

## MODELS OF INNER DEVELOPMENT

### The Four Elements

The stages of spiritual development have been allegorized, as a teaching framework, in the form of the four elements: Earth, Water, Air and Fire. The order of the elements represents increasing degrees of refinement and decreasing levels of density and materiality.

The lowest stage 'Earth' is the coarsest degree of matter and denotes passivity and fixation. At this point individuals are still conditioned by the grosser levels of manifestation, whether sensation, emotion, thought or action, in a manner which precludes any real understanding:

The stage of 'Humanity' is that of the ordinary man or woman, lacking flexibility, given to 'earthly' behaviour and also fixed by habit and training into certain beliefs. Hence its symbol, EARTH: a static condition. It is also known as the 'Condition of Law,' in which people act according to almost inescapable rules. These rules may be seen as the interplay of everyone's inherited susceptibility to training and the training itself. This is the stage of most people, characterized by its relative immobility as 'Mineral.' It includes many, if not most, of the people who imagine themselves to be spiritually-minded: the heavily conditioned ones. (1)

'Water' symbolizes the stage of potentiality when an individual enters the spiritual path and is able to exercise some capacities towards self-realization. Since a certain amount of growth and movement takes place at this stage, it is sometimes called the 'Vegetable' stage:

The stage of water, as distinct from earth, marks a very significant period in the development of consciousness: because whereas earth cannot be combined with earth except as a coarse physical mixture, water (the subtler and purer part of the human being) can be mixed with water (the subtler and purer element of a higher consciousness). This means that the "water," the purer part of the postulant, can be brought into a true mixture or relationship with the higher substances of the spiritual world. (2)

One of the functions of a spiritual teacher is to come in contact with those at the lowest stage (Earth) in order to conduct them to a higher level through the intermediary of the water element. The teacher has the capacity to raise the consciousness of the student to a point where it is possible to harmonize with the "perception of divine truth at its lowest level."

'Air' is the stage in which real insight and understanding develops. Since real developmental capacity is as different from simple movement as an animal is from a vegetable, its esoteric symbol is 'Animal.' Individual consciousness rises to a perception of true Reality higher than is possible in the 'Water' stage. The level of understanding complements and supersedes previous experiences of earlier stages.

The fourth and final stage of spiritual development is 'Fire,' in which the human essence is transmuted into its ultimate potentiality. Fire represents the highest level of consciousness or 'gnosis' and reflects contact with the Divine. In some traditions this stage is also referred to as the 'Death before death.' This 'inner or secret consciousness' within the human being is the link with the Divine, sometimes called the 'Kingdom of God.'

## Christianity and the Four Elements

The concept of the four elements is also found in esoteric Christianity where water, air and fire represent three stages of understanding in a system of human illumination (baptism, the Holy Ghost and the Kingdom of God):

This very ancient formulation is said by some to be referred to in the New Testament, with the concepts of Water, Air and Fire. Their understanding of the categories is very different from the interpretation generally and usually unexamined among Christian theoreticians and scholars. For them, the baptism of water is the ceremony which testifies to their potentiality for the First Experience ('Water'). A relic of this rite is said to be preserved – although in abbreviated form – in the words of John the Baptist: 'I baptise you with water . . .' John continues in the same passage, with ' . . . but he who comes after me shall baptize you with *pneuma* (air, the holy Ghost) *and with fire* . . .' That the experiences come in a necessary succession is testified in John, iii, 5: 'Except that a man be born of water and the Spirit, one cannot enter the Kingdom of God.' So the sentence, in esoteric terms, gives the names and order in which the successive initiations, corresponding to ever-improving perceptions, take place: water (purification from 'the world'), air/ Holy Spirit (understanding) and fire, 'Kingdom of God' (higher consciousness, awareness of Truth). (3)

In traditional, organized (exoteric) Christianity the baptism of water is followed by the ceremony of Confirmation, whereby a person gains a greater degree of knowledge and acceptance of Christianity (air or intellectual understanding) than the first stage of growth. The final stage (fire) is symbolized in the Church through the ceremony or sacrament of Holy Communion.

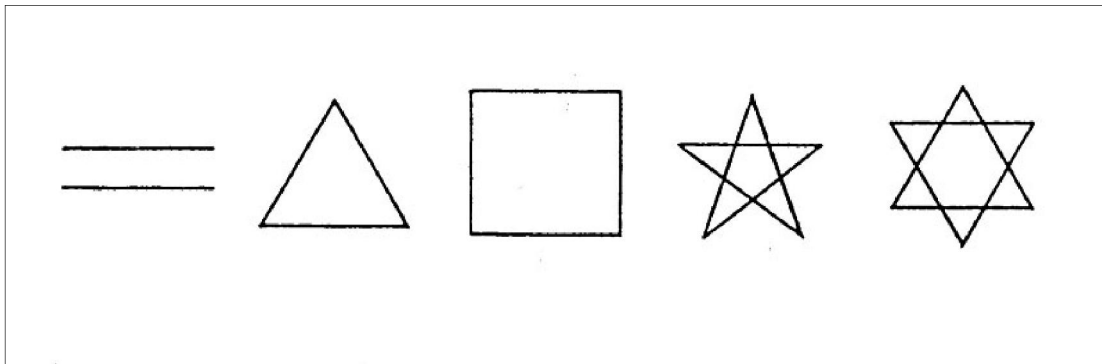
In esoteric Christianity and other initiatory systems the stages of inner development are seen as a series of 'rebirths,' involving the refinement of consciousness. The human being is born of earth, then successively transformed and purified through 'baptisms' of water, air and fire:

There are, then, three different kinds of experience, which together make up the range of possible human development. The first is emotional or energetic, and it is water baptism, a cleansing, sometimes called Catharsis, or cleaning out, purgation, which also has the function of support. The second is 'Confirmation,' or the transmission by direct methods of a higher form of understanding and spirituality,

comparable on a lower level to the religious 'instruction' received from a priest. The third stage is deeply intuitional, real perception of truth, described as coming in any case after death, but attainable in ordinary life as a 'rebirth.' (4)

### The Symbolism of Numbers

The numbers 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 and their respective related geometrical forms are a symbolic expression of the sequence of inner development of the human being, illustrating the different stages on the path to self-realization.



