

STAGES OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

*'I am a servant of whoever will not at each stage imagine
that he has arrived at the end of his goal. Many a stage has
to be left behind before the traveler reaches his destination.'*

Rumi

Metaphors and Analogies

Certain metaphors and analogies have been employed in various esoteric and spiritual traditions to indicate the process of inner growth and development. These include: “the care and maintenance of a garden,” “transmutation and purification of gold,” “digestion and assimilation of food,” “seeds, germination and flowering,” “death and rebirth” and “conscious evolution.” In his writings Rumi described the stages of human development in terms of evolution:

What is the reality and the analogy of the stages through which the consciousness must pass, in order to reach the understanding of the Sufi? Rumi puts the progression in what are today called evolutionary terms, though he stresses evolution through effort and understanding:

*“I died from the mineral kingdom and became a plant;
I died to vegetable nature and became an animal.
I died to animality and became a human being.
Next time I will die to human nature and lift up my head
among the angels.
Once again I will leave angelic nature and become that
which you cannot imagine.”*

The actual inner experiences of the Sufi mystic are parallel to this succession of awareness and being. (1)

The Sufis liken the progress of the seeker to “a traveler on the Path”, using the metaphor of a “journey” or “search” to describe the process of spiritual development: “There are stages on the Way, just as there are halts on any journey, when the traveler reaches an objective. Like any other journey, there are perils on the Way.” Gurdjieff spoke of inner transformation in terms of the emergence and the metamorphosis of the butterfly from the chrysalis:

Our development is like that of a butterfly. We must “die and be reborn” as the egg dies and becomes a caterpillar; the caterpillar dies and becomes a chrysalis; the chrysalis dies and then the butterfly is born. It is a long process and the but-

terfly lives only a day or two. But the cosmic purpose is fulfilled. It is the same with man, we must destroy our buffers. Children have none; therefore we must become like little children. (2)

Gurdjieff also alluded to an ancient esoteric teaching that utilized the analogy of a house with four rooms to describe human possibilities:

Certain teachings compare man to a house with four rooms. Man lives in one room, the smallest and poorest of all, and until he is told of it, he does not suspect the existence of other rooms which are full of treasures. When he does learn of this he begins to seek the keys of these rooms and especially the fourth, the most important room. And when a man has found his way into this room he really becomes the master of his house, for only then does the house belong to him wholly and forever. The fourth room gives man immortality, and all religious teaching strive to show the way to it. There are a great many ways, some shorter and some longer, some harder and some easier, but all, without exception, lead or strive to lead in one direction, that is, to immortality. (3)

The transformation of liquid water to other states of matter has also been employed to illustrate the successive refinement of human consciousness during the journey to enlightenment. From the Advaita Vedanta tradition: “Just like ice turns to water, and water to vapour, and vapour dissolves in air and disappears in space, so does the body dissolve into pure awareness, then into pure being, which is beyond all existence and non-existence.”

Zen Buddhism offers a metaphor drawn from the natural world to illustrate the process of spiritual development:

The continuum of practice could be divided in different ways. We could simplify the analysis with an analogy: first there is the soil, which is whatever we are at this moment in time. The soil may be clay or sand, or rich with loam and compost. It may attract practically no worms or many worms, depending on its richness. The soil is neither good nor bad; it's what we are given to work with. We have practically no control over what our parents gave us in the way of heredity and conditioning. We can't be anything else than what we are, right at this moment. We simply practice with what we are. That's the soil. Working with the soil – cultivation – covers what I have called stages two through four. We work with what the ground is – the seeds, the compost, the worms – weeding, pruning, using natural methods to produce a good crop. From the soil and its cultivation comes the harvest, which begins to be strongly evident in stage four and increases thereafter. The harvest is joy and peace . . . A life of joy doesn't mean that we're always happy, happy, happy. It means simply that life is rich and interesting. We no longer fight life. (4)

Idries Shah counsels that symbolic and analogical expressions of spiritual development are useful only up to a point and ultimately must be transcended:

In Sufi literature, the theme of the search or *journey* is one usual convention, whether in the form of a caravan of souls, or of a lover, or a seeker-after-Truth. In Sufi school situations, these materials are themselves transcended as the aspirant gets behind and beyond the significance of the symbolism which successively helps and then can hinder if retained too long. The system is thus very similar to the situation where you may march on a visible point in order to keep in a straight line, only to abandon it when it has fulfilled its function, choosing another and if necessary yet another, until the goal is reached. (5)

Nature of Developmental Stages

The stages of inner development have been precisely described in many esoteric teachings and spiritual traditions. “Every pilgrim has to pass through the same stages in his or her spiritual journey and these stages are readily recognizable by their detailed descriptions given unanimously by all masters. The landmarks and pitfalls are described in equally exhaustive particulars.”

