SPIRITUALITY AND DEVELOPMENTAL LINES:
ARE THERE STAGES?

Ken Wilber
Boulder, Colorado

THE GREAT NEST OF BEING

As Huston Smith, Arthur Lovejoy, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and other scholars of the world's great spiritual and wisdom traditions have pointed out, the core of the perennial philosophy is the view that reality is composed of various levels of existence-levels of being and of knowing-ranging from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit. Each senior dimension transcends but includes its juniors-a conception of wholes within wholes within wholes indefinitely, reaching from dirt to Divinity.

This "Great Chain of Being" is actually a "Great Nest of Being;" much like a series of concentric circles or spheres. (For those unfamiliar with the Great Nest, the best short introduction is still E. F. Schumacher's A Guide for the Perplexed (1977). Other excellent introductions include Huston Smith's Forgotten Truth (1976), and Sham­bhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior (1988), by Chogyam Trungpa, who demonstrates that the Great Nest was present even in the earliest shamanic cultures.)

For the last three thousand years or so, perennial philosophers have been in nearly unanimous and cross-cultural agreement as to the general levels of the Great Nest, although the number of divisions of those levels has varied considerably. Some traditions have presented only three major levels or realms (body, mind, and spirit—or gross, subtle, and causal). Others give five (matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit). Still others give seven (e.g., the seven kundalini chakras), I have selected a five-level scheme (see Figure 1).

*This article is an edited excerpt of a much more extensive and detailed presentation of an integral psychology, in a forthcoming book, Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy (A Synthesis of Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Approaches), (Shambhala, 1999). That volume includes cross-correlational charts, diagrammatic figures, supporting chapter notes, and a recommended bibliography.

Requests for reprints to: Ken Wilber, 6183 Red Hill Road, Boulder, CO 80302.

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Most traditions also have further breakdowns of these major levels, often giving 12, 30, even 108 subdivisions of the levels of being. In my system, the subdivisions or basic structures are simply the basic levels in the Great Nest of Being, each transcending and including its predecessors—whether we use a simple five-level scheme (matter, body, mind, soul, spirit), or a slightly more sophisticated version.

FIGURE 1  
THE GREAT NEST OF BEING.

Spirit is both the highest level (causal) and the nondual Ground of all levels.

These basic structures all represent ever-expanding holons of being and consciousness, reaching out in ever greater spheres of embrace. (A halon is a whole that is part of other wholes; e.g., a whole atom is part of a whole molecule, a whole molecule is part of a whole cell, a whole cell is part of a whole organism, and so on. The Great Nest is a big picture of those levels of increasing wholeness). In short, the basic structures are simply the basic levels (stages, waves, spheres, nests) in the Great Nest of Being.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL LINES

The basic structures—precisely because they are the levels in the Great Nest of Being—are the basic levels (or waves) through which at least two dozen relatively independent developmental lines (or streams) progress. These different developmen-
tal lines include morals, affects, self-identity, psychosexuality, cognition, ideas of the good, role-taking, socioemotional capacity, creativity, altruism, several lines that can be called "spiritual" (care, openness, concern, religious faith, meditative stages, joy, communicative competence, modes of space and time, death-seizure needs, world-views, logicomathematical competence, kinesthetic skills, gender identity, and empathy—to name a few of the more prominent developmental lines for which we have some empirical evidence.

These lines are "relatively independent," which means that, for the most part, they can develop independently of each other, at different rates, with a different dynamic, and on a different time schedule. A person can be very advanced in some lines, medium in others, low in still others—all at the same time. Thus, overall development—the sum total of all these different lines—shows no linear or sequential development whatsoever.

However, the bulk of research has continued to find that each developmental line itself tends to unfold in a sequential, holarchical fashion: higher stages in each line tend to build upon or incorporate the earlier stages, no stages can be skipped, and the stages emerge in an order that cannot be altered by environmental conditioning or social reinforcement. So far, considerable evidence suggests that this is true for all of the developmental lines that I mentioned.