Most human beings reside in the so-called normal state of consciousness which is based on dualities or 'pairs of opposites.' Our usual sensations, perceptions, impressions, feelings and thoughts are divided into positive and negative, useful and harmful, good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant. This mechanical process continues until it is clearly revealed through objective and non-judgemental self-observation. "The understanding of duality in oneself begins with the realization of mechanicalness and the realization of the difference between what is mechanical and what is conscious. This understanding must be preceded by the destruction of the self-conceit in which a man lives who considers even the most mechanical actions to be volitional and himself to be single and whole."

When self-deceit is destroyed and a man begins to see the difference between the mechanical and the conscious in himself, there begins a struggle for the realization of consciousness in life and the subordination of the mechanical to the conscious. For this purpose a man begins with endeavors to set a definite *decision*, coming from conscious motives, against mechanical processes proceeding according to the laws of duality. The creation of a permanent third principle is for man the *transformation of the duality into the trinity*. Strengthening this decision and bringing it constantly and infallibly into all those events where formerly accidental neutralizing 'shocks' used to act and give accidental results, gives a permanent line of results in time and is the *transformation of trinity into quaternity*. (5)

The successful completion of this stage is a turning point in the spiritual journey toward unity and wholeness. The next stage is the transformation of the quaternary into the five-fold construction of the pentagram, resulting in new faculties, functions and possibilities:

We know that a man has five centers: the thinking, the emotional, the moving, the instinctive, and the sex. The predominant development of any one center at the expense of the others produces an extremely one-sided type of man, incapable of further development. But if a man brings the work of the five centers within him into harmonious accord, he then 'locks the pentagram within him' and becomes a finished type of the physically perfect man. The full and proper functioning of the five centers brings them into union with the higher centers which introduce the missing principle and put man into direct and permanent connection with objective consciousness and objective knowledge. And then man becomes the *six-pointed star*, that is, by becoming locked within a circle of life independent and complete in itself, he becomes isolated from foreign influences or accidental shocks, he embodies in himself the *Seal of Solomon*. (6)

### **The 'Four Brains'**

The teaching of the 'four brains' is employed by the Sufis to describe the possibilities of inner development for the ordinary human being. The spiritual aspirant is considered three-brained, a conception that accords with modern scientific discoveries of the evolutionary development of the brain: the reptilian, the mammalian and the cerebral cortex.

FIRST BRAIN	primitive, automatic, reactive
SECOND BRAIN	animal, emotional
THIRD BRAIN	human, conceptual
FOURTH BRAIN	angelic, faculty of higher perception

The great classical Sufi teacher al-Ghazali describes human development in terms of function using the analogy of a walnut. "The completed, perfected human being is sometimes called a 'Walnut.' This is a reference to the Persian name for a walnut, which is four-brained, alluding to its convolutions."

There are, he says, four stages, which might be likened to a walnut. The choice of this nut is made, incidentally, because in Persian the walnut is called the "four-kerneled," which can also be translated as "four essences" or "four brains." The nut has a hard shell, an inside skin, a kernel and oil. The shell, bitter in taste, serves as a covering for a period of time. It is thrown away when the kernel is taken out.

The skin is of more value than the shell, but it is not to be compared to the kernel itself. The kernel is the object if one is attempting to extract oil. Yet even this inner meat contains matter which is rejected in the pressing out of the oil. (7)

### The 'Four Bodies'

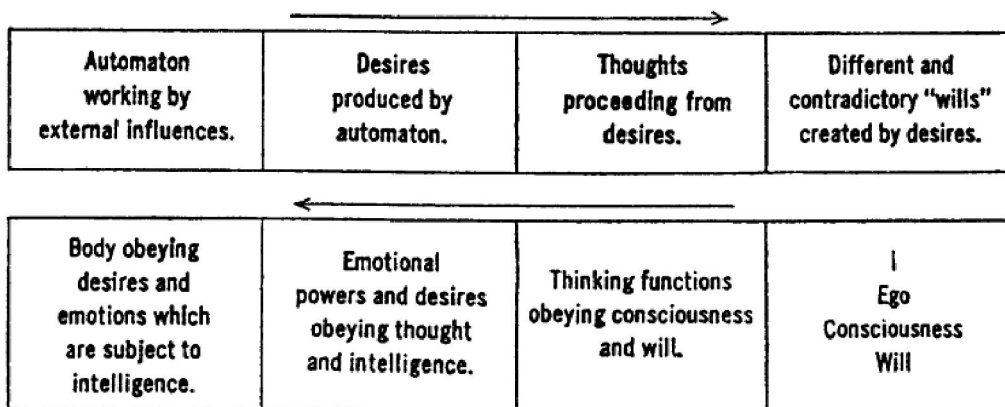
The teaching of the 'four bodies' occurs in many spiritual traditions and esoteric teachings, and is a representation of the possibilities of human development and attainment:

According to an ancient teaching, traces of which may be found in many systems, old and new, a man who has attained the full development possible for man, a man in the full sense of the word, *consists of four bodies*. These four bodies are composed of substances which gradually become finer and finer, mutually interpenetrate one another, and form four independent organisms, standing in a definite relationship to one another, but capable of independent action . . . Man is not born with the finer bodies, and they can only be artificially cultivated in him provided favorable conditions both internal and external are present. (8)

The 'four bodies' appear in both Western metaphysical and Christian terminology, and in certain Eastern teachings, and are described in analogical terms as the 'Carriage, Horse, Driver and Master.'