At every stage of development a new change in perception, behaviour and understanding occurs. It is experience itself which marks the attainment of a certain stage: “The attainment of stages is permanent. Until one of these stages has been reached, the photographic plate, as it were, may have been exposed and developed but has not been fixed; and actual experiences are the fixative substance.”

Various indisputable experiences mark certain stages of advance. These give the individual both proof of his progress and strength to continue to the next stage. Unless he receives these illuminations in correct succession, he will stay at a stage of partial awareness or occasional concentration power. One of the least desirable results of such out-of-sequence development is when the candidate is not weaned from dependence upon his instructor. (6)

Each stage in the course of inner development exposes and challenges different facets of the aspirant’s character and perception. One of the indications of spiritual progress is the development of one’s cognitive understanding of things and processes in terms of quality and refinement. As an analogy, the older a child, the greater the range of its differentiation between various shapes, sizes and weights.

Development proceeds step by step. Thomas de Hartmann relates a conversation with his teacher Gurdjieff: “In the corner stood a ladder. Mr. Gurdjieff pointed to it and said, ‘If you begin to go up, step by step, then once you come to the top you will never fall down again. So

it is in your development. You have to go step by step and not imagine that you can be at the top of the ladder at once'."

Spiritual activity, correctly carried out, follows a specific order or right succession, as each stage prepares for the next. One part of the study process should not be desired, approached or attempted before the preceding one has been successfully completed. There is a gradation in study so that once an objective is reached, it has to be forgotten or superseded, while attention is directed to the next objective: "There is a succession of experiences which together constitute the educational and developmental ripening of the learner. People who think that each gain is the goal itself will freeze at any such stage, and cannot learn through successive and superseding lessons."

People can only learn when they are ready to learn, and when the appropriate spiritual activity matches their current stage of development. This principle of phased progression is summed up by the phrase: *'You crawl before you walk and you walk before you run.'* Students must move phase by phase and may need basic (or advanced) information before the attainment of higher experiences is possible. And, the meaning of studies and experiences may only become apparent at a later date.

Individuals cannot proceed from one stage to another until they are 'ready' and in a suitable state to benefit from further studies: "Readiness is a mark of worthiness, and does not depend upon minor criteria, such as the time taken or the seniority of the individual." Certain perceptions and understanding have to be developed and subsequent development depends on this basis or foundation:

Those who follow the Sufi path soon begin to learn in a manner new to them. The process of learning itself, rather than anything factually learned, begins to alter them, to alter the way they think and the way they perceive the world. Long before the Sufi way turns into a purely mystical discipline, therefore, it works at the level of the intellect and the imagination. Its first stages are intended to prepare one for the later experiences, in order that one should not mistake their nature. Properly directed by a teacher who understands his individual needs, the disciple will achieve the sought-after ecstasy central to mysticism only when completely ready for it. Then, far from overwhelming him, it will complete him. The process of learning is the process of discovering what really exists. In order to do this, the neophyte upon the path must be persuaded to use his senses, his intelligence and his imagination in a new fashion. He must be helped towards a new kind, as well as a new level, of consciousness. (7)

Because of individual differences in background, ego-patterns, preparation, determination and capacity for understanding, the speed of development varies between people. Therefore there is no set time for the transition from one stage to the next – all depends on individual progress. And not everyone reaches every stage of development.

There is no single linear pattern of development that is typical or characterizes the actual experience of every individual, since the process of inner transformation occurs along separate dimensions concurrently. In an ultimate sense, a person's spiritual states change in relation to the "infinite gradations of truth and objectivity" and cannot be specifically labelled as fixed and universal states or stages.

The spiritual progress of an individual may not always be apparent to others. There is a saying: *'A person traveling through darkness is yet traveling.'*

Some are faster than others in developing. The disciple is learning when he does not know that he is learning, and as a result he may well chafe. In winter, Rumi reminds us, a tree is collecting nutrient. People may think it is idle, because they do not see anything happening. But in spring they see the buds. Now, they think, it is working. There is a time for collecting, and a time for releasing. This brings the subject back to the teaching: "Enlightenment must come little by little – otherwise it would overwhelm." (8)

Focusing on progress on the spiritual path can actually be counter-productive, as it creates an unhealthy fixation on future results to the detriment of practice grounded in the reality of the present moment. Zen master Shunryu Suzuki:

