

# Coaching & the 4 Stages of Growth

What is coaching? My belief is that it is a way of being in the world that deepens relationship to the point of superconductivity – where thoughts flow free and actions follow without self-conscious intervention. In practice this means helping the coachee raise their awareness, to start noticing their behaviour, their language, and their assumptions, and to develop the coachee's mobility to act.

This suggests that there is a starting point, which is the coachee's current state of thinking and acting. This stage is *the Inauthentic Self*, characterised by complacency, self-satisfaction, and comfort. This is about the individual *being the expert, knowing all the answers, having opinions (at the expense of others) and bossing others about*. It is essentially about *keeping control*. In this stage, people are disinclined to challenge their own thinking or assumptions, with the result that their listening is confined to confirming what they know or believe.

Everyone starts in this stage, and everyone is challenged more or less often to move to the next stage of Self, *the Awakening Self*. This happens when the individual is confronted by new or changing circumstances to which they have no ready answers. This stage is characterised by fear, self-doubt, embarrassment and often extreme discomfort. In this stage, the individual is trying to *regain control*, and move back to his/her *Inauthentic Self* by trying hard (and getting upset and worried in the process). We may also have some premonition in this stage that there is something bold, exciting yet seemingly risky just over the horizon should we choose to go there. Most people make a *Denial* of the premonition because they see it as being too dangerous, or uncomfortable, or challenging.

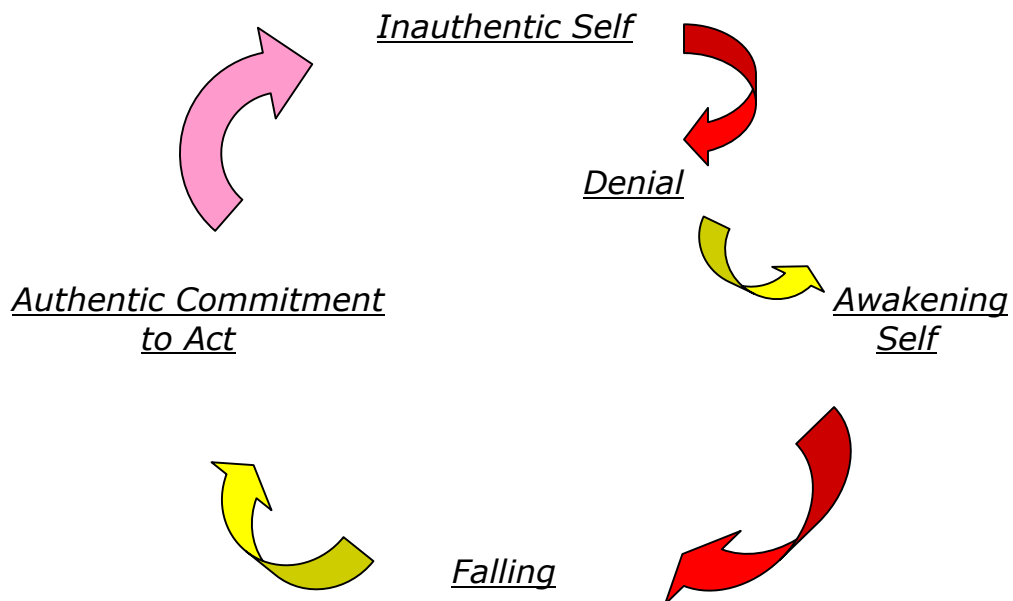
The result is that most people spend their lives see-sawing between their *Inauthentic Self* and their *Awakening Self*. It's a tiring and unsatisfying way to be, but most people consider that a reasonable trade-off against the risk of what's over the horizon – the third stage of Self, namely *Falling*. This is the stage of intense self-discovery and revelation, and consistently associated in literature with mystical metaphor, from Beowulf fighting Grendel's mother in the swamp, to Gandalf going through fire whilst vanquishing the Balrog. Both monsters represent the 'dark' side of our psyche, and both heroes had to literally 'let go' of the firm ground on which they stood to enter the fray.

