

The 4 Phases of Spiritual Growth.

By Doug Siegel

Founder of Vigilant Eats and Vigilant Life

- **Life is a spiritual journey. Let's stride together and celebrate the voyage.**

INTRO

Years ago, after a failed attempt at making a living as a musician in NYC, I found myself deeply depressed and spent much time spinning in thoughts of hopelessness. A concerned and wise friend offered to guide me through my existential crisis. His kindness and support was healing in and of itself. He intuitively understood where people were in their life's progression and had the skill to inspire growth. So, while I was standing at the precipice of hopelessness, he gave me the courage to leap. It became a process of discovery where hopelessness spawned adventure. I was seeing life anew. To nurture this insight and give it the space it needed to blossom, I traveled the country by motorcycle. I sat fireside in the evenings, spent hours gazing at the night sky, hiked, read, wrote, meditated and began doing yoga. I found myself sleeping in parks, Indian reservations, grassy knolls off of quiet back roads and guest rooms belonging to people I met along the way. I was on an inward journey while on an outward adventure. At the time, I could not have expressed what was happening to me internally nor the importance and difference between the inward journey and the outward. I would not have known how to describe the starting point nor where I was headed. That adventure lasted nearly a year. Almost 20 years later, I believe I have an idea of how to describe its start, the tell-tale signposts along the way, the ditches, detours and the psychological destination. I've met many teachers on the path and had the gumption to take a chance both outwardly and inwardly. As the layers of self continue to peel away, the fearless joy at the *core of being* shines brighter and brighter. With this, it becomes clear that life is a celebration to be cherished and it is a privilege to be part of a species capable of illuminating this well-worn path of wisdom, clarity, and awe.

As we transition from youth to maturity, our limited field of vision grows. We become ever more aware of who we are relative to a community, a nation, a humanity, an ecology, a planet, and ultimately an infinite universe. As we grow, our identity, desires and goals evolve. With it, our expectations of ourselves and others evolve. The concepts upon which we build a "self" broaden and evolve to fit the expanse of our worldview. For those consciously aware of this evolution or growth, it seems important to take ownership of this process or at least reflect upon it. Our capacity to enjoy the gift we've been given depends on whether our expanding worldview allows our fear to evaporate. Since life will inevitably swallow us whole, it's unfortunate to remain stuck in fear, self-doubt and self-centeredness. Celebration seems the reasonable response to living this brief existence.

The 4 Phases:

1. The Duckling
2. The Lion
3. The Lamb
4. The Sun

I hope these pages help you to appreciate the phase or phases in which you currently find yourself. I believe it's worth discovering and honoring each and every phase's geography. There are magnificent highs and lows in each and none are wasteful or regrettable insofar as they become the building blocks of our self-knowledge. Having friendly support in facing all the questions and conditions that appear along the way is like enjoying the accompanying audio player during a museum visit. Laughing with our fellow travelers about the irony of the experience makes for rich friendships. I see no reason to rush through the museum. This is your life; let's celebrate each step of the way together.

The 4 phases are not always experienced consecutively. We may experience multiples simultaneously. These represent states of mind that may shift moment-to-moment. I wrote this to create a framework for self-exploration, as well as develop a common language to help make it easier for people to express where they've been and where they stand currently. It's a means of sharing questions and helping to illuminate the path mutually. This helps us form rich alliances for mutual growth. *The 4 Phases of Spiritual Growth* is meant to be a general lay of the land – a basis for self-reflection and group discussion.

The Journey Begins...

PHASE 1: THE DUCKLING

The Duckling = The desire to fit in. Believing what they told you.

Please note: The description of the 4 phases reflects my personal experience. While many people identify with these phases, some have experienced differently. When I use the term "we," it is not meant as an absolute. I would love to know if your experience is otherwise, and if so, how?