After you have practiced for a while, you will realize that it is not possible to make rapid, extraordinary progress. Even though you may try very hard, the progress you make is always little by little. It is not like going out in a shower in which you know when you get wet. In a fog, you do not know you are getting wet, but as you keep walking you get wet little by little. If your mind has ideas of progress, you may say, "Oh, this pace is terrible!" But actually it is not. When you get wet in a fog it is very difficult to dry yourself. So there is no need to worry about progress. It is like studying a foreign language; you cannot do it all of a sudden, but by repeating it over and over you will master it . . . We can say either that we make progress little by little, or that we do not even expect to make progress. Just to be sincere and make our full effort in each moment is enough. There is no Nirvana outside our practice. (9)

From an ultimate perspective, self-realization is not a matter of time. Nisargadatta Maharaj: "All waiting is futile. To depend on time to solve our problems is self-delusion. The future, left to itself, merely repeats the past. Change can only happen now, never in the future." Whether progress appears slow or rapid is not important:

Q: What does it mean to fail in Yoga?

A: The question is wrongly put. There is no question of failure, neither in the short run nor in the long. It is like travelling a long and arduous road in an unknown country. Of all the innumerable steps there is only the last which brings

you to the destination. Yet you will not consider all previous steps as failures. Each brought you nearer to your goal, even when you had to turn back to bypass an obstacle. In reality each step brings you to your goal, because to be always on the move, discovering, unfolding, is your eternal destiny. Living is life's only purpose. The real does not identify itself with success or failure – the very idea of becoming this or that is unthinkable. The Self understands that success and failure are relative and related, that they are the very warp and weft of life. Learn from both and go beyond . . . Nobody ever fails in Yoga. It is all a matter of the rate of progress. It is slow in the beginning and rapid in the end. When one is fully matured, realization is explosive. It takes place spontaneously, or at the slightest hint. The quick is not better than the slow. Slow ripening and rapid flowering alternate. Both are natural and right. (10)

Catalysts of Spiritual Development

Traditional spiritual teachings have devised various methods or 'skilful means' to facilitate the process of inner development. Ramana Maharshi recommends four approaches, depending on the capacity and temperament of the aspirant, to initiate the spiritual journey to eventual enlightenment: (1) *pranayama* -- control and regulation of the breath and *mantra* -- the repetition of sacred sounds; (2) *bhakti* -- devotion to an ideal such as "God, Guru, humanity in general, ethical laws, or even the idea of beauty"; (3) *karma yoga* -- the action of good deeds and altruistic service; (4) *vichara* -- the introspective and analytical method of self-inquiry: "Who am I?"

The first step on the path to Self-realization is all-important and lays the foundation for all subsequent development. Until we recognize that our experience of life revolves around our personal ego and self-image, no essential transformation is possible. Real development begins when we objectively observe the workings of our mind and then let go of our self-centered viewpoint so that our true self can emerge as the impersonal witness of life as it actually is:

The experiences of my life seem to be centered around "I." "I" see, "I" hear, "I" feel, "I" think, "I" have this opinion. We rarely question this "I." Now in the enlightened state there is no "I"; there is simply life itself, a pulsation of timeless energy whose very nature includes – or is – everything. The process of practice is to begin to see why we do not realize our true nature: it is always our exclusive identification with our own mind and body, the "I." To realize our natural state of enlightenment we must see this error and shatter it. The path of practice is deliberately to go against the ordinary self-absorbed way of life. The first stage of practice is to see that my life is totally centered around myself . . . Then the next stage (and these stages may take years) is to observe what we do with all these thoughts, fantasies, and emotions, which usually is to cling to them, to believe that we would be miserable and lost without them. If we require that life

be in a certain way, inevitably we suffer – since life is always *the way it is*, and not always fair, not always pleasant. Life is not particularly the way we want it to be, it is just the way it is. (11)

The application of attention and mindfulness to the habitual patterns of our thoughts, emotions, sensations and perceptions leads to real change and growth. Observing without judgement the constantly changing fluctuations of the mind and emotions reveals a deeper state of being that is our natural birthright. “To really face life, you must face it with your openness. So the already known must be given up. You must face life completely open-minded, empty, without any representation. Then you come to the understanding of life, and then you also use life in the right way.”

