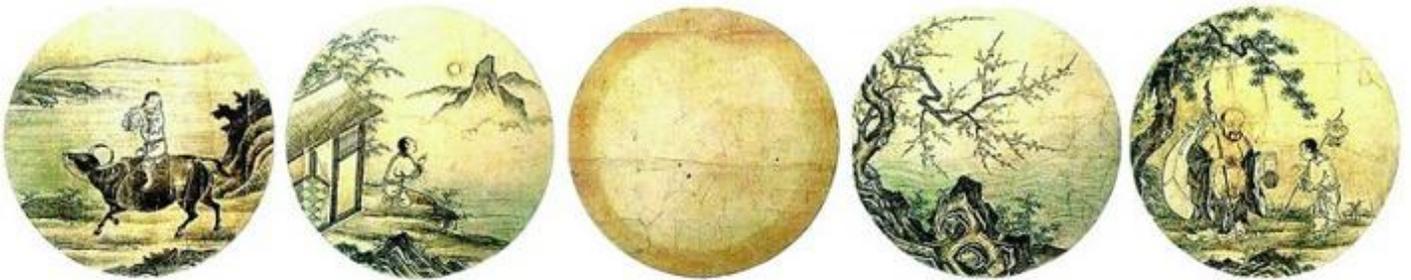


The “Ten Ox Hearing” pictures and how they can be seen in the light of our modern psycho-spiritual journey towards realising our potential.

These “Ten Ox Hearing” pictures show our potential journey in ten stages (12th c. China - Wikipedia)



1. “In search of the Ox”
2. “Discovery of footprints”
3. “Seeing the Ox tail”
4. “Catching the Ox”
5. “Taming or tending the Ox”



6. “Riding the Ox back home”
7. “Forgetting the Ox, the person rests alone” - the Ox is transcended
8. “The ox and the ox-herder are both forgotten” - both Ox and Self are transcended
9. “Reaching the Source” – re-connecting with form
10. “Appearing in the marketplace with gifts” - the return to Society

Before reflecting on these pictures, I first want to look at the difference between “self-development” and our “spiritual” or “transpersonal” development.

(Knowing what word to use for the “spiritual / transpersonal” dimension of our experience is difficult. Both words have their dis-advantages, but there are no others. “Spiritual” has the unwanted connections with religion and belief systems, with “spirit” as some magical external force. “Transpersonal” is too vague, missing the personal felt experience of being here and now. I end up using them interchangeably.)

Spiritual / Transpersonal “development” is more about attuning and opening to the non-ordinary “being” level of life, it connects us to the miracle of here and now consciousness. It seems that as human beings we are part “God”, some refer to this as the “True Self” or just the “Self” with a capital “S”. What is clear is that spiritual opening can happen at any point in our lives. The process of this “opening” runs parallel to, but separate from, the developmental stages that the personality and ego go through (as Ken Wilber explains). Actually, the transpersonal is not really about development at all, it is much more about degrees of connection, because whatever we call it, “Spirit”, “Being”, “Consciousness”, “Love”, it is always fully here waiting to be opened or connected to. So, it is a question of the degree to which we are aware of this connection. Or to put that another way, how

deeply we are consciously embodying the Consciousness, Love and Energy, which always, and exclusively, exist, in the connected depth of the “here and now”.

So spiritual or transpersonal “development” is not about achieving anything, it is about increasingly “**Waking Up**” to what is already here ... our “I am” ness, our connection to Consciousness, to Love and Energy. “**Growing Up**” on the other hand is about taking responsibility for “removing the obstacles” to being able to be in the “here and now”, i.e. choosing to face and see and understand our essentially defensive ego with its personality traits. It is about healing and maturing towards being able to increasingly own our ego, so as to be able to eventually let go of it. “Waking up” and “Growing-up” are Ken Wilber’s terms for what is needed on our journey of realising our potential. He added “Cleaning up” for the work of therapy, and “Showing up” for the work of engaging with the world, but it is the first two that are fundamental in my understanding.

We experience the transpersonal differently at different stages -

Our self develops through the process of “transcending and including” (Wilber 2017) sequential stages of consciousness, which is essentially about being able to hold increasing levels of complexity, and the paradoxes, of our nature. At each of these stages though, our experience of, and interpretation of, spiritual connection is different, as Wilber explains well. From within the “Survival or Archaic” stage there is the glory of confluence, of being merged, at the “Magic” stage the spiritual does seem to be magical, from the “Mythic” stage there is religious belief, for the “Modern / Rational” stage it is maybe more about awe and wonder of nature and the belief in science, in the “Postmodern” stage the spiritual has to include the relativity and subjectivity of everything. Next are the “Integral” stages, where we are then able to let go of our identification with “our stage” being “right” and another “wrong”. Here the view is “Worldcentric”, and all the previous stages can be seen with an open appreciation of their place and value, as we move towards ever more encompassing perspectives.