FIRST BODY	Physical body	"Carriage" (body)
SECOND BODY	Astral body	"Horse" (feelings, desires)
THIRD BODY	Mental body	"Driver" (mind)
FOURTH BODY	Divine body	"Master" (I, consciousness, will)

The functioning of an undeveloped human being is very different from one who has attained mastery of all four bodies. In the former case the functions of the physical body, which unconsciously responds to external influences, impacts the functioning of the higher bodies, while in the latter case command and control emanates from the fourth body. In diagrammatic form:



The creation of the third and fourth bodies is accomplished by the conscious transmutation of the 'coarse to the fine' through an 'alchemical' process which is the result of inner work:

When the third body has been formed and has acquired all the properties, powers, and knowledge possible for it, there remains the problem of fixing this knowledge and these powers, because, having been imparted to it by influences of a certain kind, they may be taken away by these same influences or by others. By means of a special kind of work for all three bodies the acquired properties may be made the permanent and inalienable possession of the third body. The process of fixing these acquired properties corresponds to the process of the formation of the fourth body. Only the man who possesses four fully developed bodies can be called a 'man' in the full sense of the word. This man possesses many properties which ordinary man does not possess. *One of these properties is immortality.* All religions and all ancient teachings contain the idea that, by acquiring the fourth body, man acquires immortality; and they all contain indications of the ways to acquire the fourth body, that is, immortality. (9)

## Death and Rebirth

There are a number of parables and allegories in the world's esoteric literature based on the theme of awakening, death and rebirth. The New Testament speaks of the seed which must die in order to be born: "*Except a corn of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abideth alone; but if it dies, it bringeth forth much fruit.*" And, Gurdjieff quoted an ancient book of aphorisms which encapsulated the process of death and rebirth: "*When a man awakes he can die; when he dies he can be born.*"

'To awake,' 'to die,' 'to be born.' These are three successive stages. If you study the Gospels attentively you will see that references are often made to the possibility of being born, several references are made to the necessity of 'dying,' and there are very many references to the necessity of 'awakening' – 'watch, for ye know not the day and hour . . .' and so on. But these three possibilities of man, to awaken or not to sleep, to die, and to be born, are not set down in connection with each other. If a man dies without having awakened he cannot be born. If a man is born without having died he may become an 'immortal thing.' Thus the fact that he has not 'died' prevents a man from being 'born'; the fact of his not having awakened prevents him from 'dying'; and should he be born without having died he is prevented from 'being.' Being 'born' relates to the beginning of a new growth of essence, the beginning of the formation of individuality, the beginning of the appearance of one indivisible I. But in order to be able to attain this or at least begin to attain it, a man must die, that is, he must free himself from a thousand petty attachments and identifications which hold him in the position in which he is. (10)

Gurdjieff indicated that the process of 'death and rebirth' has a psychological dimension and meaning as well as a spiritual significance: "Christ and others spoke of the death which can take place in life, the death of the tyrant from whom our slavery comes, that death which is a necessary condition of the first and principal liberation of man. This would be the death of "I," the death of everything it consisted of, the destruction of everything false collected through ignorance or inexperience.

Q: In what sense is it said that one who has not died cannot be born?

A: All religions speak about death during this life on earth. Death must come before rebirth. But what must die? False confidence in one's own knowledge, self-love and egoism. Our egoism must be broken. We must realize that we are very complicated machines, and so this process of breaking is bound to be a long and difficult task. Before real growth becomes possible, our personality must die. (11)

In some spiritual teachings the sequence of inner transformation is expressed as a process of three 'deaths':

The theme that man must 'die before he dies' or that he must be 'born again' in his present life is to be found in very many forms of initiatory observance. In almost all cases, however, the message is taken symbolically, or is commemorated by a mere mime or ritual. The Sufis, believing that they preserve the original sense of this teaching, mark the three main grades of initiation with a "death" process. In this, the candidate has to pass through certain specific experiences (technically termed "deaths"). The actual initiation ceremony merely commemorates this happening, and does not simply dramatize it as a symbol. The three "deaths" are:

1. The White Death
2. The Green Death
3. The Black Death

The first process, the White Death, marks the initiation of the disciple, when he starts to reconstruct the automatic and emotional *nafs*, so that it will in turn provide an instrument for proceeding to the activation of conscience, the second *nafs*. Leading up to the spiritual experiences referred to as "deaths" are a series of psychological and other exercises which include three outstanding factors:

1. Abstinence and control of physical functions.
2. "Poverty," including independence from material things.
3. Emotional liberation through such exercises as overcoming avoidable obstacles, and "playing a part" in order to observe the reactions of others.

Discipleship under a master follows a special pattern in which the Seeker is given opportunities for exercising his consciousness of these three stages. Since Sufism uses the normal organization of "the world" as a training ground, the three "deaths" always involve specific enterprises carried out in human society, leading to the spiritual experiences marked by the three "deaths" and successive "rebirth" or transformation which results from them. (12)

## **‘The Four Stages of Aspiration’**

In the Naqshbandi school of Sufism, the teaching of the ‘four stages of aspiration’ describes the psychological attitude and posture required for progress from one stage of development to another:

According to the Naqshbandi path, the following four stages of aspiration have to be passed through in readjusting that part of themselves which has perceptive capacity:

1. Desiring things for oneself;
2. Desiring things for others;
3. Desiring what should be desired;
4. Being free from desire.

