

Grow Up, Wake Up: Maturity Levels

Growing up is essential to waking up. Peter Tosh and Bob Marley's reggae civil rights anthem, "Get Up, Stand Up," becomes an anthem of awakening if we change a few words: "Grow up, wake up . . . wake up from the dream". Most so-called grownups aren't necessarily so grown up, even if we've been swallowed whole periodically by Aha! moments. Our old immature conditioning is far from extinct, and our trained parrot won't let tastes of unconditioned reality silence it for long.

In my early years of practice, since zen was big on poems, the first time the walls of my ego took a tumble I wrote this one: Roses are red, violets are blue; two is one, and one is two. It's not Auden, but it points to the absolute nature of relative reality. Shortly thereafter the light dimmed before it illuminated some of my childish ego trips and multiple identities. This called for a second poem: Roses are red, violets are blue; I'm immature, and I am too.

How does our ego structure relate to maturity levels? Old self-contenders for the real me reemerge predictably, we see a Rashomon-like phenomenon, where our viewpoint shifts from one self-image to another. We can look like a whole dysfunctional family, all by ourself.

The maturity levels listed here don't reflect developmental phases; instead, they're characteristics and attitudes that are

sometimes adopted by spiritual practitioners. See which of the following categories ring true for you most often, and which come along situationally, such as being adult at work and adolescent on vacations. Make note of the traits that are familiar or raise your hackles. Add words as you see fit to the following categories:

- o Infant.* Hysterical, overwhelmed, prone to tantrums or inconsolability when emotional demands aren't heeded rapidly.
- o Child.* Needy, clingy, dependency oriented, convinced that others must meet our needs, deferential toward authority figures.
- o Adolescent.* Ambivalent toward authorities - alternatively rebellious and compliant, susceptible to peer pressure, aggressive or passive-aggressive, blasé or yes-butting, cool or cynical.
- o Parent.* Authoritarian, caretaking, perfectionistic (or imperfectionistic) - finding fault or trying to fix things, attending to the needs of others, while perhaps claiming to have no personal needs, likely to advise others "for their own good."
- o Adult.* Functional, responsible, valuing self and others equally, willing and able to function as a team member or leader, as appropriate. This level only falls short of wakefulness in that the full-empty dimension isn't conscious, so our identity is still largely confined to me-and-mine.
- o Elder.* Rather than being precisely a maturity level, elder refers to those instants in which the full-empty wonder of things is

revealed, allowing the love and inter-being of our nature to shine forth. Of course, painful feelings may still arise, given the depth of our parrot's conditioning.

Only in the elder maturity level are our perceptions aligned with the fullness of reality. Yet its appearances are intermittent. Spiritual aspirants are sometimes tempted to take on the mask of *pseudo elder*, that is, trying to seem more awake than is the case, particularly as moments of unconditioned perception start to fade. Probably some of us have posed as spiritual doctoral candidates when our level of wakefulness was closer to junior high. And to what purpose?

A best-case scenario for waking up is set forth in the New Testament's I Corinthians verse 13: "When I was a child, I understood as a child and thought as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things." But not always: we may set aside childish concerns for a time, only to find that they pop up for us to stumble over periodically. Probably truth in packaging requires most of us, at times, to wear one of those "Child on Board" signs that are sometimes seen in car windows.

Speaking of children, while they often demonstrate marvelous attributes, like curiosity, playfulness, and joy, they can hardly be awake, since there hasn't been a chance for the blossoming of such seeds of awakening as compassion, lovingkindness, empathic goodwill, discernment, and clear seeing. The things we admire

most in children are also characteristics of older people who have made the acquaintance of unimpeded being, yet most of us tend to lose contact with the wonder of life as our parrot is increasingly trained.

One factor in our conditioning that can be a big barrier to growing up is being unable to distinguish between actual needs and wants. By *wants* we mean that long list of luxuries and entitlements that we may regard as necessities, ranging from transportation to recreation. Probably most of us who take up meditation have life's actual needs adequately covered: healthful food, sufficient sleep, safe shelter, and sufficient medical care. Our quality of life values/needs are usually available too: access to human contact (even if that one person we like has other interests) and the ability to give back to life in accord with our professed values. Then there are real needs. A zen meal verse points us toward these: "First, seventy-two labors brought us this food; may we know how it comes to us" - a reflection on the inherent connectedness that makes our existence possible.

Speaking of hunger, do we regard the hunger to wake up as a fundamental need? Abraham Maslow did, placing self-actualization at the pinnacle of his hierarchy of needs. Even if descriptions of the self differ in psychological, philosophical, and spiritual circles, might we say that actualizing the authentic self is a profound need, the destiny for which we are born?

If we aspire to live an increasingly awake life, our mandate is to grow up, to aspire to the elder maturity level. In the meantime, we can stay alert to our shifting maturity levels, to help undermine some of the strongly held identities that don't serve awakening. For example, it's hard to take yourself too seriously when you watch yourself switch abruptly from a childish "Pick me up" to an adolescent "Put me down," from a needy, dependent "Tell me what to do" demeanor to a foot-stamping "Don't you tell me what to do!" stance. As our inner committee's Many Me's are less hypnotized by their emotion-laden demands, it's more likely that we will be awakened, *as all things*, more regularly.

Maturity levels don't explain everything, yet they are particularly helpful in nurturing intrapersonal awareness, starting with seeing our ego systems as objectively as possible. We don't want our gravestone to read "You had to walk on eggshells around him" or "She was like a two-year-old on a bad day and a three-year-old on a good day."

It's inspiring to see signs of spiritual maturity. One morning I drove past Christ the King Church and saw that the black Christ statue outside the church had been vandalized, its hands broken off. By that afternoon someone had put a sign in the statue's broken arms: "Whose hands will you put here?"