

An Introduction to Spiral Dynamics and How it Works for You

Within each of us is a primary individual spiral and secondary environmental spirals from our family and society. These inner and outer spirals are colored by values, thoughts, and beliefs held based on the life conditions encountered—both ours and others’.

To lead a happy, successful, fulfilled life, it is necessary to work with these, often conflicting, spirals and use them to our advantage. For those less-developed spirals, we can look to examples in our environment for clues on how to build skills. Whether you call this modeling behavior of others, “faking it until you make it”, finding a mentor, or tapping into balancing energies, you’re using your environment to assist you in your self development. Consequently, through developing a good inner spiral foundation in ourselves, we can effectively influence our outer spiral, and therefore the entire world, in a more positive, successful way.

So, what is a spiral and how do you know which spiral is strongest in you? A spiral is a stage in human evolution. It is composed of value memes, or vMemes, which are composed of the beliefs and values we create in response to our needs. vMemes include information on religion, ethnicity, economics, politics—collections of values formed into set beliefs. Each spiral produces certain behavior patterns based on its guiding vMeme. The behavior patterns in the environment then influence our internal thinking and, therefore, behavior, and then we consequently influence our environment in relation to these influences—and the Spiral continues and grows.

Spiral Dynamics

The term vMeme was coined by Dr. Clare Graves, a psychology professor who formulated a levels model of human psychology that formed the basis of the Spiral Dynamics model. In it, he theorized that in response to external conditions, humans develop coping systems to adapt and evolve. Building on the work of Dr. Graves is Dr. Don Beck, creator of Spiral Dynamics, a bio-psycho-social structure of culture. Spiral Dynamics is a way of understanding human nature and evolution through response to the life conditions of our environment.

In Spiral Dynamics, the warm-colored spirals—beige, red, orange, and yellow—are focused on personal, individual experience—defining yourself and your individuality. The cool-colored spirals—purple, blue, green, and turquoise—are focused on community and group experience—finding your place in and fitting into the whole.

The Spiral (Note: An uppercase “S” denotes the Spiral as a whole, evolving organism; a lowercase “s” denotes an individual level) is currently composed of two levels, or tiers: six spirals in the first tier, and two in the second. The Spiral is continuously growing—and at a faster and faster rate at each higher level. Life conditions determine the values and therefore the spiral that emerges. Each spiral includes and transcends the next. Thus, each spiral includes all of the spirals below it. Graves projected that there are three tiers with six spirals in each. If this is the case, we are not even halfway to our full potential as a species.

The first spiral begins with Beige. This spiral began 100,000 years ago and is comprised of approximately 0.1% of the world’s population. The focus at this level is on survival—getting your basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and procreation met. We call upon Beige skills in crisis situations and in life-threatening moments that require basic survival instincts.

The second spiral is Purple. This spiral began 50,000 years ago and is comprised of approximately 10% of the world’s population. Purple can still be seen in animistic and/or tribal cultures. Here, after the basic survival needs are met, or as a means of gaining assistance in meeting these needs, communities are formed. In Purple, we see a concept of something greater than us—the beginnings of spirituality. Group thinking and protection arise. We may call on Purple skills when in need of finding our “tribe” or “kindred spirits” and when on a spiritual quest.

The third spiral is Red. This spiral began 10,000 years ago, is comprised of approximately 20% of the world's population, and can be seen today in emerging democracies or countries in turmoil. When the demands of a society become overly burdensome, a need to exert individuality and "stand up for yourself" emerges—on an individual level and/or on a societal level. Here is where revolts, revolutions, rebellions, and warfare occur to gain individual rights.

The fourth spiral is Blue. This spiral began 5,000 years ago, is comprised of approximately 40% of the world's population, and is seen in parts of the U.S., such as the "Bible Belt", as well as many traditional societies. To control excessive upheaval and unrest in a society due to the violence and chaos in Red, structure is created. Here is where purpose becomes important—a desire to sacrifice self for a higher ideal. Organized religion becomes important. Military and police presence is established.