For example, in the widely regarded text *Higher Stages of Human Development* (Alexander & Langer, 1990), the works of thirteen top developmental psychologists—including Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, Kurt Fischer, Howard Gardner, Karl Pribram, and Robert Kegan—are presented, and of those thirteen, all of them, except one or two, present models that are hierarchical in part, including Gilligan for female development. These conclusions are based on massive amounts of experimental data, not merely on theoretical speculations.

This is not to say that all of these developmental lines are only hierarchical; many of their features are not. But crucial aspects of all of them appear to be hierarchical in important ways. Furthermore, there is a general consensus that no matter how different the developmental lines might be, not only do most of them unfold holarchically, they do so through the same set of general waves, which include: a physical/sensorimotor/preconventional stage, a concrete actions/conventional rules stage, and a more abstract, formal, postconventional stage.

In learning to play a musical instrument, for example, one first physically grapples with the instrument and learns to relate to it in a sensorimotor fashion. One then learns to play a simple song or two, gradually mastering the concrete operations and rules of using the instrument. As one becomes proficient in playing the musical keys and scales, the skills become more abstract, and one can increasingly apply the abstract skills to new and different songs. Almost all of the developmental lines—from cognitive to ego to affective to moral to kinesthetic—proceed through those three broad stages. If we allow for the fact that there might be yet higher or transpersonal stages of development, and if we simply call all of those "post-postconventional," then that would give us four broad stages, levels, or waves—sensorimotor, conventional, postconventional, and post-postconventional—through which most of the developmental lines proceed.
And what are those four broad waves? Nothing but a simplified version of the Great Nest of Being, moving from body (sensorimotor) to mind (conventional and postconventional) to spirit (post-postconventional). Of course, those four broad stages are just a succinct summary of what research has found; in most of the cases—cognitive, self, and moral, for example—development actually goes through five, six, seven or more stages, and, in virtually every case, those stages, as far as they go, match in a very general fashion the levels in the Great Nest. All of this can be represented as in Figure 2, which is what I call an "integral psychograph."

The levels in the Great Nest are shown on the vertical axis, and through those levels run the various developmental lines. Of the two dozen or so lines, I give five as examples: cognitive, moral, interpersonal, spiritual, and affective. I have listed "spirit" both as the highest level, and "spiritual" as a separate developmental line, reflecting the two most common definitions of "spirituality." Since the Great Nest is actually a holarchy (as shown in Figure 1), we can more accurately represent the integral psychograph as in Figure 3.

This does not mean that all, or even most, of the important aspects of development are hierarchical. In my system, each basic structure or wave actually consists of both hierarchy (or increasing holistic capacity) and heterarchy (or nonhierarchical interaction among mutually equivalent elements). Thus holarchy, as I use the term, includes a balance of both hierarchy (qualitatively ranked levels) and heterarchy (mutually linked dimensions).

SPIRITUALITY: STAGES OR NOT?

This conception of developmental lines necessarily leads to one of the thorniest of questions. Does spirituality itself necessarily unfold in stages?

As I have often suggested, "the answer" depends almost entirely on how one defines "spirituality." There are at least five very different definitions, two of which involve stages, and three of which do not. All of them are legitimate uses of the word "spirituality," but it is absolutely necessary to specify which is meant. In fact, I think these are five very important aspects of the broad phenomenon we call "spirituality," and all of them deserve to be included to some degree in any integral model.

Here are the common definitions: 1. Spirituality involves the highest levels of any of the developmental lines. 2. Spirituality is the sum total of the highest levels of the developmental lines. 3. Spirituality is itself a separate developmental line. 4. Spirituality is an attitude (such as openness or love) that you can have at whatever stage you are. 5. Spirituality basically involves peak experiences, not stages.

1. Spirituality involves the highest levels of any of the developmental lines.

In this definition, "spirituality" basically means the transpersonal, transrational, post-postconventional levels of any of the lines, such as our highest cognitive capacities (e.g., transrational intuition), our most developed affects (e.g., transpersonal love),
our highest moral aspirations (transcendental compassion for all sentient beings), our most evolved self (the transpersonal Self or supra individual Witness), and so on.

