so on.

If it doesn't cause us to blithely ignore political issues that need our attention, some critics suggest, getting involved in personal growth may cause us to neglect problem areas in our own lives. For example, "positive thinking," assuming it works, may make us "too happy," and thus complacent about real financial concerns we're facing.

["Personal Growth: The New Opiate of the Masses?"](#) covers this topic.

3. Self-Help and Selfishness

Critics often argue that, as their name implies, self-development practices encourage us to become overly focused on ourselves, to the exclusion of others' needs.

Some critics basically suggest that every minute we spend taking workshops, doing qi gong, or engaging in some other self-growth activity, is a minute we won't be able to spend reaching out to people in need.

What's more, critics charge, personal growth teachers often encourage us to focus on our own wants instead of the wants of others. After all, there are all sorts of books, seminars and so on about becoming wealthy, "finding the one," and so on, but how often do we see self-help bestsellers about, say, ending

starvation in the world?

I address these questions in “[Is Self-Help Selfish?](#)”

4. The Victim Culture

As we saw earlier, some critics target what they see as self-development’s exaggerated view of people’s responsibility for their life situation. Some, however, take the opposite tack, asserting that personal growth teachers encourage people to adopt a passive and self-pitying “victim mentality.”

For instance, many critics claim that psychotherapy fosters in patients the mindset that their parents are responsible for their present woes, and that freeing themselves of the influence of their “families of origin” is basically impossible.

Similarly, some self-development opponents assert that, by inviting us to wallow in our own pain, psychotherapy, support groups and like phenomena draw our attention away from the more serious suffering of others.

“[Personal Growth: A Culture of Victimhood?](#)” deals with these concerns.

What Is Personal Development?

Obviously, it is difficult to debate personal development’s merits without fully understanding what it is. Thus, I’ll explore what self-growth means more rigorously before addressing its critics.

In a nutshell, to my mind, personal development perspectives and techniques are (1) *consciously intended to work with our “inner experience,”* meaning our thoughts, emotions and sensations; and (2) meant to produce *progressive and lasting results*. I’ll expand on this below.

We're In It For The Feelings

Arguably, human beings do basically everything they do with the goal of having some kind of inner experience. Whether we're meditating, giving to charity, getting an education, drinking alcohol, or something else, we're doing it because of the way we think that activity will have us *feel*.

To use a common example, we don't make money just for the sake of having a bunch of colored pieces of paper. We do it because of the *feelings* we think having and spending money will bring us. Perhaps we want the feeling of security that comes with knowing we'll have enough to eat, a sense of accomplishment, the thrill of knowing we can buy a flashy motorcycle, or something else. But in any case, what we're after is some inner experience.

Some might object that they make money to take care of others (their children or elderly parents, for example), not because it helps them feel a certain way. However, you probably wouldn't have any interest in taking care of others if doing so didn't give you a certain inner experience — maybe a feeling of happiness, righteousness, or something else.

In other words, if you were emotionally indifferent to whether someone else lived or died, stagnated or thrived, you probably wouldn't be helping them.

Where The "Conscious" Part Comes In

While it's true that we do most of what we do with the goal of having an inner experience, we aren't always *consciously* seeking such an experience. In everyday life, I think, most of us don't consciously contemplate how the things we do will have us feel.

When we get up in the morning, for example, we don't usually ask ourselves whether we'll feel better if we go to work or stay home, or whether listening to the car radio will make the commute smoother. Usually, when we do these kinds of

activities, we're just going through the motions, running on "autopilot."

By contrast, personal growth activities, to my mind, are things we do with the *specific goal* of transforming our inner experience. We do them consciously intending to create a specific mental or emotional state. As a simple example, I may say the affirmation "I am lovable" with the intent of developing more self-appreciation. Or, perhaps I'll do some yoga to get a sense of openness or lightness in my body.

By my definition, the specifics of an activity don't determine whether it amounts to personal growth. For instance, suppose (somewhat implausibly) that I'm in the habit of meditating every day simply because my parents told me to. I'm not doing it because I think it will bring me inner peace, happiness, or some other feeling.

In this example, meditation is not a "personal growth" activity *for me*, regardless of how others might use it, because I don't do it with the conscious goal of feeling a certain way. The intent is what's important, not the specifics.

Growth Versus Advice

I've yet to discuss how one particular area of self-development fits into this framework. I'm talking about approaches that try to harness our thoughts, emotions and sensations to create a specific result in the outside world.

Popular examples include visualizing something you want in order to bring it into your life — whether it's business success, an intimate relationship, or something else; and energy healing intended to improve the client's health.

This sort of practice is a form of personal growth, under my definition, if it seeks to achieve the outer result by transforming the user's inner experience, or the way the user relates to that experience.

To illustrate, as I said earlier, a book that teaches us ways to become more loving toward ourselves, on the theory that this

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