Wilber divides the whole of our “development” into three “Tiers”, with each representing a step change in expansion of our consciousness. As above, the beginnings of our “spiritual awakening” can happen at any point during any stages. The five “First Tier” stages are grouped together because at each of these stages the ego is identified with its perspective, there is not yet an independent enough sense of self, able to be sufficiently self-reflective to take on a more objective perspective. In the 2nd Tier or “Integral” stages we gain the freedom of multiple holistic perspectives, and the 3rd Tier stages are more spiritual and concerned with increasingly letting go of the ego as we become increasingly connected to the transpersonal aspects of ourselves and the universe.

The first four “Ox herding” pictures can be seen as “Tier 1” process of becoming self/ego aware, the personality becomes increasingly sophisticated, towards awareness of the forces that drive us to be the way we are. The fifth and sixth pictures, “Taming or tending the Ox” and “Riding the Ox back home” are the “Tier 2” or “Integral” stages of self-mastery or becoming our “authentic self” (Richard Harvey). The last four pictures are the process of letting go of our ego altogether into the fullest possible freedom.

It is not really until the “2nd Tier”, or “Integral”, stages of our development that the work of therapy can be fully embraced, i.e. that we can move into taking real responsibility for ourselves, of healing our ego and facing our insecurity. This is about dis-identifying with our ego through healing the traumas that created the need for it in the first place. This needs us to be able to “make an object out of what we are subject to” (R. Keagan), i.e. making our insecurity an object of study and exploration during the process of deepening our awareness, and understand, of it. It seems that usually the earliest this process can fully be entered into is around our late twenties to early thirties.

Wilber's Stages of - Belief systems / Self-development	Spiritual awareness – awareness of being - can develop at any stage	The Ox Herding stages
Tier 1		
Archaic / Survival	Joy of confluence, of feeling merged, totally supported	<p>“In search of the Ox” – the need to find meaning, or “freedom”, or to understand life – can start in mid teenage years - sometimes earlier, but needs a developed sense of self (ego) to be more fully formed.</p> <p>“Discovery of footprints” – starting to see that there is meaning ‘out there’ and that it has something to do with ourselves. Can start at Magic? Usually later –</p> <p>“Seeing the Ox’s tail” – starting to understand that we are driven by forces we don’t understand, but that there is meaning and a developmental process.</p> <p>“Catching the Ox” – working directly on ourselves to see, own and understand. Starting to really take responsibility for ourselves.</p>
Magic	Wonder at the ‘magic’ of life	
Mythic / Religious	Sensing the heart call of the spirit, in religions	
Rational / Modern	There is logic and meaning and process – but this does exclude wonder and awe	
Postmodern	Everything is part of everything and “I need to start taking responsibility for myself”	
Tier 2		
Integral 1	Working on taking responsibility for myself. Starting to open to our deep wish for “Waking up”	“Taming or tending the Ox” – process of attaining self-knowledge and working to reconciling ourselves.
Integral 2	Taking full self-responsibility. Living the wish to “Wake up” Ego accepted and seen and not identified with – it is in proper place.	Riding the Ox back home – reconciled. We are our “authentic selves”
Tier 3		
	Finally, letting go of last identification with the ego	The Ox transcended or “forgetting the Ox, the person rests alone” – peace
Ego Transcended	Ego is transcended – resting in being, in silence and emptiness	Both Ox and self-transcended or “the ox and the ox-herder are both forgotten” – self is let go of, there is nothingness
	Re-integrating with the world of “Form”	“Reaching the Source” – all is just as it is, but Spirit and Form together are the Whole
	Re-engaging in the busy ness of the world from a completely different place.	Return to Society or “appearing in the marketplace with gifts” – manifesting enlightenment in life. The complete integration of Heaven and Earth

Is the ego only created by trauma? Is trauma during our development inevitable? These are big questions that I don't know the answer to. It seems though, that fundamentally, arriving in this world as an infant with our only previous experience being that of "oneness", we are faced with the experience of separateness and unmet needs, which must inevitably be traumatic. Then, as Thomas Huebl has made clear in his investigation of "collective trauma", our society is profoundly influenced and structured around trauma, around separation and alienation on multiple levels. It is as though the social "air" we breathe is conditioned by fracturedness. Then there is also the fact that our developmental journey is so long and complex that it is impossible to negotiate it without rupture at some point. Obviously the greater our trauma, the stronger our ego, its need for defences are more fixed and deeply embedded.