We grow up receiving deep emotional imprints every time an authority figure praises or condemns us, tells us we are good or bad, adequate or inadequate. Because we desire feeling good and aim to avoid feeling bad, we begin acting in such a way that seeks approval, often at the expense of discovering and expressing our own curiosities and authenticity. Media and tradition form our conditioned notion of self, as does parental love or abuse. In terror of judgment, we become our own worst critics when we've taken on an authority's belief system. This thought matrix follows many through their whole lives. People take these beliefs into their marriages. Their partners often validate these beliefs as do their families and traditional peer groups. Often, this is what

tradition is, a validation of what one's group believes is good and bad without any regard for who a person may actually be.

Key Questions:

- *Were you celebrated for your unique qualities as a child or did your family and peers criticize you, making you feel invalidated and inadequate?*
- *Did you value those who your group or community deemed heroes? What were the specific "good" qualities of these heroes? Were they the qualities you exhibited?*
- *Do you currently feel like you must keep up appearances and social commitments with those you do not share the same mission or values? Are you afraid of their judgment or their disowning you?*
- *Do you feel guilty when you choose to do an activity of your desire?*

The growing frustration that exists between our rising curiosities versus the worry of failing to meet the expectations of our tribe may bring us to a boiling point. When this happens we feel as though we are "damned if we do, damned if we don't." After years of sublimating our authentic selves, everything feels terrible, like we're trapped in a cage. Every move we make feels squashed by guilt or fear while the voice of our desire grows louder. In years prior, we did not have this voice, or perhaps it was at low volume, thus there was no conflict, we simply stepped in line like a duckling. As the desire to claim our own passion rises, the conflicting thoughts of our conditioned mind begin to argue with us. Notice the difference between the voice of desire and the voices of our tradition. Comparison, harsh self-judgment, guilt, shame, conflict, and abuse we're not voices we chose for ourselves. Is this abuse what we wish to impart on ourselves or our loved ones? Adults use these fear tactics as means to persuade the youth to adopt "adult" values. These same values manifest the wars between nations, neighbors, families and ourselves.

We will now be faced with the most important question of our lives: "AM I WILLING TO BREAK FREE, TO STEP INTO THE UNKNOWN, TO CLAIM THE LIFE I DESIRE?"

Are we able to muster the courage and face the consequences we most feared? Breaking free of the cage, finding friends who love us the way we wish to be loved and loving people the way we wished to be loved is all a possibility once the madness, sadness and rage come to a head. As we look to the horizon to what we desire; the circumstances, alliances and tools of navigation fall within sight. As our escape grows nearer, the faster we accelerate. When ripe and ready to break free of the **duckling** phase, all who oppose us are either offered a polite "thanks" for their concern or the middle finger. Their consent or lack thereof is of no consequence to us as we are claiming our stake, taking ownership of ourselves, moving from *no self-esteem* to discovering the self that was buried beneath the rubbish and cruelty. The courage to jump from this launching pad has us born anew.

It is from all the frustration of our early experience that we gain the courage to break free of Phase 1. It's a terribly painful process. If it were not, we'd not have

the opportunity to gain the strength needed, nor would we have a victory to celebrate. Once we cut the cord and break free – when we’ve made the jump – we become as a newborn. We must be gentle with ourselves, caring for ourselves with the greatest love and tenderness. We must become a gentle mother to our inner child, the child who was not given the love he/she desired. We must help him/her overcome the fear of abandonment and tell him/her that we will never abandon him/her again. From here we may choose our allies. Our allies are those who have done this before; the people who have worn this path, who wish us only love and a life of celebration.

PHASE 2: THE LION

The Lion = Hear Me Roar!

We’ve made the escape, achieving our first great act of self-love. The outward journey is born. We pack our bags and head to a destination that in our mind represents freedom, passion, adventure and possibility, even if it’s just down the street. The curiosity that helped get us out of confinement now needs to be explored. This is the path of tasting and testing the fruits of every whim and taboo, allowing oneself to be as a child, putting everything in our mouth. We may pursue activities that we were formerly afraid of – travel; romance; joining the Peace Corps; studying massage; writing a cookbook; becoming a farmer; a mountain climber: a clown.