The purpose of the teacher is to guide the learner from one stage to the next. Greedy people remain at the stage of desiring things for themselves only, and cannot make the transition, in many cases, to wanting things for others. When they do reach this stage (which can happen with conventional idealists and the pious) they still have to detach from the desire to desire things for others in order to give themselves pleasure, for this is only a form of Stage One. This is the point at which the conventional moralist can only appeal for non-selfish service: he will generally not have the means to teach it, and hence most religious systems suffer from what they freely admit is vanity. Their constant battle against this, whether it has results or not, absorbs energy and lasts for whole lifetimes, as we know from the records left by saints and others fighting ‘temptations’ of all kinds. The Third Stage, that of ‘desiring what should be desired’ comes when the previous barrier has been overcome. It signals the awakening of knowledge, because it is then understood that ‘what should be desired’ is more important than desiring itself. This paves the way for the Fourth Stage, when the individual is able to detach from desire itself. Since he (or she) is now able to enter a non-desire state, the actions of a higher will (‘Thy Will be done’) may become manifest. (13)

## **‘Zen Mountains, Zen Rivers’**

The three progressive experiences of unification with the Divine are allegorized in Zen Buddhist teaching as the perception of ‘mountains and rivers’ as metaphors of human transformation. “Before you enter into the study of the Path, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; in due course mountains are no longer mountains, nor are the rivers, rivers; but when illumination shines forth, mountains are mountains again and rivers are rivers.”

The apparent duality of object/subject, perception and perceiver is resolved in the realization of the indivisible unity and oneness of Reality. “At the beginning, we are more or less



absorbed in what we do; we are lost in the object. In order to free ourselves from the object and reach the unitive knowledge of the subject, the method of discrimination between the seer and the seen gradually leads us to the understanding that we are neither perception nor thought, but He who knows. The final experience is a consciousness of the unity of the subject-object.”

Q: What do you understand by the Zen saying ‘First there are mountains, then there are no mountains, then there are mountains again?’

A: First you are aware only of objects. You are identified with the mountains. Then you become aware that objects exist because they are perceived, because you are. Attention is then on the perceiver, not the objects. But quickly the intellect reminds you that the perceiver that can be perceived is also an object and you are taken by the ultimate perceiver, awareness itself, the ‘no mountains.’ This is direct perception. But as long as the body exists in space and time, the senses function spontaneously in the world. Without the restriction imposed on them by a perceiver, sense perceptions unfold and there are mountains again. These are no longer perceived as objects but as facets of one harmonious Reality. They are no longer an objectification in space but an extension of silence, expressions of the totality you are. (14)

### **The Parable of the Three Domains**

The ancient story of ‘The Parable of the Three Domains,’ said to originate with the Sarmoun Sufis of Afghanistan, is an allegory of the potential destiny and inner life of the spiritual seeker. “Human life is not what it seems. In fact, it follows a pattern evident to some and concealed to others. Again, more than one pattern is moving at a time.”

Let us consider, for example, three things: the wheat in the field, the water in the stream, and the salt in the mine. This is the condition of natural man; he is a being which is both complete in some senses and has further uses and capacities in further senses. Each of the three items is representative here of a substance in a state of potentiality. They may remain as they are, or circumstances (and in the case of man, effort) may transform them. This is the condition of the First Domain, or state of man. In the Second Domain, however, we have a stage in which something further can be done. The wheat, by effort and knowledge, is collected and ground into flour. The water is taken from the stream and stored for further use. The salt is extracted and refined. This is a domain of a different activity than the first, which was merely growing. In this Domain, stored knowledge is brought into play. The Third Domain can come into being only after the three ingredients, in correct quantity and proportion, have been assembled in a certain place, at a certain time. The salt, water and flour are mixed and kneaded to

become dough. When the yeast is brought, a living element is added, and the oven is made ready for the baking of the loaf. This making depends as much upon 'touch' as upon theoretical knowledge. Everything will behave in accordance with its situation: and its situation is the Domain in which it is cast. (15)

The parable illustrates three stages of spiritual development. In the First Domain, the raw materials are available but lie in a state of potentiality. In the Second Domain, the materials are processed, systematized and preserved. Only in the Third Domain does the final process occur, under the guidance of a specialist 'baker.' A number of important points and teachings emerge from the parable (16):

- There is an order and orderly progress of the 'Great Work.'
- People tend to confuse the three Domains.
- There is a human tendency to attach oneself to something without any awareness of the real stages and sequence of the Work.
- People who are attached to the First or Second Domain are unable to see the whole process clearly.
- Many questions are asked on the basis of assumptions belonging to the first two Domains.
- There is no benefit from repetitiously following "the work of a Domain which is not of this time, or this place, or this community and its real necessities."
- Nothing is accomplished by trial and error or experimentation.
- The success of the Work in the Third Domain depends on the right teaching formulation, at the right time, in the right place, with the right people.

### **The Story of 'The Conference of the Birds'**

Various Sufi tales describe, often in disguised form, the stages of spiritual development alluding to the 'pilgrim's progress of the soul.' One such story is *The Conference of the Birds*, written by the classical Sufi master Attar. In this allegory, birds on a pilgrimage to the source of wisdom constantly question and oppose their leader. Each of the birds represents a function of the human mind. Sufi masters have noted that the story is only illustrative and does not map out the inevitable path of all seekers.

The seven stages are: (1) The Valley of Search, (2) The Valley of Love, (3) The Valley of Knowledge, (4) The Valley of Independence, (5) The Valley of Unity, (6) The Valley of Amazement and (7) The Valley of Poverty and Annihilation.

The birds, who represent humanity, are called together by the hoopoe, the Sufi, who proposes that they should start on a quest to find their mysterious king. He is called Simurgh, and he lives in the mountains of Kaf. Each bird, after at first being excited by the prospect of having a King, begins to make excuses as to why

he should not himself take part in the journey toward the hidden King. The hoopoe, after hearing the plea of each, replies with a tale which illustrates the uselessness of preferring what one has or might have to what one should have. The poem is full of the Sufi imagery, and has to be studied in detail in order to be properly understood. Essentially the hoopoe tells the birds that in the quest they have to traverse seven valleys. First of all is the Valley of the Quest, where all kinds of perils threaten, and where the pilgrim must renounce desires. Then comes the Valley of Love, the limitless area in which the Seeker is completely consumed by a thirst for the Beloved. Love is followed by the Valley of Intuitive Knowledge, in which the heart receives directly the Illumination of Truth and an experience of God. In the Valley of Detachment the traveler becomes liberated from desires and dependence. The fifth valley is the Valley of Unification. Now the Seeker understands that what seemed to him to be different things and ideas are, in actuality, only one. In the Valley of Astonishment, the traveler finds bewilderment and also love. He no longer understands knowledge in the same way as formerly. Something, which is called love, replaces it. The seventh and last valley is that of Death. This is where the Seeker understands the mystery, the paradox, of how an individual “drop can be merged with an ocean, and still remain meaningful.” He has found his true ‘place.’ (17)

### **‘The Ladder of Four Rungs’**

Sufi teachings posit four major ‘conditions’ of human development which are possible for the spiritual aspirant beyond the ordinary state of normal human functioning and behaviour. This model is sometimes called ‘The Ladder of Four Rungs.’