One should be available, ceaselessly questioning oneself, calmly observing one’s own behaviour without passion. A new and non-subjective outlook may then progressively prevail on us and we may come to understand that we are not the ego. We may then, with a complete and new awareness, taste the unexpected flavour of those moments of non-desire which will be revealed as being plenitude, silence, and peace. This flavour which is only fleeting at first will become more constant and vigorous until that time when it will appear as a reality which carries us, enfolds us, and is our very substance. The bliss which is then experienced is entirely different from what we usually call happiness . . . The essence of this pure attention implies the complete elimination of all elements from the past, thus allowing the authentic purity of the present to be completely grasped. We must forget everything and wait, yet wait for nothing. This entails a state of complete receptivity which seizes and is open to the complete, eternal and perfect newness of each moment. (12)

When the teaching of conscious transformation is actualized there is a natural unfolding of human potentiality from darkness to light, from unconscious manifestation to the purity of the awakened and enlightened state. This process is sometimes presented as a refinement of human consciousness through a series of sequential steps:

- (1) The consciousness of most human beings is the ordinary subjective state of attachment and identification with conditioned patterns of thought, feeling and sensation.
- (2) By entering the path of self-knowledge through self-observation and self-study, the nature of the ego is identified and thoroughly understood. This allows a degree of detachment that “opens up a window for subtle faculties of perception that usually lie dormant behind the noisier and more colorful façade of thoughts, imaginings and ideas.”
- (3) When attention is sustained and the functioning of the body, mind and emotions are observed without judgement, evaluation or interpretation the pure sense of “I am” arises and stabilizes in the consciousness.
- (4) Resting in the “I am” without words or thoughts eventually expands into the experience of pure silent awareness and being. In this state of non-duality the distinctions between the observer and the observed, between subject and object, disappear into direct perception of the suchness or beingness of objective reality or the Self.

(5) The final stage of enlightenment is the actualization of spiritual practice in our daily lives and activities, whereby one is able to move with freedom and equanimity while seeing into the ultimate nature of existence. One is now able *to be in the world but not of the world*. "With perfect enlightenment we apprehend that our conception of the world is false, and upon this realization the world of Oneness, of true harmony and peace, is revealed."

Although for some individuals progress on the Path may take place without the intervention of a teacher, the knowledge of a teacher is generally necessary to guide the aspirant from one level to the next. The teacher is responsible for providing the spiritual instruction which makes it possible for the student to pass from one stage to another. At the same time, the guide is also responsible for relating the progress of the individual student to that of the total needs of humanity. The role of the teacher is sometimes expressed in metaphorical terms:

The stage of 'Water,' also symbolizing purification in some traditions, takes place when the Teacher is in a position to amalgamate the watery (that is, the mobile and purified) elements in the postulant with 'water' in another sense. This latter 'water' is a finer substance of a spiritual kind, partaking of the nature of an energy. When this is possible, a certain kind of 'mobility' can take place. In procedural terms, it means the stage when the higher elements of the mind and individuality are connected through the intermediacy of the Teacher. (13)

A genuine teacher can lead the aspirant through each of the stages of spiritual practice, by skilfully guiding them through the many challenges they may face and supporting their efforts and aspirations to grow and develop in a correct manner, culminating in the realization of one's true nature:

Establishment in our true nature is reached by a complete elimination of the world of objects. First of all, with the help of a teacher, one must understand that objects have no intrinsic reality and are nothing but projections of desire. This truth, when it is completely assimilated, produces a falling back of desire upon itself. That is to say, all the energy invested in the world of objects is now in a state of balance, of abeyance, of rest. This turning back upon itself of desire produces a stopping of the mind, and consequently an arising of the consciousness of the Self. This experience of the Supreme, discovered to be the very heart of our being, is the essence of realization. From then on, and always with the help of a teacher, the establishment in that state will be permanent. This is not a passing state, but a permanent establishment in our true nature. It is a state of being which we only seem to have left, and which consequently we do not need to reach. The disciple then finds in the Self complete joy and no longer searches for it in objects which have no independent existence. (14)

After the first enlightenment experience the journey continues with further levels of refinement of the consciousness as more subtle realms of existence are explored and actualized.

Challenges and Obstacles

People tend to limit their spiritual development by having unrealistic expectations. In their spiritual practice they try to hurry, push and do too much due to impatience and the desire to progress too quickly – “the race against time” syndrome.

The very desire for change and progress can be a powerful obstacle to real growth. Spiritual teacher Toni Packer: “If there were no memory or comparison, there would just be what is going on right now, not in comparison to what was a moment ago or ten years ago, but just what’s going on now. There would be no possibility of talking about change. There would just be living this moment as it is.”

