

Basics of the Spiritual Life--Plus

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When people get interested in spirituality they expect there to be some kind of progression in their life, in terms of movement into a different type of experience or a different way of being or maybe changes in behavior or something. So they expect there to be change in a positive direction.

So that development is conceptualized in different ways. Most often it seems to be conceptualized as a linear journey, forward, or up—climbing the mountain, going up. Stages, steps—moving from one step, up, forward, up, forward, up, forward. So it's kind of movement toward the future, progression, right? Or a journey through a desert or something like that.

Another metaphor that's used is development, like a flower blooming or a tree growing from an acorn into a full-blown tree. So there's change less in terms of movement from one place to another than in something organically growing and becoming more fully what it was meant to be.

But there's another metaphor and that's the one I want to point at tonight, and this is to envision the spiritual journey—right there there's a metaphor, right? “journey”—this spiritual development as cyclical. Like it's going in a circle but each circle is a little bit maybe deeper, so that you find yourself moving around and then coming back in the same place, but with a somewhat different perspective, or a deeper understanding or appreciation. So it moves in a spiral, right? You find yourself not really going from place to place in a linear sense, but you can conceive of it as constantly re-experiencing aspects of life, or your life in particular, in new ways, in different ways.

Having said that, what I want to talk tonight is about basics in the spiritual life, and I want to look at each of these basic elements of the spiritual life on two levels. One is the more obvious initial level that people experience when they first begin doing these things, or practicing. And then the other is deeper—so this is the “plus” in my title of the talk: essentials of the spiritual life, plus the deeper sense of what those things represent or are or you experience through them. Another plus might be other things I think of to say [*laughs*], but I don't know that yet.

So I want to look at three things in particular, and you can divide these into the categories of learning, practicing, and living—essentials of the spiritual life. Learning has to do with assimilating information, reading, or listening to people speak, stuff like that. Practicing has to do with the myriad of different things that we do connected with our spiritual lives, like going to services of one kind or another, ceremonies, rituals, or practicing meditation, or a prayer life, or chanting—there's a variety of different forms of practice. And the third one, at least in its initial meaning, has to do with morality and how we behave toward ourselves and other people—and you could even include other living

beings or even inanimate beings; so how we treat ourselves and the world around us. Learning, practicing, and living.

So learning, primarily reading and listening. We read sacred literature; every spiritual tradition has its sacred books—at least all the ones I’m familiar with, there’s probably some that don’t. Well, shamans, indigenous cultures, that kind of stuff. But most of them have a literature that people read, study, assimilate. Or reading things that aren’t acknowledged as sacred in the same sense, but they are helpful guides to spiritual life, whether older or more recent authors. Or listening to speakers, such as me, or people that speak even better [*laughs*]. Maybe some that speak worse! But listening to people that talk about this kind of stuff, right?

And it has to do with assimilating information through words. And like other forms of learning through words, people initially approach this as gathering information, adding to our stock of conceptual knowledge. Taking in ideas, concepts, sayings, whatever form it takes, into our mind and holding it there—kind of gathering and adding, adding up, as though somehow if we hear enough and add enough to our mind we’ll be able to live it. And that’s how people approach it because that’s how they’re used to learning. I mean you go in a classroom to learn most subjects and you assimilate information and you add to your stock of conceptual knowledge about it, right?

But what you learn as you go on in the spiritual journey is that it’s not simply about taking things into your intellectual mind, it’s not just adding to our stock of knowledge, as helpful as that can be. What that actually does, if it’s working for you, is to rearrange our ways of thinking about life and our lives; what we’re doing, what we’re trying to achieve, how we want to be. So we enter into this spiritual life with ideas about those things—what life is about—and we’re looking for a perspective that is more satisfying. So you’re looking for some other way to tell yourself, to talk to yourself, about what you’re doing with your life, what it means, where you’re heading, how you’re supposed to get the most out of it. So we’re dissatisfied with our ways of looking at it, and we try to listen to people and read things that are going to help us to reconceptualize. This is initially how we come into it. So it’s not just adding information but it’s adding a perspective.

What that’s doing is it’s clearing a space. It’s clearing a space so that your mind finds a way to be more relaxed with this drive towards development and open a connection to the heart, because the things that you most respond to that you read or listen to in spiritual talks or spiritual literature are things that touch you at a deeper level. And when we think we’re gathering information what we’re actually doing is just filtering stuff until something hits that deeper level and starts to create that connection.

And that’s where you can really build, because it is making a connection between the thoughts and the concepts in the mind and something that seems to be present already in the heart. It’s almost like a built-in stock of wisdom that’s responding to some outside source that expresses it to your mind in a way the mind can go, “oh, I *sense* that.” It’s not just a new idea, it’s an idea that you recognize—it’s almost a remembrance. Like it’s already in your soul and you’re hearing it and it’s bringing that from the heart into the

head; it's establishing that connection, it's saying, "okay, I'm mostly living in my head conceptually, this heart sense is stirring, and now these ideas are helping me make a connection. This is a way of thinking about something that I've sensed all along. And I can start to forge that connection a little bit more, um—make it stronger, make it clearer."