#### **STAGE 1: DISCIPLESHIP**

The first stage is preparatory in nature as the student undergoes a process of deconditioning, breaking mental sets and false expectations, and taming the ego and the lower or ‘animal self.’ One of the key practices is renunciation and repentance, a turning away from the attractions of the outer world so that the inner life can blossom and mature.

The disciple comes in contact with a teaching master and is able to benefit from studies and interaction with the teacher. To truly benefit fully from this relationship the student must learn to trust his or her mentor and follow their instructions and recommended exercises. At the same time the pupil may engage in group work in a spiritual community in order to learn from others at a similar stage of development. The combination of these factors acts on the student to transform raw potentiality into suitability for advancement to the next stage of the Path.

## STAGE 2: KNOWLEDGE OR REAL CAPACITY

This stage is sometimes called the 'Journey to Knowledge' and marks the point at which real progress on the Path becomes apparent. The lower self is now under control and there is a purging of detrimental physical, emotional and mental aspects of the being. It is akin to a process of 'spiritual alchemy' that "promotes a greater appreciation and understanding of the Work as a whole, and enhanced respect for the latent possibilities of humanity in general and a broader comprehension of the importance of service."

During this stage of inner development there may be various experiences of higher states of consciousness such as ecstasy and glimpses of cosmic unity. The teacher may project spiritual power into the seeker's mind and there may be the attainment of occult powers and special abilities. The teacher may suggest travel to foreign countries or pilgrimages to sacred places or shrines. It is held that this stage generally takes far longer to complete than the previous one.

## STAGE 3: ABSORPTION OR ATTUNEMENT WITH THE DIVINE

The next stage of spiritual development is known as *fana* or annihilation and is sometimes called the "travel away from forgetfulness." At this stage consciousness is transferred to the reality of God and the individual is in harmony with Absolute Knowledge or Truth. In this state of spiritual oneness or unity there is a total destruction of all barriers that separate the Seeker from the full knowledge of all things.

At this summit of spiritual growth the transformed human being is capable of functioning on several levels simultaneously and is in direct contact with cosmic reality. When the mind is illuminated there seems to be "an all-devouring blaze in which duality and self both vanish."

When he not merely knows but realizes the truth, when he is filled with an awareness of the Absolute beyond anything that can be apprehended by the unaided intellect, he is taken to have entered the stage called *haqiqah*, Truth. This culminates in *fana-fi-lah*, the annihilation of the self in the Absolute, the experience of unity that is finally what gives such blazing significance to the Sufi path. (18)

With the attainment of this stage of inner realization, the person is no longer in need of a guide and may teach others (if that is his or her function and destiny), or may operate in other ways that are beneficial to the needs of humanity.

## STAGE 4: DESCENT AND RETURN

There is a stage called *baga* or permanency which is even beyond *fana* and is sometimes called the state 'equipoised between the Two Forces.'

This final state is called *baqa* which means 'abiding' or 'continuance.' It is that condition that a person appears to those round about to have achieved perfec-

tion. Complete self-knowledge and constant access to the certainties only glimpsed in ecstasy have released him from all ordinary doubts and trammels. He is fully conscious, conscious of himself and of his unbreakable connection with the cosmic unity that, as it were, flows through him. He is both self and non-self, having made himself aware of his total state, of the way that he manifests in a unique manner, his own manner, the cosmic generality. Whoever achieves this state becomes a 'perfect man,' who relies on consciousness and is ruled by reason. (19)

At this point of spiritual development there is a conscious return or 'arc of descent' of the realized mystic to the ordinary everyday world or 'baser life' of humankind in order to guide and purify others:

Aided by intuition the perfect man functions as a totality with spontaneity and expressiveness. Instead of studying life from afar, he is life itself. He embraces all of life; he is beyond good and bad. Consciousness, reason and intuition – with such qualities a person moves among ordinary men like a creature out of myth. He sees everything as it is, and has as a result no need of rules. He feels a direct involvement with every human being, every creature, and has as a result no need of laws. He is complete, and in a way that has no necessity to sustain itself by solitary contemplation. He has taken a vast journey, inward into himself, outward into the universe, and it has brought him back, utterly changed, to work and spread the invisible emanations of his truth in the same world that he left. While once he languished in its carefully baited traps, now he can turn to the endless task of liberating others. (20)

### **'The Seven Gradations of Man'**

Gurdjieff's Fourth Way teachings divide human nature into seven categories based on stage of development and evolution. The first three categories (instinctive, feeling and thinking) are, for all practical purposes, on the same level. In most people these three functions are not equally balanced and one tends to dominate, and as a result further development is bound to be lopsided without the guidance of a teacher. The four higher levels of development represent increasingly refined states of consciousness and being.