The experience of enlightenment can be overwhelming if it is not integrated properly or if the person is not adequately prepared. For this reason certain knowledge, teachings or exercises may be withheld from someone until a later time so as not to disturb the proper sequence of learning and development. Idries Shah elaborates on this point: “Secrecy can be the word applied to the fact that something is not ready to be revealed, or that it is ‘hidden’ from someone at a particular time for a good reason: and this reason may not be anything more than effectiveness of operation, to ensure progress. Many things which are called ‘secrets’ are only things withheld from people until they can understand or effectively experience them.”

When a spiritual experience occurs prematurely or out of sequence, it can have serious negative consequences for the practitioners: “For the constricted person the universe looks like a little pinpoint of light. Introduce a light as bright as the sun and the person may go crazy, and sometime does.” To be truly effective and meaningful the enlightenment experience must occur in a fully integrated and psychologically balanced person:

For those who are ready, that experience is the most wonderful thing in the world. They sense it before they have it and they’re prepared to receive it. But for someone who is not prepared, it can be harmful. It produces no good results: in fact quite the opposite may be true . . . Great care must be exercised; a premature enlightenment experience is not necessarily good. To have such an experience is to realize that we are nothing (no-self), and that there is nothing in the universe but change. We encounter this enormous elemental power which we are. To realize this when ready is liberating. But for a person who is not ready, it’s annihilation. And even a person who is ready for such an experience may have to spend many years practicing with the bypassed levels of maturation, clearing them up. (15)

Self-deception, insincerity and the power of the ego assert themselves throughout every stage of the spiritual journey. At each stage of development inner work is required to overcome the obstacles created by attachments, fixations, illusions and past conditioning:

Zen training continues endlessly. The mean or petty ego, which was thought to have been disposed of, is found once again to be secretly creeping back into one's mind. The long, chronic habit of consciousness has implanted negative impulses so firmly in one's mind that they haunt us perpetually, and it is impossible for us to inhibit them before they appear. However, the longer we train ourselves, the more we are liberated from the petty ego. When the petty ego appears, do not be concerned with it. Simply ignore it. (16)

There can be fear and uncertainty as our former world view and seemingly secure self-image is revealed, through sincere spiritual practice, to be insubstantial, relative and largely fictional:

Our practice throughout our lifetime is just this: At any given time we have a rigid viewpoint or stance about life; it includes some things, it excludes others. As we begin to question our viewpoint we may feel struggle, upset, as we try to come to terms with this new insight into our life; and for a long time we may deny it and struggle against it. That's part of practice. Finally, we become willing to experience our suffering instead of fighting it. When we do so our standpoint, our vision of life, abruptly shifts . . . It's like climbing a mountain. At each point that we ascend we see more, and that vision doesn't deny anything that's below – it includes that – but it becomes broader with each cycle of climbing, of struggle. And the more we see, the more expansive our vision, the more we know what to do, what action to take. (17)

Before we can reach higher states of consciousness and enlightenment we need to work with the lower elements of the human psyche to provide a foundation of psychological stability:

The first thing that has to happen – with many steps, many byways and pitfalls – is the integration of ourselves as human beings, so that mind and body become one. For many people, this enterprise takes an entire lifetime. When mind and body are one, we are not constantly being pulled this way and that way, back and forth. As long as we are controlled by our self-centered emotions (and most of us have thousands of these illusions), we haven't accomplished this step. To take a person who has not yet integrated body and mind and push him or her through the narrow concentrated gate to enlightenment can indeed produce a powerful experience, but the person won't know what to do with it. Momentarily seeing the wonder of the universe doesn't necessarily mean that our lives will be freer. The important thing is who we are at any given moment and how we handle what life brings to us. As body and mind become more integrated, the work becomes paradoxically far easier. Our job is to be integrated with the whole world. As the Buddha said, "The whole world are my children." Once we are relatively at peace with ourselves, integration with the rest of the world becomes easier. (18)

As the student advances on the spiritual path challenges, questions and misadventures become more subtle and unrecognized: "We go through numerous doubts and numerous

openings until finally there is enough stability, enough foundation of trust and faith to go through the last barrier, the final gate. Of course, even after that we can get stuck in the very realization of nothing to attain.” Even if one experiences a deep awakening the inertia of habits remains and these cannot be eliminated in a single stroke.

Spiritual progress is hardly a linear process. In reality there are ups and downs, successes and failures, gains and missteps. “The first stage of practice is becoming aware of our feelings and internal reactions. We must first become aware of our emotional reactions and our bodily tension, how we carry on about everything in our lives, even if we conceal our reactions.”

