

The Spiral Path

The spiral is a shape often used to depict our pathway of growth toward God. The Three Ways of the spiritual life, Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive, are often depicted on a spiral drawing like that on p. 2. The basic stages are briefly described by Kaye King in her excellent book *Journeys* available from Journeys Counseling Center (972) 889-2479.

Prepurgative Level	The beginning stage of life in this fallen world that we enter upon birth. It is intended as the stage when we receive the emotional and spiritual maturity necessary to move on to the Purgative Level. We gain maturity when we can make a free will choice to enter the process of knowing who we really are.
Purgative Stage	The second stage of the spiritual Journey, in which we work with God in coming to know the Real Self, identify the obstacles of the Seven Deadlies and embrace the growth of the virtues in our soul. It is here that we covenant to walk by faith and turn our entire life over to God. It is here that we get healed enough to be healed so that we may journey with Christ.
Illuminative Stage	This third stage of the Journey is a time of great insight and growth in God's plan in our life. We not only are prepared and receive our ministry, but we also receive the maturity needed to enter the Nights of the Spirit.
Unitive Stage	In this fourth stage God transforms us and we reach union with the Trinity. In a state of serenity we live our lives in love and service to God.

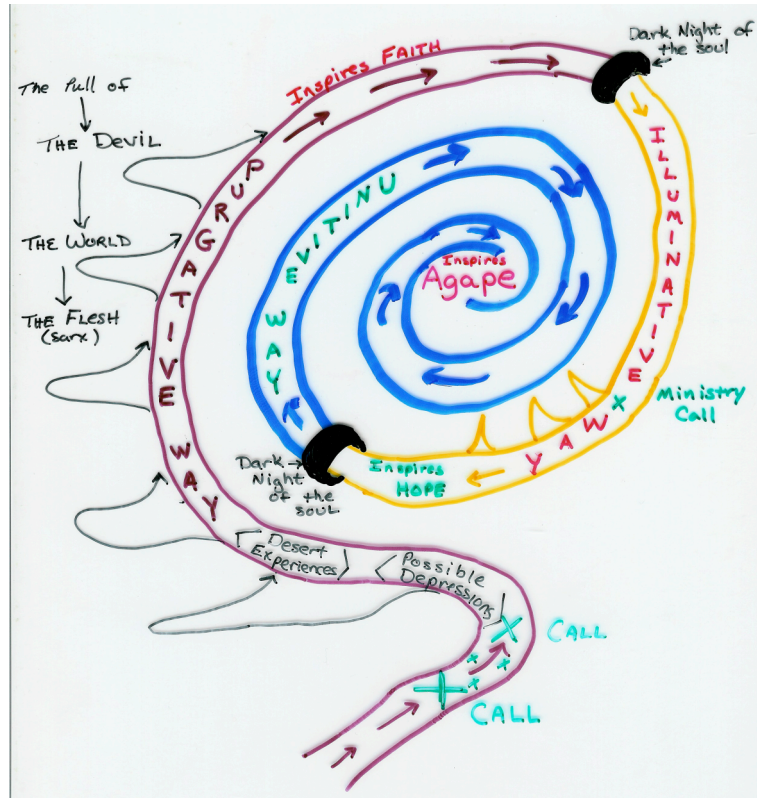
The Three Ways occur broadly over one's life span, but they also might be considered as spiritual processes that occur over and over again like smaller spirals on the lifetime spiral path. When discussing growth and development, we think of stages in a line most often. On this web site there are numerous such examples. However, many find that thinking of the spiral enhances ones appreciation for the divine order amidst life's complexity.

On the next page is an elegant description of the Spiral Path by a spiritual theologian. I have annotated it to aid your understanding.

The Spiral of Spiritual Growth

Linear Progression and Cyclical Experience

According to ancient tradition, the *helikos tropon* (after the manner of a spiral) is the central image of mystical journey¹. The traditions introduce it to describe the pattern underlying evolutionary movement within both the natural and spiritual orders. The physical transmutation of creation² occurs as an open circle (in the "manner of a spiral") according to a volitional and spontaneous impulse (*thelema*) present in the very depths of being itself.³ Spiritual progression is also along a spiraling track. As Schnapper observes in her investigation of the sacred path within all traditions, transformation "necessarily involves three basic motional patterns, a cyclic, a graded, and a linear". The cyclic



would refer to the cosmogonic round as a form of mythic emplotment.⁴ The graded would designate the various hierarchical structures both internal and external to the self. The linear would be the narrative history of individual journey through time. Set together as another spatial metaphor utilized by mysticism, the spiral is a synthesis of all three features which speak to the different aspects of the journey. "Approached from different angles, any one of these patterns may appear to overshadow the others, giving rise to seemingly contrasting symbols and metaphors employed in the portrayal of the Pilgrim's Way" (Schnapper 33). She writes,

"The symbol of the spiral as a basic pattern, together with its almost endless and often highly elaborate variants, is like a many-storied building; it is not only many

¹Although the thought of anything mystical is uncomfortable to some Christians, the substitute word 'spiritual' is less so. The mystical journey can be thought of as those sequences of growth stages that lead a person closer to full experience of God and the likeness of Christ. See Romans 8:29.