This is now OUR journey and we will allow no one to get in our way. No one will convince us that we’re not enough or that we are doing anything “wrong.” We are the **lion** taking command. We begin to enjoy finding out things about ourselves that we had tucked away for years. The “traditions” of our former days is either abandoned or we find inspired ways to breathe new life into them. No apologies needed when exposing ourselves to our new passionate friends with deep reflective interests and exploration. This is the much celebrated phase of Elizabeth Gilbert’s adventure in “Eat, Pray, Love.” During this phase, the emotional highs are like we’ve never experienced. Discovering curiosity, and the passion to explore it brings us to unimaginable new places and encounters. All hopes seem possible and achievable. This adventure will give us the courage needed to accomplish anything we desire, both now and later. Life can’t be imagined better. At this point, we’ve climbed to the top of the mountain. Buddhists call this the “God Realm.” We may find this experience lasts for months, years or decades. But then... it’s time to roll down the other side.

Tables turn.

Eventually, as we settle into our new life, we may find ourselves living more predictably. Romance naturally turns into relationship and responsibility. Explorations and adventures turn into jobs and accountability. Relationships may blow up, jobs and health may implode, roads of hope may fizzle, circumstances turn and all of a sudden we go from emotional ecstasy to devastation. Perhaps we take up root and push forth on another journey,

another romance, another curiosity. Maybe two years go by, but then the same thing happens again. We want the elation to continue. We want our formerly newfound freedom of becoming as the lion to resurface, but our expectations and hopes don't seem to match what life is throwing at us. We've hit a wall. We've searched every horizon and searched under every rock, but cannot seem to find the freedom, hope and ecstasy we once had. In utter horror we exclaim, "no matter where I go, there I am."

What now?

Self-doubt creeps in. We wonder why we ever gave up on our conventional life. Self-pity, confusion, hopelessness and backpedaling ensue. It's a painful time where the mental pathways forged over several elated years come to a halt. Desire seems to dead-end at fear and the two go round and round until they grow tired. Being the courageous lion adventurer is now a distant memory. We are now an old and tired lion wondering why everything feels lifeless. But, dead ends don't sit well with us.

At this phase, we look for answers in books, sages, our elders and therapists. It seems as though either nothing is happening or that bad things are happening. Panic rises and that old familiar feeling of "damned if I do, damned if I don't" resurfaces. This period may take months or years. The greater the level of panic and frustration, the more we are left feeling like "no matter where I go, there I am." The frustration energy builds without a place to direct it and soon we face the second-most important question of our lives. We ask ourselves, "WITHOUT A FEELING OF HOPE, DO I WANT TO CONTINUE LIVING?"

When I was faced with this question, I discovered a teacher who generously imparted severe yet helpful words of wisdom. He said, "To move forward, you must be willing to do one thing."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Die."

PHASE 3: THE LAMB

The Lamb = Acceptance

I was absolutely willing to die. I was exhausted. Frustration had my thoughts tied in knots and I had run out of steam. Fighting life itself was no longer worth it. The price of trying to control everything, of being afraid, of chasing empty hopes was too high.

Within seconds of hearing my teacher's words, with his lovingly expressed encouragement to die, a portal suddenly opened. He gave me permission to give up the fight, to let go. He gave me the assurance that the unknown would be the

destination and that it was the only way forward. With my willingness to die, he guided me toward a mental explosion, a psychological death. "My Story" (the mental reel) came to an end. All of a sudden, I awakened to the senses, to presence. The room lit up. My body came alive. The shadows and sounds exuded beauty. The past was no longer. A hopeful destination no longer existed. The present became impregnated with life and devoid of story. Desire and fear imploded and all that remained was the presence of awareness.