In this usage, spirituality (or this particular aspect of spirituality) definitely follows a sequential or stage-like course, because it is, by definition, the post-postconventional stages in any of the developmental lines. This is a very common usage, reflecting those aspects of spirituality that embody the very highest capacities, the noblest motives, the best of aspirations, the further reaches of human nature, the most highly evolved, the growing tip, the leading edge—all of which point to the highest levels in any of the lines.

2. Spirituality is the sum total of the highest levels of the developmental lines.

This is similar to the previous definition, but with a slightly different (yet important) twist. This definition emphasizes the fact that, even though the individual lines unfold hierarchically, the sum total of the highest stages of those lines would show no such stage-like development. Like "overall development" and "overall self" development, "overall spiritual development" would not be stage-like. (Say there are ten developmental lines. Say that the post-postconventional stages of those lines are the ones we are calling "spiritual." One person might develop post-postconventional capacities in lines 2 and 7; another person, in lines 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9; another person, in lines 1 and 5. Each of those lines is hierarchical, but the sum total obviously follows no set sequence at all.) Every person's spiritual path, in other words, is radically individual and unique, even though the particular competences themselves might follow a well-defined path. (Notice, however, that with this definition, precisely because the developmental lines themselves are still sequential and hierarchical, the development in each of those lines could be tested for.) I believe this definition, like all of them, points to some very real and important aspects of spirituality, aspects that any complete definition of spirituality would want to include.

3. Spirituality is itself a separate developmental line.

Obviously in this case spiritual development would show some sort of stage-like unfolding, since a developmental line, by definition, shows development. In *Integral Psychology* (Wilber, 1999) I have drawn together some two dozen theorists, East and West, who present convincing and sometimes massive evidence that at least some aspects of spirituality undergo sequential or stage-like development. This includes most of the various meditative paths, East and West. In all of these cases, these aspects of spirituality show holarchical sequential development (although again, that does not preclude regressions, spirals, temporary leaps forward, or peak experiences of any of the major states).

Daniel P. Brown's extensive work on the cross-cultural stages of meditative development deserves special mention as being the most meticulous and sophisticated research to date. What he and his co-worker Jack Engler found is that "The major contemplative traditions we have studied in their original languages present an unfolding of meditation experiences in terms of a stage model: for example, the
Mahamudra from the Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist tradition; the Visuddhimagga from the Pali Theravada Buddhist tradition; and the Yoga Sutras from the Sanskrit Hindu tradition.” These were subsequently checked against Chinese and Christian sources.

"The models are sufficiently similar to suggest an underlying common invariant sequence of stages, despite vast cultural and linguistic differences as well as styles of practice .... " The results strongly suggest that the stages of meditation are in fact of cross-cultural and universal applicability (at a deep, not surface, analysis).

Their work, described above, is included in Transformations of Consciousness (Wilber, Engler & Brown, 1986), along with an in-depth study, by Harvard theologian John Chirban, of the stages of spiritual development evidenced by saints in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Chirban’s conclusion: "Although each saint describes his own experience (often in his own unique way), basic parallels emerge as one compares the stages of the saints with one another. This sameness confirms the catholicity of their experience ... "- and the catholicity (or universal applicability) of the basic waves of consciousness themselves, which are similarly reflected in these numerous cross-cultural sources. Whether one is looking at St. Teresa, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, Lady Tsogyal, St. Dionysius, Patanjali, Hazrat Inayat Kahn, or Mahamudra, one is again struck by the broadly similar morphogenetic field or developmental space over which their stages migrate (a morphogenetic field known as the Great Nest).