The seven categories can be divided into two concentric circles – the inner (esoteric) circle and the outer (exoteric) circle of humanity:

To the inner circle belong men no. 5, 6 and 7; to the outer circle, men no. 1, 2 and 3. Men no. 4 are on the threshold of the inner circle, or between the two circles. The outer circle, in which we live, has several names, designating its different features. It is called the mechanical circle, because everything *happens*

there, everything is mechanical, and the people who live there are *machines*. It is also called the *circle of the confusion of tongues*, because people who live in this circle *all* speak in different languages and *never understand one another*. Everyone understands everything differently. If men in the outer circle realize that they do not understand one another, and if they feel the need of understanding, they must try to penetrate into the inner circle, because understanding between people is possible only there. Schools of different kinds serve as gates through which people can pass into the inner circle. But this penetration into the circle higher in comparison with the one in which a man is born requires long and difficult work. (21)

#### MAN NUMBER 1 (INSTINCT)

This is the physical person in whom the instinctive and moving functions predominate. The center of gravity of the psychic life lies in the moving center and physical body, which outweigh the feeling and thinking centers:

Men and women dominated by the physical body are called men and women number one. Man number one is not necessarily what we might call a 'physical type.' He may be intelligent and interested in ideas; but when his behaviour is carefully observed, it can be seen that he is dominated by material considerations. He is insensitive to the feelings of others and has not even much feeling for himself. He may appear to make intellectual judgments, but looked at closely, they prove to be based on quantity rather than quality, on the visible and tangible rather than a sensitive appreciation of deeper values. (22)

#### MAN NUMBER 2 (FEELING)

This is the man or woman of feelings and emotions, whose center of gravity lies in the emotional center. Their behaviour and decisions are based on like and dislike, sentiment and impulse:

There are also many who are dominated by their feelings, though they are much less numerous than the first category. Their emotional states are more important to them than their bodily and mental states. They are people who have strong feelings; whether or not they have strong bodies, it is the feelings that predominate. In the extreme case, man number two is emotionally exaggerated. His likes and dislikes are flamboyant, his enthusiasms irrational, his hopes and fears unrelated to the facts of the world. Not all men number two are obviously emotional; the real mark is that of trusting feelings rather than material considerations or abstract ideas. Man number two may love money and possessions but he does so to satisfy his self-love, rather than to find material security. He can feel for others, but only insofar as he is himself involved. Though more sensitive than man number one, he is usually more self-centered. (23)

### MAN NUMBER 3 (THOUGHT)

Man number three is dominated by the thinking function – the center of gravity lies in the intellectual center. This is the person of reason and rationality, who relates to life from theories and mental considerations. Decisions are based on logical thinking, concepts and rational arguments:

People of the third kind, men number three, are those whose thinking part predominates. They live by theory or assess everything in terms of yes and no, agreement and disagreement. These are the logical people whose minds dominate their bodies and their feelings. This is the smallest group which can be recognized by certain characteristics, such as lack of feeling and instinct, and the tendency towards abstraction and the desire to solve their problems by words rather than deeds. (24)

### MAN NUMBER 4 (TRANSITIONAL)

Man number four is at an intermediate stage and is consciously working on self-development. This is the first place in the process of inner development where there is the possibility of going beyond “the limitations of our ordinary human nature, to enter different states of consciousness, to acquire new powers for understanding, and to go beyond the conditioning of our earthly existence.” The focus of life is now centered on spiritual growth and development: “Man number four has made the first step toward liberation from his own egoism. He sees where he has to go, and he is prepared to make the sacrifices necessary in order to reach the goal.”

Man number four is not born ready-made. He is born one, two or three, and becomes four only as a result of efforts of a definite character. Man number four is always the *product of school work*. He can neither be born, nor develop accidentally or as the result of ordinary influences of bringing up, education, and so on. Man number four already stands on a different level to man number one, two or three; he has a *permanent center of gravity* which consists in his ideas, in his valuation of the work, and in his relation to the school. In addition his psychic centers have already begun to be balanced; one center in him cannot have such a preponderance over others as is the case with people of the first three categories. He already begins to know himself and begins to know wither he is going. (25)

### MAN NUMBER 5 (INTEGRATED)

At this stage the individual has acquired unity and self-consciousness, and differs from ordinary people because a higher center (the higher emotional center) already works, making available many functions and powers not possessed by ordinary individuals:

The next stage, defined as man number five, is the first step beyond the limitations of human existence. By ordinary standards, number four is what man should be. He is balanced, he has sound judgment and he has a right and permanent system of values; he knows what he must do with his life and he has committed himself to doing it. He knows that it is first necessary to make sacrifices and he is prepared to make them. This, in ordinary terms, is what we call a good man, and we do not ask more from him than that he should continue on his way. According to Gurdjieff, however, man number four has not acquired anything that is beyond the limitations of this life. There is an inner and secret transformation that can take place, whereby man acquires a different kind of being which is no longer subject to the limitations of existence, where he has passed beyond a certain threshold . . . With the acquisition of this new dimension, man becomes different from ordinary people. Man number five is balanced between the material and the spiritual worlds. He has two bodies and his *Kesdjian* body can acquire objective reason. Nevertheless, until he has acquired it, he still remains within the limits of his human nature. He has attained what is natural and right for man to attain. There is beyond this a transformation which goes beyond his own individuality. (26)

#### MAN NUMBER 6 (CONSCIOUS)

At this stage of inner development the aspirant has acquired objective consciousness and both higher centers (the higher emotional center and the higher intellectual center) are working. Such a person possesses many more new faculties and powers, beyond the understanding of the ordinary person. However, some spiritual and transcendental properties have not as yet become permanent:

Man number six is probably the same as the Bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism, or the great saints and *wadis* of Christianity and Islam. He is no longer concerned with his own personal welfare, but has committed himself to the salvation of all creatures. The real truth is that man number six is no longer confined to the existing world. He has been liberated from the limitations of existence. This is described in the words attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, "die before you die." The meaning of this death is incomprehensible until man has had at least an experience of liberation from existence . . . Man number six has a 'higher being body.' This is the seat of Objective Reason, which is the principle of immortality. Man number six has died and been resurrected in a transcendental mode. (27)

#### MAN NUMBER 7 (PERFECTED)

This final stage is said to describe a person who has reached the fullest development possible for a human being, who "possesses everything a man can possess – will, consciousness, permanent and unchanging I, individuality, immortality." His or her own knowledge cannot be taken away: "It is the objective and completely practical knowledge of All." At the seventh level, the



individual who has reached ultimate realization has ceased to be constrained by any of the limitations that beset the rest of humanity:

Man no. 7 is a man who has attained all that a man can attain. He has a permanent "I" and free will. He can control all the states of consciousness in himself and he already cannot lose anything he has acquired. According to another description, *he is immortal within the limits of the solar system.* (28)

### **The Seven 'Nafs' or 'Selves'**

In Sufi teaching, spiritual development corresponds to the transformation of the seven *nafs* or 'selves.' The term *nafs* is sometimes translated as "ego" or referred to as "essence," "soul" or "breath." The stages of development reflect seven degrees of refinement of consciousness in which the attainment of each stage leads to a further enrichment of being.