Real practice begins moment by moment, just facing the moment. Our minds are no longer so obstreperous; they don't dominate us anymore. Genuine renunciation of our personal agendas begins, though even then it may be interrupted by all sorts of difficult episodes. The path is never direct and smooth. In fact, the rockier the better. The ego needs rocks to challenge it. As practice progresses, we notice that the episodes, the rocks in our path, are not as difficult as they once would have been. We don't have quite the same agenda that we had before, not the same drive to be important or to be judgemental . . . The process is a slow wearing away – not a matter of gaining virtue, but of gaining understanding. (19)

Sequence and Progression of Stages

Traditionally inner development is conceptualized, in general terms, as the refinement of consciousness from immersion in the world of form to perception of more subtle levels of reality. Ramana Maharshi described the spiritual journey as a movement away from identification with the body/mind and the sense of a separate self toward the direct perception of the Self:

There is a stage in the beginning, when you identify yourself with the body, when you are still having the body-consciousness. At that stage, you have the feeling that you are different from the reality or God. Then you think of yourself as a devotee of God or as a servant or lover of God. This is [still] the first stage. The second stage is when you think of yourself as a spark of the divine fire or a ray from the divine Sun. Even then there is still that sense of difference and the body-consciousness. The third stage will come when all such differences cease to exist, and you realize that the Self alone exists. (20)

In a similar fashion, Nisargadatta Maharaj describes a progressive refinement of states from clinging to the notion of a separate self or ego to an intermediate state of dwelling in the sense of 'I am' to the highest state of Self-realization or enlightenment:

At present, you identify with your body and mind. Therefore, in the initial stages of your spiritual practice, you should reject the identity by imbibing the principle that 'I am' is the vital breath and the Consciousness only and not the body and mind. In the later stages, the vital breath and the Consciousness – that is, the knowledge 'I am' – merge in one's ultimate nature . . . When you realize that you are neither the body nor the mind, you will remain unaffected by any mental modifications. In that state, you are the dynamic universal Consciousness. You should abide in this state. (21)

Zen teacher Charlotte Beck expresses the transformation that occurs through spiritual practice in psychological terms:

The first is to move from relative unhappiness to relative happiness. At best this is a shaky accomplishment, one that is easily upset. But we must have some degree of relative happiness and stability to engage in serious practice. Then we can attempt the next stage: an intelligent, persistent filtering of the various characteristics of mind and body through meditation. We begin to see our patterns; we begin to see our desires, our needs, our ego drives, and we begin to realize that these patterns, these desires, these addictions are what we call the self. As our practice continues and we begin to understand the emptiness and impermanence of these patterns, we find we can abandon them. We don't have to *try* to abandon them, they just slowly wither away – for when the light of awareness plays on anything, it diminishes the false and encourages the true – and nothing brightens that light as intelligent meditation . . . With the withering of some of these patterns, no-self – which is always present – can begin to show itself, with an accompanying increase of peace and joy. (22)

There is a striking similarity in the delineation of the specific stages of inner development among many of the world's spiritual teachings.

Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way (23, 24)

Stage 1 *Man number 1,2,3 (Many I's)*

- Humanity asleep
- Multiple changing I's
- Psychic centers unbalanced

Stage 2 *Man number 4 (One 'I')*

- Intermediate stage
- Permanent center of gravity – the Teaching or Way
- Centers becoming balanced

Stage 3 *Man number 5* (No 'I')

- Unity and self-consciousness
- Higher emotional center opened
- Functions and powers ordinary people do not possess

Stage 4 *Man number 6* (Void)

- Objective consciousness
- Higher intellectual center opens
- More faculties and powers beyond the understanding of ordinary people
- Some properties not yet permanent and may be lost

Stage 5 *Man number 7* (Self)

- Full development possible for a human being
- Permanent 'I', consciousness, free will and individuality
- Knowledge cannot be taken away; it is objective and practical knowledge of All
- Immortal within the limits of the solar system

Sufism (25, 26, 27)

Stage 1 *Sleep* (Humanity)

- The nature and behaviour of ordinary humanity
- Conditioned patterns of thought, feeling and sensation
- Static condition, inflexible, subjective
- Stage of immobility

Stage 2 *Tariqat* (Discipleship)

- The Path or Way
- Contact with a teaching master
- Purification and regeneration of the lower self
- Stage of learning, preparation and potentiality

Stage 3 *Arif* (Perception)

- Higher knowledge and capacity
- Finer perception and sensitivity
- Stage of real inner progress and attainment

Stage 4 Fana (Annihilation)