One of the major difficulties in coming to terms with a stage conception is that most people, even if they are in fact progressing through stages of competence, rarely actually experience anything that feels or looks like a stage. In their own direct experience, "stages" make no sense at all. With respect to cognitive development, for example, you can videotape children at a preoperational stage (where they will claim that when you pour an identical amount of water from a short glass into a tall glass, the tall glass has more water), and you can show them the videotape when they are at the conventional operational stage (where it is "completely obvious" that the same amount of water is present in each glass), and they will accuse you of doctoring the videotape, because nobody could be that stupid, and certainly not them. In other words, they just went through a monumental stage in development, yet they actually experienced not the slightest thing that told them that an extraordinary milestone had just occurred.

So it is with stages in general. We spot them only by standing back from unreflective experience, comparing our experiences with others, and seeing if there are any common patterns. If these common patterns check out in numerous different settings, then we are justified in assuming that various stages are involved. But in all cases, these stages are the product of direct investigation and research, not abstract philosophizing. And when it comes to spiritual experience, all of the great wisdom traditions I cite have found that some very important spiritual competences follow a stage model, not in a rigidly clunk-and-grind fashion, but as unfolding waves of subtler and subtler experiences, and that when you compare these experiences over a large number of people, certain similarities in unfolding occur. In other words, we have some stages.

My model has often been accused of being based solely on the Eastern meditative traditions. This is a misconception. To dispel it I would in particular like to draw attention to the work of Evelyn Underhill. Her masterpiece, Mysticism, first published
in 1911, is still in many ways an unsurpassed classic for the elucidation of the Western mystical and contemplative traditions. Underhill divides Western mysticism into three broad hierarchical stages (with numerous substages), which she calls nature mysticism (a lateral expansion of consciousness to embrace the stream of life), metaphysical mysticism (culminating in formless cessation), and divine mysticism (which she divides into dark night and union). These are in many ways quite similar to my own categories of nature mysticism, deity mysticism, and formless/nondual mysticism. These stages of spirituality are deeply important, whether they appear East or West, North or South, and no account of spirituality is complete without them.

4. Spirituality is an attitude (such as openness or love) that you can have at whatever stage you are.

This is probably the most popular and common definition. Nonetheless, it has proven very difficult to define or even state in a coherent fashion. We can't easily say that the requisite attitude is love, because love, according to most research, tends (like other affects) to unfold from egocentric to sociocentric to worldcentric modes; and therefore this attitude is not fully present at all of the levels, but rather itself develops (do we really want to call egocentric love "spiritual"?). "Openness" might work, but again the question becomes: does the capacity for openness itself simply show up fully formed, or does it develop? And just how "open" can a preconventional individual be, when he or she cannot even take the role of other? "Integration" would fit the bill—the degree to which whatever lines are present are integrated and balanced—but in my system that is just another name for what the self does, and thus is not anything specifically "spiritual." At any rate, I believe this is a legitimate definition, but thus far, coherent examples of it have been scarce.

5. Spirituality basically involves peak experiences, not stages.

That is certainly true in many cases, and peak experiences (or altered states of consciousness) do not usually show development or stage-like unfolding. They are temporary, passing, transient. Moreover, states, unlike structures, are mostly incompatible. You cannot be drunk and sober at the same time. (This is quite unlike structures, which, because they transcend and include, can coexist: cells and molecules can both exist together, the one embracing the other—which is why growth and development occur by way of structures, not states, although the latter are significant in themselves and can have a direct impact on development) Therefore, if one's definition of spirituality is a peak experience, then that does not in itself involve a stage-like unfolding.

However, as I earlier suggested, you can examine peak experiences more closely and find that they generally involve psychic, subtle, causal, or nondual peak experiences interpreted through archaic, magic, mythic, or rational structures—and each of those show stage-like development. Still, this is an important definition of spirituality, and it goes to show that at virtually any stage of development, temporary peak experiences of the transpersonal realms are possible. However, to the extent these temporary states are converted to enduring traits, they become structures that show development.
Those are five of the more common definitions of spirituality. The conclusion: not everything that we can legitimately call "spirituality" shows stage-like development. Nonetheless, many aspects of spirituality turn out, upon closer inspection, to involve one or more aspects that are developmental. This includes the higher reaches of the various developmental lines, as well as spirituality considered as a separate line itself. Peak experiences, however, do not show stage-like development, although both the structures that have the peak experiences, and the realms that are peaked into, show development if permanent realizations are acquired.