This can work both ways though, after all every "stick" has two ends, with our difficult relationship to our lives providing the motivation to work hard for our freedom facing the difficulties of our trauma, which can lead to deep levels of self-knowledge and self-understanding and transformation. I have never met anyone who has not been scared by their upbringing, who is not defensive at some level. There are a lucky few with relatively little trauma who are lucky enough to flow through life with creativity and relative ease, but they still have the challenge of facing their death and discovering what life means. It does seem that globally increasing numbers of people are "waking up", let us hope that our technology continues to support this in the future, enabling our societies to transform into something wonderful and capable of healing our planet. The emergency of climate warming provides us with enormous motivation after all.

Again, "Waking up" is more about attunement than development through learning to open and integrate our head, heart and body into the amazing presence of the "here and now". There is nothing to develop in this spiritual / transpersonal part of the self, it is a miracle of consciousness, love and energy that are already here, already perfect. So, it is a question of developing our ability to open and to connect to them as we progress through the stages of our development, although it seems that this process needs to be forgotten and re-learned many times in order that our motivation can be re-set and come from an ever freer place each time. With each 1st Tier stage, we become more sophisticated, able to be more conscious, until self-reflection becomes fully possible (Tier 2). Then we can work consciously to heal and grow and resolve the unreconciled trauma and needs which underpin our ego, working to remove our "obstacles", one after another, as we slowly detach from our identifications and projections with all their associated fears.

I spent much of my life dealing with the consequences of my insecurity, and in doing so I have faced much of the hurt from the abandonment I experienced as a child. Recently I came to face another layer of this that was to do with a fear of "nothingness", something that I think exists at an existential level for many people. My motivation for writing this sentence, for being a therapist, the search for spiritual connection, all have elements of needing to fill this fear with the wish to feel 'special' and valuable. Finding real freedom from insecurity is a gradual process of undoing layer after layer of trauma. Another recent example was around losing my temper. On looking into this I became aware of the hurt that I still holding was from having been assaulted several times in the course of my life. Feeling the hurt, allowing my vulnerability, and understanding it, is always liberating, again I felt like I could allow my heart to open a little more, I could "be" a bit more, relax a bit more.

It really is the case that each of our "problems" or "issues" is a doorway to our liberation if we can use it as such. There is a wonderful book by Mary O'Malley called "What's in the Way is the Way" arguing just this. "Moralistic" approaches that proclaim what is "right or wrong" completely fail to understand this. *Everything* is process, and as such, has meaning. Freedom is about healing our insecurity, which is all about facing the un-bearable feelings we have unconsciously avoided facing. This is what is behind all the compulsive compensatory ways we avoid the "here and now", it is behind all the self-justifying chatter that fills our heads and all the stuckness of our bodies.

In order to fully face our insecurity, it can be helpful, and maybe in the end essential, to have some connection to support that can only come from connecting to the transpersonal dimension of life. This helps us find the trust we need to let go of our defences and face the reality of ourselves. Although this support is indirect, it gives a general sense of greater trust in ourselves and life which makes it easier for us to open our heart, our mind and our body.

I continue to find the variety in people's journeys amazing, for some it is slow work over many years of facing the un-faceable in tiny incremental steps, as has been the case for me. For others, the "growing up" part of the journey seems to happen quite quickly, it is as though all that was needed was a little help to get over a hurdle, enabling them to flow quickly onto issues more connected to "waking up".

Whatever the process, this is the work of reversing our projections and our identification around our "victimness" and "specialness". Can I bear not being special and take full responsibility for how I am in this moment? For being the wounded and flawed person that I am? And how to bear this without our archaic 'victim' wound associations getting re-stimulated? This is part of accepting life increasingly as it is, right now, and of working to let go of being caught into continuously "wanting more" or attached to "shoulds". Somehow, we need to face, and not run away from the discomfort of our 'now'. Whatever this discomfort is, be it a sense of "deficit", "nothingness", "inadequacy", "badness", "fear", "grief", "emptiness", or simply tiredness, or some burdensome sense of responsibility, or all of them combined, it needs to be faced. When we do this, we experience some resolution of our insecurity, however small the step, it leads to an expansion of consciousness, an opening of our heart, which is always towards Love, towards clarity and a release of physical tension.

These are the three basic ways that we relate to the world, through our head, heart and body, and if any part changes, it changes the whole. Healing in therapy usually happens through reconciling some emotional conflict or stuckness, which then affects our thinking as well as relaxing our physical tension, but just as trauma can start with the heart or head or body, so healing can happen through each too.