- Gnosis, awareness of Truth
- Unification of consciousness with objective Reality
- Attunement with the Divine
- Stage of love

Stage 5 Baqa (Permanency)

- Stabilization of objective knowledge and being
- Human completion and fulfilment
- Stage of one who returns to the world to guide others, Saintship

Buddhism (28, 29, 30)

Stage 1 Samsara

- The world of conditioned phenomena, impermanence, the cycle of birth and death
- The realm of *dukkha* – pain, suffering, unsatisfactoriness
- Illusory sense of oneself as a discrete ego or separate self

Stage 2 Dharma

- The teaching of the Buddha
- The Four Noble Truths – there is suffering, the cause of suffering is self-centered craving and attachment, the experience of suffering can be transcended, there is a Way that can be followed to accomplish this
- The Eightfold Way – right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration

Stage 3 Samadhi or Jhana

- Meditative absorption
- One-pointed concentration of mind
- State of effortless attention and alertness

Stage 4 Satori or Kensho

- Self-realization, opening the mind's eye
- Seeing into one's true nature
- Awakening or enlightenment
- Inner peace and freedom, liberation from suffering

Stage 5 *Nirvana*

- Union with Ultimate Reality and Absolute Truth
- Non-dualistic state beyond life and death
- *Sunyata* or the Void, Emptiness, the Ground of Being
- Return to the world of form to guide other human beings to enlightenment; in Zen the Tenth Ox-herding Picture: “Entering the marketplace with helping hands”

Advaita Vedanta (31, 32, 33)

Stage 1 *Maya*

- False identification with the body and mind
- The “I” image, ego, personality
- Ignorance of the true self
- The state of illusion and bondage, the cycle of pleasure and pain

Stage 2 *Sadhana*

- Spiritual practice
- Guru-disciple relationship
- Purification of the body and mind
- Inquiry into our real nature, self-observation and self-knowledge
- Effort and discipline, devotion and surrender

Stage 3 *Savikalpa Samadhi*

- Advanced state of concentration
- Non-directional attention and alertness
- The contemplative, witnessing state
- Choiceless awareness and discrimination

Stage 4 *Nirvakalpa Samadhi*

- The experience of pure universal consciousness and being
- Effortless Self-awareness and presence
- Perception of the light which give life to all phenomena
- Stillness, silence

Stage 5 *Sahaja Samadhi*

- Liberation, Illumination, Self-realization
- One’s natural primordial and eternal state of being

- Direct perception of Ultimate Reality and the Source of All
- Complete and final elimination of the ego
- Abidance in the Self while able to function normally in the world

The Final Stage: Enlightenment

The stage of Self-realization or enlightenment is the culmination of the spiritual journey. This stage is characterized by steady, effortless stabilization in the Self regardless of the circumstances or vicissitudes of life.

Historically, there has been a philosophical distinction in some spiritual traditions or schools of thought between those which emphasize process (realism) and those that focus on the end (absolute idealism). For instance, in Buddhism the Northern school of Zen was based on pragmatism and gradual development while the Southern school was more intuitive and instantaneous. In the words of D.T. Suzuki: "The reason why the Southern school is known as 'abrupt' or 'instant' against the 'gradual' school of the North is because it upholds that the coming of enlightenment is instantaneous and does not allow any gradation as there are no stages of progress in it; whereas the Northern school emphasizes the process of arriving at enlightenment which is naturally gradual, requiring much time and concentration."

The attainment of Buddhahood or the realization of Enlightenment is what is aimed at by all Buddhists, and Zen, as one of the Mahāyāna schools, also teaches that all our effort must be directed towards this supreme end. While most of the other schools distinguish so many steps of spiritual development and insist on one's going through all the grades successively in order to reach the consummation of the Buddhist discipline, Zen ignores all these, and boldly declares that when one sees into the inmost nature of one's own being, one instantly becomes a Buddha, and that there is no necessity of climbing up each rung of perfection. The 'seeing into one's nature' was an instant act. There could not be any process in it which would permit scales or steps of development. (34)

From a certain perspective enlightenment is both gradual and sudden. "There are stages in elimination, but none in realization. Reality lies beyond becoming and is completely outside the framework of time, space, cause and effect. What is everlasting does not ripen in Time."

Enlightenment is instantaneous but the mind becomes gradually clearer. The clarity of the mind brings about a relaxation from old patterns, freeing of energy which in turn stimulates clear-sightedness. It leads us towards living free from all striving to attain something, free from the tension brought about by waiting for something to happen, expectation. (35)

The gradual and sudden nature of enlightenment also expresses itself after awakening as the experience is slowly integrated into everyday life. Enlightened beings radiate deep stillness, serenity, wisdom and compassion. True awakening is “a realization that brings one solidly down to earth into the world of toil and struggle. The ascent is for oneself, the descent for others.”