What happens when our thinking mind collapses in on itself? The narrator that normally accompanies our moments goes quiet. Instead of the constant story, the sounds of our surroundings come to life. In our body, we feel the heartbeat radiating in our chest. We take notice and say, "the heart is beating. 'I' am not doing this. The eyes are seeing; there is no 'me' doing such things. Life fills us with sensory experience without an 'I' having to claim ownership. A gift is being given in all moments and thank goodness, all we have to do is receive it. Life is not what I thought, we are part of a much greater story, one worth celebrating."

In all moments, we have a choice of either feeding our fictional notion of self by chasing possession and desire, or we allow that story to expire and make peace with life, thereby allowing life and love to flourish.

A quiet mind that has let go has opened up the gates. From this, life's awe comes flowing in. Without claim of "thoughts" dividing "good and bad," we are open to all the textures of life without judgment, without resistance, without a story. The result? It's the intro to real joy and fearlessness beyond circumstance or identity. The theme at this juncture is ACCEPTANCE; not as an exercise, a belief or religion, but simply an experience. "Trying" to accept is simply violence against ourselves, thus "trying" is the opposite of acceptance. Experiencing acceptance is born of our willingness to die to this moment, a remembrance that the struggle is simply not worth it, not worth forfeiting the joy of peace. If you have to try, you are simply not ready to die. Exhaustion manifests surrender. Making peace with life is a gift that is given when we are ripe for it. Of course, when it happens, thoughts still arise, but with this new found realization, we are given a choice. Every thought produces or reflects an intention. A thought is either resisting "what is," or it is celebrating "what is." Knowing that resisting is the basis of our suffering, this allows us to choose celebration intentionally. We may celebrate the story of that which is much bigger and wiser than ourselves, the story of the ever unfolding "what is."

As happened when we escaped our conventional life of Phase 1 and transitioned to Phase 2, our ideas shifted, our identity altered, our notions of good and bad were transformed. This new awakening is equally transformative. Again, our minds are blown open and who we believe ourselves to be goes through transformation. What happens to our notions of good and bad, positive and negative, fear and desire when our resistance dissolves? What happens when fear no longer arises conjoined with the circumstances we used to resist? What happens to our thoughts, identity and goals when we feel states of joy in the most simple of circumstances? Who am I when stepping beyond fear, beyond self, beyond hope and instead bathing in the beauty of this moment's radiance?

Key Questions:

- *Who would you be without fear?*
- *How would your beliefs change?*
- *How would you spend your days?*
- *How would you treat others?*

Meditation becomes the support of this “acceptance.” It’s a constant return to this simple awareness. For me, meditation was born before I learned about sitting on a cushion. The end of resistance meant I was born anew and meditation was simply a word that suggested remaining open to life.

I’ll never forget that day with my teacher. He concluded his transmission to me with a Zen kōan that clarified the point: “How do you get higher than having climbed to the top of a 100 foot pole?”

The answer: “Being there fully.”

Resisting life and resisting “what is” is exhausting and simply rejects the magnificence of the gift we’ve been given. However, when we surrender, when we give ourselves to life on life’s terms, we then fall in love with life itself.

At this phase, we experience a taste of freedom, a sense of becoming “free from” the confines of belief. Belief is rooted in the dualistic notions of good and bad. There is no freedom when caught in this attachment to belief. With this insight and a new found taste of liberation, our focus moves toward activities and reflections like yoga, meditation, study of mind, understanding the nature of thought and self in a whole new broadening way. With both meditation and yoga, we are faced with our own inner resistance and given the opportunity to practice surrender.