"Growing up" is about taking more responsibility for ourselves, it is about "removing obstacles" which then naturally moves us closer to "Spirit", closer to "Waking up". "Growing up" can only be done alone, no one can take responsibility for us, make choices for us, become aware for us. "Waking up" though is about realising that we are not alone, that we are in relationship to everyone and everything that exists and that this is miraculous, especially when we start to see how it is Love that underlies every relationships, from atoms to galaxies, molecules to Gaia and friend and foe.

A final "Waking Up" is, it seems, a significant shift into living permanently embodying this non-separateness in the way that many "masters" (and "ordinary" people, see batgap.com) have described. For most people it seems that approaching this "waking up" is a delicate and subtle process of gradually letting go of our attachments to our egoic wants, fears, desires, needs, whilst increasingly opening to the wish within life itself for us to embody ever deeper Consciousness, Love and Energy. Healing and self-knowledge facilitate this opening by "removing obstacles" but it seems that we still have to choose to let go, which is of course a huge paradox. This the paradox at the heart of "waking up", it is at the centre of the "self-enquiry" that Ramana Maharshi was always asking people to ask, "Who am I?", what is this self? This is about how we can gradually (or for some, suddenly!) see and understand that my "self" is not in the end me as a separate individual, we are but a point of light of Universal Oneness, Conscious or Love.

Our choice is absolutely necessary and yet has to be increasingly surrendered the closer we get to that which cannot be connected to from our ego. This whole process is surely a sliding scale, the more ego, the more choice is needed. As we heal and reconcile the less dominant the ego becomes, the less

choice is needed. But choice must still surely remain an essential ingredient until that ultimate egoless “Yes” of transformation occurs, in whatever miraculous way it does.

So, it is clear that the final process of “Waking up”, in terms of transcending the ego, has to come from a motivation beyond the ego. This is why it usually takes such a long time. We have to continually purify our motivation by healing and knowing ourselves better and better. It is in this respect that therapy is a “path” towards enlightenment, because therapy is about seeing and understanding and having compassion for the layers of motivation of the self. This continual questioning of our motivation is what I call the “Zen of Therapy”. It leads, if pursued far enough, to Maharshi’s insistence on “I-I self-enquiry” or Gurdjieff’s “self-remembering” or Papaji’s “STOP”, Harding’s “Headlessness”, the Buddha’s “compassion”, Christ’s “Love”, Zen’s “Aha” and so on.

“Spirit” is a part of us that exists on another level than our ordinary thoughts, feelings or bodily sensations, it is beyond our personality and ego. It is that aspect of us that is connected to everything around us, to the universe and beyond, because it comes from what is beyond Form. Connecting to this, which we do through our head as Consciousness, our heart as Love, and our body as Sensation or Energy, is, as Non-Duality teachers have argued throughout history, an aspect of the infinite and eternal. It has the power and qualities of “magic dust”, it can change perspectives, transform and inspire and give us meaning and freedom. A tiny sprinkling goes a long way. It can be felt in the arts, in religion, in ceremony, in movement or singing, in meditation, in relationships, in sex, in sports, in nature, on holiday, or within any “mundane” moment of our lives.

Our contact with the Transpersonal is wonderful and deeply supportive, but it also inevitably ends up being used by our ego along the way. It can open our hearts, our minds and our bodies, but our ego will inevitably (to the extent that unconscious trauma is still within us, with its associated compulsive compensatory processes) take the nourishment for itself and attach to it. Then we use it in what has been called “spiritual bypassing” to avoid feelings, especially those difficult feelings that surround our insecurities, whatever the form they take. Also, to avoid the effort of having to think for ourselves, as well as the effort of taking responsibility for our bodies. Most of us attempting this journey try to cheat and take short cuts at some stage, impatience is very human after all. But every attempt at “bypassing” is of course, doomed to failure.

So, “mindfulness”, meditation etc., etc., can all be double edged swords. Who, after all, is doing it? Where is the motivation coming from? This is the great difficulty of this journey, having to ever more deeply question our motivation, to check and re-check, look and re-look with ever more ruthless honesty. This is the slow process of purification, of needing to let go of the ego again and again at ever deeper levels, of needing to face our insecurity at ever deeper levels, towards opening to Life’s own wish for Consciousness and Love and Embodiment, rather than “ours”. (do see De Salzmans’s “The Reality of Being”)

This approach is “scientific”! It is about getting closer and closer to facing and living with ‘what is’, to discerning the underlying truth about ourselves and our situation. Something that through the miracle of being a human-being with choice and conscience, most of us are capable of.