In *Falling*, the individual gives up the 'firm ground' on which they stand so resolutely – their need to be right, to have answers, to be in control. They let go their fear of embarrassment, ridicule, loneliness and of being hurt. What is left of the Self, when all fear, doubt, expectation and opinions have gone? Nothing except the falling, the being present to the here and now.

In this way, *Falling* is the gateway to the fourth stage, which is *Authentic Commitment to Act*. It is at this point that the individual has real power. In creating themselves as a commitment to some purposeful goal, without fear, doubt, or expectation, what can stand in such a person's way? History can attest to many outstandingly famous Authentic Commitments to act in this way – J F Kennedy, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, to name a few. And of course, across the world and throughout history, there have been people emboldened with the courage and commitment to make something happen that would have been unthinkable before their personal stand.

It can happen in the boardroom, in the classroom, in the home, in the sports arena, at work. The power and intention inherent in *Authentic Commitment to Act* is available to everyone, everyday.

### The Four Stage Model



## Coaching and the four stages of growth

Coaching is a conversation that allows the coachee to:

- understand their *Inauthentic Self*
- explore their *Awakening Self*
- develop strategies for being successful whilst *Falling*
- move powerfully forward in service of their *Authentic Commitment to Act*

As a coach, my coachee requires that we both have a deep mutual understanding of their current mode of *Inauthentic Self*. This may include 360 feedback, factual information and reliable data from colleagues, performance appraisals etc, and feedback from the coach. Most importantly it will involve the questioning and challenging of assumptions and beliefs that underpin the coachee's present modus vivendi and operandi. When this reality is fully understood, it will become clearer how it limits and distorts the coachee's choices.

When confronted by new or challenging situations (it's called life!), the coachee will move into her/his *Awakening Self*. The role of the coach is then to explore with the coachee their barriers and assumptions and to challenge deeply held opinions about 'how it should be'. The purpose is to help the coachee move into an exploratory frame of mind, an inquiry into 'how it could be' with the accent on questions such as what if, what about, why not...

Coaching often fails through a lack of challenge and follow-through at this crucial third stage of *Falling*. The coach's role is to act as support, voice of conscience and essentially to keep the hurdle high enough for the coachee to leave the ground of knowing and step into the unknown. This will require stretch goals, for the coachee to have something at stake that they sincerely consider worth the 'risk' of falling. The coach must be sensitive to the fact that this stage is one of powerful emergence for the coachee, as new horizons of possibility become clearer to them.

*Authentic Commitment to Act* is not a 'landing' after the fall, but more a getting used to the state of falling, and acquiring facility and ease with oneself as being in this state. This of course is a constant journey, where a coach may occasionally be called upon when the practice of falling gets a bit rusty. We all tend to revert to type, and the free-fallers will find themselves back in a state of Inauthenticity sooner or later, though not as inarticulately as they were originally. It will be easier second time around.

## **The Coach's Journey**

The coach's journey is identically reflected in that of the coachee. Great coaching is an *act of authentic commitment*, which can only be arrived at through *falling*. What is *falling* for a coach? It's breaking through our own sense of self-consciousness, becoming transparent, being present without intrusion. It's the creation of space in our listening, and more becomes available the more we ourselves become free of our judgement, opinion, and the need to be right and interfere.

This is not an overnight task. The notion of becoming a non-directional coach with a few days training is absurd. It is not about the training. It never was. Being a great coach is about self-discovery, not expertise. Rilke, the German poet, expresses this journey in his poem, The Swan:

*This clumsy living that moves  
lumbering, as if in ropes,  
through what is not done*

*reminds us of the awkward way the swan walks  
and to die, which is the letting go  
of the ground on which we stand  
and cling to every day*

*is like the swan, when he nervously lets himself  
down into the water which receives him gaily,  
and which flows under and after him  
wave after wave  
while the swan, unmoving and marvellously calm  
is pleased to be carried,  
each moment more fully grown,  
more like a king,  
farther and farther on.*

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