The study and practice becomes focused on helping us face our limitations, decrease our resistance, and welcome life. As fear dissolves and joy rises, we find abundance in our hearts and effortlessly shift from a lifestyle of self-centeredness to a lifestyle of service. The willingness to give becomes more and more effortless and unintentional. This phase is most often about practice. Cultivating it as a skill requires effort, like a young martial artist developing the movements of proper response to an opposing force, it’s not yet second nature. Shifting our habits requires constant attention. Having friends and teachers who speak the same language is an excellent support in reminding us to change the flow of energy. We must constantly be reminded of the source of joy we’ve discovered and give ourselves the permission to let go, to die. To “un-identify.” The practice of letting go, of offering to the universe all we hold dear, simply changes the flow of energy from grasping to giving. In doing so, we empty the vessel. When we empty the vessel, it is freedom and joy that continue to fill the vessel of its own accord. The effort is in the offering. We do so with intention and remembrance until the habit and flow of energy is constant. We do this till love becomes the currency and we give it freely and receive it exponentially.

It's a slow and steady process. The energy of life continues to flow, but we are slowly but surely diverting its flow. We deliberately give of ourselves, emptying ourselves to life, to "what is." We give until emptied of *self*. When resistance dissolves and we are in need of nothing, filled only with the willingness to give, then we have become love. Since our thoughts are either expressions of resistance and suffering or expressions of celebration and awe, we may work with our thoughts to update their symbolism, to help them reflect the bigger picture we've adopted. This requires commitment.

To me, this is the final phase. I believe a transition to this final phase does not require a realization or shift. It's not a line in the sand but a never-ending stroll. It's a growing clarification of focus, a building of momentum and attention to the offering of oneself and to the upgrading of our thoughts. Once the waterwheel is built and put in the river, the river keeps it turning. The offering and the upgrading our thoughts is what we build. It is met by the constant flow of "what is." Love becomes the outward offering fueled by the inward flow of joy.

PHASE 4: THE SUN

The Sun = A light unto ourselves, beaming compassion indiscriminately.

Who have you become when the light of joy enters your heart and selfless love becomes your expression? At this point, there is no guide or referee managing the process. There is no resistance. At this point we are completely engaged, yet free to express without self-consciousness or question of intention. OSHO calls this phase "a return to the child." This is the creative energy of the universe itself in action, of which we are simply a creation and conduit. Our life becomes a self-generating offering, just as the sun gives its warmth to the earth. We become a light unto ourselves that lifts the frequency of all human and otherwise sentient consciousness. Like a seasoned martial artist, a developed master is able to respond knowingly and effortlessly to any oncoming concern. He becomes "free to" express himself with ease. OSHO describes it as a movement from a state of "free from" to "free to."

When we open up, dissolve in love, forgive completely, take nothing personally and surrender our resistance, to the unfolding story of "what is," then we become radiant joy shining indiscriminately like the sun. Our energy is then expressed in play, in work and in all movements. Fearlessness and selflessness are no longer concepts grasped, but lived and expressed without claim. This is an honoring of life itself, a celebration, a oneness with the light of consciousness, from which all arises. When living in presence, life and death are no longer divided concepts. We welcome death as a casual stroll from one room to the next. This is the fruition of the mind's self-knowledge, the ability to expand our notion of self from something tiny and bound by hope and fear, to something infinite and eternal.

When this becomes the lens through which we see, life is then an effortless act of service and celebration. Thought is then merely a tool to help us manifest the wonders of generosity. On a TED Talk, Simon Sinek, a great speaker on leadership, stated, “No one would be displeased if Mother Theresa won the lottery.” So true! It warms our heart to witness acts of selflessness. It is who we are at our core. United, fearless love.

Spiritually speaking, entering the 3rd and 4th phases and forging the path forward is bold, brave and the greatest human endeavor. It increasingly moves toward love. When we allow life to swallow us whole, we are giving the greatest offering. For this, we receive the greatest gift. Such is a life of gratitude, where each moment is anew, and will never know regret or the feeling of being out of step with this universe.

IN CLOSING

I hope these words offer you permission to make peace with life, to reside in this present moment and the courage to choose it repeatedly. It’s this investment that shifts our worldview from psychological poverty to abundance. May you continue to find the support and insight needed to expand perception and move forward on the path.

Doug Siegel
April 2015