The *nafs* may be viewed as a process created by the interaction of spirit and matter. At its lowest level *nafs* represent negative traits and tendencies, features which are obstacles to growth and learning. As the *nafs* are transformed and purified the seeker becomes less attached to the material world and more attracted to the spiritual dimension of reality.

The goal of all mysticism is to cleanse the heart, to educate, or transform, the self, and to find God. The lowest level of the self is dominated by pride, egoism, and totally self-centered greed and lust. This level is the part within each person that leads away from Truth. The highest level is the pure self, and at this level there is no duality, no separation from God. The self is actually a living process rather than a static structure in the psyche. The self is not a thing. It refers to a process that comes about from the interaction of body and soul. When the soul becomes embodied, it forgets its original nature and becomes enmeshed in material creation. This creates the self. (29)

The actual experience of the transformation of the 'essential self' is inward and functional. "It is legitimate to represent the process as being composed of stages, but this is at best only an illustrative distinction. The Sufi whose consciousness is operating correctly will regard the different phases of the essence's transmutation in a special and distinctive way, not adequately duplicated in familiar terminology." The adjectives used to describe the seven *nafs* refer both to the effect upon the individual and the functions which are most marked at each stage. Not all spiritual or religious traditions recognize all the levels described in the Sufi system:

Each one of the words signifies a major characteristic of the Self in its upward ascent. In Sufi eyes, most people in all cultures are generally familiar only with the first stage of the self as represented in their ethical systems as something which seeks only its own interests. The ordinary person, staying at the level of

ordinary religious and moral teaching, is at the stage which the Sufis would regard as only struggling with the Commanding Self, with, in action, the Accusing Self reproaching itself for its shortcomings. Observers have styled Sufi development as going five stages beyond that known to the ordinary 'moral' person. (30)

#### (1) THE COMMANDING OR TYRANNICAL SELF

This is the automatic or emotional self, a mixture of conditioned behaviour and subjective reactions and beliefs. "The Commanding Self is the origin of the individual controlled by a composite consciousness, which is a mixture of hopes and fears, of training and imagination, of emotional and other factors, which makes up the person in his or her 'normal' state."

No real growth is possible until the individual learns that their belief that they have a coherent personality is false, and that in reality, like all undeveloped individuals, they have a multiple and constantly changing personality. "The tyrannical *nafs* generally operates outside conscious awareness. It seems to speak with our own voice and to express our own innermost desires, so we rarely resist it. It is a skilled ruler, who rarely has to rely on naked force. The tyrannical *nafs* dominates us without our knowing it."

The lowest level of the self, the ego or lower personality, is made up of impulses, or drives, to satisfy desires. These drives dominate reason or judgment and are defined as the forces in one's nature that must be brought under control. The self is a product of the self-centered consciousness – the ego, the "I." The self must be transformed – this is the ideal. The self is like a wild horse; it is powerful and virtually uncontrollable. As the self becomes trained, or transformed, it becomes capable of serving the individual. (31)

#### (2) THE ACCUSING OR REGRETFUL SELF

At this stage conscience is activated to remind a person of certain essential facts in regard to inner development. This marks the dawn of self-awareness, revealing the automatic operation of the lowest *nafs*. "We begin to see more clearly who we are and what our mistakes are. We can no longer remain in blissful ignorance and total denial. Because of this, we are more aware of the impulses of the lower self, and this very awareness reduces their power." As insight dawns, the negative effects of a habitual self-centered approach to life becomes apparent and the aspirant develops the potential to align with Truth.

The Accusing Self is the state of the Self when it is able to monitor its behaviour and perceive the secondary nature of so many things formerly imagined to be primary, the actual relativity of assumed absolutes, and so on. This part of the man or woman is both the check on imperfect action and also the area through which the legitimate reproaches of others or of the environment get through to the individual. This is the stage of ordinary conscience. (32)

### (3) THE INSPIRED SELF

This stage marks the beginning of real integration and direct perception of spiritual truths as the mind begins to operate on a higher level than in the previous two stages. Rather than self-blame and regret there is repentance – a sincere effort to let go of the past and open our hearts to an inner voice of guidance and inspiration. Idries Shah: “When the Commanding self and the reproaching or accusing selves have done their work, the organ of perception and action becomes susceptible to the entry of perceptions formerly blocked. In this stage comes the first indications, albeit imperfect ones, of the existence and operation of a reliable higher element, force, or power.”

Though one is not free of desires or ego, this new level of motivation and spiritual experience significantly reduces the power of these forces for the first time. What is essential here is to *live* in terms of higher values. Unless these new motivations become part of a way of life, they will wither and die away. Behaviors common to the inspired self include gentleness, compassion, creative acts and moral action. Overall, a person who is at the stage of the inspired self seems to be emotionally mature, respectable and respected. (33)

There is a danger at this stage. Although one is capable of genuine spiritual experiences and insights, if these are filtered through the ego, the person can become tremendously inflated.