The fifth spiral is Orange. This spiral began 1,000 years ago, is comprised of approximately 30% of the world's population, and is seen in parts of the U.S., such as Silicon Valley in California and the northern Virginia technological area, and many technologically oriented societies such as Japan. When Blue becomes overly constricting and stagnant, a shift again happens towards individuality—this time as a focus on technological and material progress. Success is measured in terms of monetary wealth and material objects, not control and order.

The sixth, and last, spiral of the first tier is Green. This spiral began 150 years ago, is comprised of approximately 10% of the world's population, and is seen in parts of the U.S., such as the west coast; Canada; and many parts of Europe, especially Scandinavia. After the self-focused materialism of Orange, Green was born to create community and equality among all, making sure everyone gets a fair share.

Next, we come to the second tier. At this level, there is no longer differentiation between competing values. The lens with which we see the world widens. The individual and the world are viewed as a whole—interconnected to all parts. The greater good is of paramount importance. Here, you are opening up to the universe on a bigger scale.

The seventh spiral (or first spiral in the second tier, which relates back to the first spiral in the first tier) is Yellow. This spiral began 50 years ago and is comprised of approximately 1% of the world's population. In Yellow, the differences Green accepts are channeled into necessary advantages for human growth. Education, which leads to self-actualization, is valued. Synthesis of many differences is pursued for the benefit of the universe.

The eighth spiral is Turquoise. This spiral began 30 years ago and is comprised of approximately 0.1% of the world's population. Here, everything is seen as interconnected. The growth and healthy continuance of the universe is the focus. Turquoise is thought of as being right-brained with logic, in contrast to Yellow, which is left-brained with feeling.

These spirals can be seen in your society, in your family, and in yourself. The spiral you were nurtured in affects the spiral you most closely relate to—either directly or as a reaction against what you experienced growing up. If the spirals are congruent, you may be "at home" in your society and family, perhaps even living in the same community you grew up in. If there is disparity, you may be forging your own way via your own spiral. In order to "feel at home" anywhere and adapt well to different environments, Spiral Wizardry skills are necessary.

Spiral Wizardry for Yourself

What is a Spiral Wizard? The Spiral Wizard is a change agent knowledgeable on the Spiral and adept at organizing the flow of energy for the health and growth of the Spiral, and for the individual. According to Don Beck, Spiral Wizards "instinctively roam over vast mindscapes seeing patterns and connections others do not notice because the First Tier's filters do not allow them to. They can move through the spine of the Spiral awakening, unblocking, empowering, or repairing each of the vMemos...constantly

survey(ing) the whole while tinkering expertly with the parts.” On an individual level, the Spiral Wizard must understand himself or herself well, be able to identify shifts in values and thinking, and know when to call upon which spiral for power.

Each spiral has an energy of its own that can be tapped into when needed. Beige supplies the necessary energy for pure survival—the drive for security and safety. Purple gives meaning to an uncertain world, adding a spiritual and community dimension. Red defines individuality and promotes independence. Blue gives structure and purpose to a chaotic environment. Orange encourages tangible success through material accomplishments. And Green assures all voices are heard and all are treated fairly and equally. These are the gifts of the first tier.

However, a Spiral Wizard must use second tier thinking to solve problems—looking at issues from a holistic, interconnected perspective. By using the foundation of personal experience and environmental influences, a Spiral Wizard has a large pool of information and experience from which to draw. Through understanding the past and learning from what worked and didn’t work, a Spiral Wizard can craft a future from the necessary elements of each spiral for a successful solution to current issues and further personal growth.

Spiral growth encompasses time and space: By using the Spiral for self evolution, you are tapping into past ancestral wisdom in the present to progress into the future. Through the skillful integration of the spirals, you can find fulfillment through building your personal power and ascending the Spiral.