Even after *kensho*, when you perceive that everything is one and are no longer confronted by an external world, you still cannot live in and through that experience. Somehow you keep returning to the previous state of mind. However, if you continue to work that experience is reaffirmed and you return to the world of non-duality with greater clarity. Gradually the clarity and the ability to live in this world of oneness improve. So there is both suddenness and gradualness in Zen training. The experience of awakening is sudden, but the integration of the experience into your life is gradual. To awaken quickly is not necessarily advantageous, nor is to take a long time necessarily disadvantageous. When you practice earnestly each day, you are actualizing in your life the aspects of oneness. (36)

Enlightenment is a nondual state of being distinguished by experiential living in the present moment beyond conceptualization, intellectualism or emotionalism. Jean Klein: “In the magnetic light of pure being individuality, the sense of authorship and psychological memory vanish, never to return, and you are stabilized in the stillness of presence without the idea of becoming. After awakening there is nothing to gain or lose.” The attainment of enlightenment removes all human need and grasping, replaced with wisdom and compassion and a sense of unity with everything that exists. “As we identify with less and less, we can include more and more in our lives.”

Self-realization is a death-dealing blow to the subjective ego which is permanently eradicated. In Zen this is called the ‘Great Death’ in which one transcends life and death to achieve complete freedom. Zen master Bunan: “Die while alive and be thoroughly dead. Then do what you will, and all is good.”

The ultimate state is also sometimes described in terms of spiritual poverty. In the words of Nisargadatta Maharaj: “One wants nothing – neither from others nor from oneself. One dies to all and becomes the All. To watch the universe emerging and subsiding in one’s heart is a wonder.”

Enlightenment emerges naturally when attention opens to panoramic awareness and timeless being. With pure awareness one is simultaneously aware of both one’s surroundings and aware of being aware. There is no longer the duality of a subject/object relationship. “When you familiarize yourself with attention without expectation, letting the attention simply be attentive, there is an unfolding, an unfolding in alertness, in intelligence until it comes to what we call awareness.”

Q: You said that pure attention is on the threshold of awareness. What then is the difference between attention and awareness?

A: Attention is still brain function though free from psychological interference. As attention broadens, brain function slows down and attention flows into awareness. Completely limitless attention and awareness are one and the same.

Q: Is this awareness our real nature?

A: In awareness there is no limitation of brain function but there is still a conceptual duality: 'I am aware of something.' This something is global functioning, energy uncontaminated by the cerebral structure and the senses. Here you find yourself at the threshold of your timeless being. You are in the nearness of your real nature where nobody is aware of anything. It is the background of all function.

Q: How does one go from the threshold to the stillness beyond all movement?

A: You cannot cross the threshold by any activity. Only abide there and you are spontaneously taken.

Q: What is the nature of this abiding?

A: It is 'waiting without waiting,' to use Heidegger's phrase, a state of openness without goal or motive. It is akin to wonder, to admiration, without an object. In living unconditional openness you are taken by your essential being. But you must wait to be taken. There is no going.

Q: Is there no feeling after such a momentous event?

A: On the phenomenal level there is a feeling close to thankfulness. Thankfulness for its own sake, for there is no one left to give and receive thanks. It is offering. It is pure love. (37)

Self-realization is beyond experience, which is limited and temporal, and transcends the phenomenal world. Enlightenment is pure being or silent, non-directional presence. "There is only wholeness. It is a non-state. Then when action is called for, action appears; when speech is necessary, sound appears; movement occurs when movement is necessary. You use your faculties or sense organs when required. Everything, every percept, concept, feeling, emotion comes out of the totality of your beingness."

Realization is not a new experience. It is the discovery of the timeless factor in every experience. It is awareness which makes experience possible. Just like in all the colours light is the colourless factor, so in every experience awareness is present, yet it is not an experience.

Q: If awareness is not an experience, how can it be realized?

A: Awareness is ever there. It need not be realized. Open the shutter of the mind, and it will be flooded with light.

Q: Are there levels of awareness?

A: There are levels in consciousness, but not in awareness. It is one block, homogeneous. Its reflection in the mind is love and understanding. There are levels of clarity in understanding and intensity in love, but not in their source. The source is simple and single, but its gifts are infinite. Only do not take the gifts for the source. Realize yourself as the ultimate source, that is all. (38)

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