### (4) THE SERENE, PEACEFUL OR TRANQUIL SELF

This self operates by reorganizing the emotional life to achieve serene balance and equilibrium. It is characterized by gratitude and contentment. There is an opening of the heart to welcome wisdom and love.

The seeker is now at peace. The struggles of the earlier stages are basically over. The old desires and attachments are no longer binding. The ego-self begins to let go, allowing the individual to come more closely in contact with the Divine. This level of self predisposes one to be liberal, grateful, trusting and adoring. If one accepts difficulties with the same overall sense of security with which one accepts benefits, it may be said that one has attained the level of the contented self. Developmentally, this level marks a period of transition. The self can now begin to “disintegrate” and let go of all previous concerns with self-boundaries and then begin to “reintegrate” as an aspect of the universal self. (34)

### (5) THE FULFILLED OR SATISFIED SELF

The individual at this stage of development has the power of fulfilment and new ranges of experience and understanding. Spiritual growth becomes more subtle and inward:

When our sense of gratitude and our love of God are such that even the bitter tastes sweet to us, we have reached the station of the pleased *nafs*. Other characteristics of this stage are miracles, nonattachment, sincerity, contemplation, and remembrance of God. Miracles are possible because God responds to the sincere prayers of those at this stage. For example, there are many saints whose prayers for healing have been answered. Nonattachment occurs because we are no longer tempted by anything in this world. Our focus is within ourselves and on God. (35)

#### (6) THE PLEASING, FULFILLING OR SATISFYING SELF

At this stage new extra-dimensional activities and functions emerge through the “inner marriage of self and spirit in the heart.” Inner struggles and a sense of duality and differentiation are replaced by an experience of inner unity and wholeness and a perception of the world as unified and whole:

We realize that all power to act comes from God, that we can do nothing by ourselves. We no longer fear anything or ask for anything. We have no desire to talk or communicate. Our exteriors have been destroyed but our interiors have become palaces. Our hearts are in ecstasy. (36)

#### (7) THE COMPLETED OR PURIFIED SELF

This is the final stage on the spiritual journey where the task of reconstitution is completed. Objective understanding emerges along with the possibility of teaching others. This is the state described as ‘to die before dying,’ where the ego is dissolved into unity. “There is no longer any sense of a separate self or separate identity. There are no clear boundaries between self and God; the self has become like salt dissolved in the ocean. There is only the Divine.”

Those few who attain the final level have transcended the self entirely. There is no ego or separate self left, only union with God. At this stage, the individual has truly realized the truth, “there is no god but God.” The Sufi now knows that there is nothing but God, that only the Divine exists, and that any sense of individuality or separateness is an illusion. Rumi illuminates this state for us:

If you could get rid  
Of yourself just once,  
The secret of secrets  
Would open to you.  
The face of the unknown,  
Hidden behind the universe  
Would appear on the  
Mirror of your perception. (37)

## The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures

The ten Ox-Herding pictures of Zen Buddhism are a traditional series of drawings depicting the journey from delusion to enlightenment, cast in the form of a man progressively taming a wild ox.

### (1) SEARCHING FOR THE OX

In Zen Buddhist teachings, the ox is likened to one's True Nature. The first stage of the long spiritual journey is to search for the ox which, like the raw seeker's mind, is wild, undisciplined and untamed.

### (2) SEEING THE TRACES OF THE OX

When the man finds traces or footprints of the ox he has entered a new stage of development. "He finds his mind beginning to become quieter. He now finds to his surprise that his normal state of mind has been noisy and agitated, and he had been unaware of it."

### (3) SEEING THE OX

Now for the first time the ox is glimpsed: "The ox is there all by himself, nowhere is there room to hide himself." This heralds the entry into a new dimension of understanding "beyond the manifestation of chimerical form."

### (4) CATCHING THE OX

The ox may be caught but it is yet to be tamed, just like the mind that is restless and prone to influence by external impacts. "The ox is found hard to keep under control. The wild nature is still unruly and altogether refuses to be broken in."

### (5) TAMING THE OX

This stage is a turning point in the process of transformation. "When the ox is properly tended, he will grow pure and docile. Without a chain or other binding, he will by himself follow you."

### (6) RIDING THE OX HOME

Once the ox is tamed it can be usefully put to work, to the benefit of the man and others. "The struggle is over; the man is no longer concerned with gain and loss."

(7) THE OX FORGOTTEN, LEAVING THE MAN ALONE

The ox now recedes from the consciousness of the man and a new awareness emerges. “Let events happen as they may, and simply let them pass by. When things have happened, they have happened. When they have gone, they have gone.”

(8) NO OX, NO MAN

All shadows of uncertainty and confusion disappear and serenity alone prevails. “A thorough and decisive purification of consciousness is carried out, and the muddy deposits, accumulated through countless eons, are dredged away.”

(9) RETURNING TO THE ORIGIN, BACK TO THE SOURCE

This is the fully awakened state which penetrates to the very depth of reality where one no longer differentiates enlightenment and non-enlightenment. “He watches the growth of things, while abiding in the immovable serenity of non-assertion. The waters are blue, the mountains are green; sitting alone he dispassionately observes all things undergoing change.”

(10) ENTERING THE CITY WITH HELPING HANDS

The final stage of the spiritual journey is the *Bodhisattva* who enters the marketplace to help others achieve self-realization. “Having completely finished one’s practice, one moves among ordinary people, helping them whenever possible, free from all attachments to enlightenment. To live in this last stage is the aim of life.”

His thatched cottage gate is closed, and even the wisest know him not. No glimpses of his inner life are to be caught; for he goes on his own way without following the steps of the ancient sages. Carrying a gourd he goes out into the market, leaning against a staff he comes home. He is found in company with wine-drinkers and butchers, he and they are all converted to Buddhas.

Bare-chested and bare-footed, he comes out into the marketplace;  
Daubed with mud and ashes, how broadly he smiles!  
There is no need for the miraculous power of the gods,  
For he touches, and lo, the dead trees are in full bloom. (38)

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