DOES PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT HAVE TO BE COMPLETED BEFORE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT CAN BEGIN?

This depends, once again, almost entirely on how we define those terms. If spirituality is defined as a separate line of development, the answer is "no" (because it occurs alongside of, not on top of, psychological development). If spirituality is defined as peak experience, the answer is also "no" (because that can occur at any time). But beyond that it gets a little trickier.

First of all, what many theorists mean by "psychological development" is the personal stages of development (preconventional, conventional, and postconventional), and what they mean by "spiritual" is the transpersonal stages (post-postconventional). Using those definitions, and when looking at anyone developmental line, the psychological must generally be completed before the spiritual can stably emerge (simply because, as much research indicates, you can't have postconventional without first having conventional, and so on).

However-and this is what has confused many theorists-because the developmental lines themselves can unfold independently, an individual can be at a very high spiritual stage (transpersonal or post-postconventional) in one line and still be at a very low personal or psychological stage (conventional or preconventional) in others. For example, a person might be at a transpersonal level of cognition (perhaps attained by meditative development), and yet still be at a personal or psychological (conventional or preconventional) stage of moral development. Thus, even though, with these definitions, the spiritual comes only after the psychological in any given line, nonetheless all sorts of spiritual developments can occur before, alongside of, or after, all sorts of psychological developments, precisely because the lines themselves are relatively independent.

If one's idea of spirituality is peak experiences, those can occur any time, any place, so overall psychological development does not have to be completed for those, either. But to the extent those states become traits, they, too, will of necessity enter the stream of development and swim in its morphogenetic currents, flowing through the waves in the great River of life.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Finally, let us note an item of great importance. Whether, in the end, you believe spiritual practice involves stages or not, authentic spirituality does involve practice.
This is not to deny that for many people beliefs are important, faith is important, religious mythology is important. It is simply to add that, as the testimony of the world's great yogis, saints, and sages has made quite clear, authentic spirituality can also involve direct experience of a living Reality, disclosed immediately and intimately in the heart and consciousness of individuals, and fostered by diligent, sincere, prolonged spiritual practice. Even if you relate to spirituality as a peak experience, those peak experiences can often be specifically induced, or at least invited, by various forms of spiritual practice, such as active ritual, contemplative prayer, shamanic voyage, intensive meditation, and so forth. All of those open one to a direct experience of Spirit, and not merely beliefs or ideas about Spirit.

My own recommendation is to not just think differently, but to practice diligently, in almost any authentic spiritual practice. A qualified teacher, with whom one feels comfortable, is a must. One can start by consulting the works of Father Thomas Keating, Rabbi Zalman-Schacter Salomi, the Dalai Lama, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Hazrat Inayat Khan, or any of the many widely acknowledged teachers in any of the great lineages.

At the same time, I believe it is best to be wary of those spiritual paths that involve simply changing one's beliefs or ideas. They might be a fine place to start on a spiritual path, but they are not an effective path to that life.

Authentic spirituality is not about translating the world differently, but about transforming your consciousness. It is about the growth of consciousness and interior transformations, and what you can do to foster them in yourself, thus contributing to a world-centric, global, spiritual consciousness in yourself and others

NOTE

1 In Integral Psychology I have identified twelve structures that subdivide the major five levels (see Figure 1), with some overlapping: Level A (matter), matter and sensation; Level B (life or body), perception, exocept, impulse, image, symbol, and endocept; Level C (mind), concept, rule, formal, and vision-logic; Level D (soul), vision-logic, psychic/vision, subtle/archetype, causal/formless; Level E (spirit/nondual), causal/termless and nondual! In Integral Psychology these structures are cross-correlated with parallel structures in various Eastern and Western systems.

REFERENCES