²Not only the soul is transformed through the spiritual journey, but even the physical creation is being redeemed. See Romans 8:22-23.

³"The very depths of being itself" would correspond to what is called "the ground of being" in philosophy and the "archetypes", "instincts", or "collective unconscious" in depth psychology.

⁴Mythic emplotment involves the manifestation of basic archetypal patterns which tend to recur until fully expressed. These patterns create a feeling of being part of an epic (mythic) journey or higher purpose. We cycle through some of these patterns repeatedly but at higher and higher levels. For example "purgation" is a basic pattern involved in spiritual growth which we experience throughout our journey. However, the purgation during the Purgative Way is a very different experience than the purgation of the Unitive Way.

sided but many-leveled, each level of meaning, complete in itself, standing for one particular aspect of the cyclic sequence of birth, death and new birth. All these levels interpenetrate and in so doing they tend to obscure one another; furthermore, emphasis on one strand of meaning often brings about a change in the symbolic pattern used, a new variant appears, and the old is frequently lost sight of (Schnapper 11).

The narrative history of the self in its journey toward the horizons includes a trajectory of many spiraling returns to, and recapitulations of, places and entities which have been encountered at other levels and dimensions. In many different ways, mystical literature portrays the unfolding of higher stages of consciousness⁵ and the appearance of higher-order structures of being. As the self-system navigates its passage, it is always accompanied by a variety of phase-temporary events and experiences, but these tend to recur in new and more complex combinations in a spiraling movement. At each level or stage in this spiraling journey of ascent and descent the individual is depicted as engaged with both the old and the new, with each encounter, it is made adequate for the next rendezvous (Wilber 1983, 289-290).

Ultimately the spiral could perhaps replace the representation of any spiritual journey as merely a linear progression. A spiral would signify a dialectical movement⁶ in the narrative of journey between phases of integration, deconstruction, and reintegration.⁷ Seen from this perspective, the circle of human growth and transformation is not closed, but is an open one pointing towards greater freedom. For readers and followers of the mystical traditions, the spiral opens on to the transcendent in ever widening curves of inquiry and exploration as it turns round itself. Each completed circle of the spiral remains, however, incomplete. For though it comes at once to an old place revisited, yet a new space is always opened before it. Such open spaces have of course already been proposed as the infinite and ever receding horizon of human being (Heidegger), or as the projection of a "new world" before every example of a text (Ricoeur). It is this model of the human self as a "text," we are each embraced and enfold in a great spiral, that is understood to traverse toward the horizon of our own ultimate destiny.

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footnotes by Troy Caldwell, M.D.

⁵A description of some of these higher developmental stages as described by research is available in the document from troycaldwell.com titled [A Dialog of Developmental Greats](#). See also James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*. The traditional stages are perhaps best described by Evelyn Underhill in her internationally recognized work [Mysticism](#).

⁶A dialectical movement is a struggle between thesis (established idea or way of being), antithesis (a competing idea or way in seeming conflict with the thesis), resulting in synthesis (a transcending and integrating idea or way of being or doing that is at a higher level of understanding or complexity than either thesis or antithesis.)

⁷The life, death, and resurrection of Christ can be appreciated as a metaphor of "integration, deconstruction, and reintegration". Each movement around the spiral requires letting go of old ideas and life structures. To the degree we are emotionally attached to these ways, this letting go can feel like a death. When we are willing to bear going through the dialectical opposites (thesis and antithesis) without seeking premature closure of mind or heart in order to hold on to the security of what is familiar, we feel a tension of opposites within us. Metaphorically, as we bear this tension, we are "on the cross". When the old dies, we usually do not have a full vision of what will take its place. The hope of the resurrection is that Transcendence will intervene and awaken a newness of vision, hope, and empowerment after a period of incubation in the tomblike darkness of "not knowing". Following this cocooning, comes the butterfly--our life on a new level--the next level of spiral path. This is described in a linear fashion in [Archetypes as Guideposts on the Spiritual Journey](#) article on this web page. Note especially the Erickson and the Beatitudes diagram.