So that's the plus element of it. It's not simply assimilating new knowledge, but it's opening that channel to the wisdom that's already present. Making the mind, the intellectual mind, and the deeper sense that I've been calling the heart, making it connect. The further plus is to bring out that wisdom from within and express it in your own ways, rather than having to have the help from the outside, to find the concepts that express what you're sensing, what you know is there. To find a way to just move into that and bring it out on your own.

So this is a spiral—you start with learning these concepts and then you start making connections to something inside and then the inside becomes able to express it. That's the kind of cycle with knowledge, with learning. Learning from the world around you, connecting that with the learning from within, then more and more learning from within and not needing so much the outside support for it. But there's a progression, there's a development. So that's the aspect of learning.

Practicing—lot of different forms of practice. And they each have their characteristic ways of affecting us either emotionally or behaviorally—building community for group rituals, initiation exercises give you a sense of commitment to something new, meditation of course is a practice in concentration and attentiveness. All kinds of different practices, and we learn these from various sources, or they're introduced through a group we join or something like this, and we start trying things out, not sure at first what exactly they're supposed to do for us. You may have some idea, but you don't know until you start practicing what the result is going to be.

What all of those have in common, and this is the plus side, initially they seem different—they're all spiritual practices, they're all supposed to help me develop, can't quite see how. But what they all have in common, what underlies them all and connects them together, is that they're all exercises in setting aside time specifically to pay attention to *now*. When you're involved in a religious ceremony or ritual of some kind, you set that apart from ordinary time—if you're practicing it in a sincere and reverent way—you set that aside from ordinary time and you pay attention. Right?

You're present to what's happening in a way that you usually aren't in ordinary day-to-day activities, where you let your mind go to the past and the future and all kinds of things you're thinking about—you try to make yourself present. So it's an exercise in being a present, in being attentive—not being *a* present but being present [*laughs*], I guess you're a present too because you're going to open up into gifts for the world—an exercise in being attentive, in being present.

The attentiveness is more clear in something like meditation where you're trying to be attentive to whatever your focal point of meditation is, or if you're in a further stage just

being attentive to whatever you're experiencing, but it's the same for all these practices. I mean when a, when a committed form of prayer life is not simply an occasional, you know, "oh God help me" kind of prayer [*laughs*], but is spending time, setting aside time for it, what you're doing is being attentive to, number one, maybe what's going on inside yourself, trying to draw that out and express it. Number two, thoughts of kindness towards other people, you know, well wishes toward other people, praying for other people, praying for situations to resolve in a way that's good for people. So it's attentive to these kind of things, it's a focusing and using that time to keep that focus sustained on those things and exclude other kinds of distractions.

So this is an exercise in attentiveness. The Buddhist term is mindfulness. These are all exercises in mindfulness in one way or another whether you conceive of it that way or not. So in addition to what any specific type of practice gives you—and everybody finds that some practices draw them more than others; some things you try and it leaves you kind of cold, other things you try and it really seems to feed a need or a desire within. So they have different kinds of effects and different kinds of draws for people but they all, what they ask of you really is to be attentive, to be mindful, to exercise that capacity for mindfulness.

Further progression in the spiritual life is further progression in mindfulness. Taking that quality of attentiveness and reverence—attentiveness to now, reverence for life—beyond specifically designated times to all of your life, moving it out into the rest of life. And that's the progression. So first it's practicing these things with some sense that it's feeding you, and then it's building on this attentiveness, this mindfulness, this reverence, and then it's spilling that over into the rest of your life. And that's the cycle.

Third part: living, living the spiritual life. All the major religions have moral codes, sometimes very elaborate sets of codes about what to do, what not to do. And we all know that they boil down in essence to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Putting yourself in somebody else's shoes insofar as you're able and trying to do for them what's good for them the same way you would, or want to or desire to or ought to be doing for yourself. So morality is a way of describing the kinds of behaviors that are most conducive to doing good to others as well as to yourself.

And they become very elaborate when they talk about all the different forms of relationships you can have with people and how those can be damaged—you know, stealing, harming physically, lying, lack of faithfulness, all these different things they specify for different types of relationships—and when we first encounter it, it becomes something that's kind of like putting on a new suit of clothes. I mean, most people approaching spirituality will already have a good, um—good habits, moral habits that they've gotten from someplace, upbringing or somewhere, but then it will be taking a more serious look at different areas of your life to say, "How well is my life conforming to this larger code? Are there areas I'm neglecting or ignoring that I need to work on?"

So at first it's identifying areas of your life that you feel you need to develop better habits in, and it becomes a practice in that sense—I'm practicing trying not to lie so much

or whatever, or not getting angry with people or not speaking out of anger, whatever it is—cutting down on abuse of substances—identify areas of your life that seem to be problematic and try to try on a new behavior and practice it, make it a habit. So it has this outward aspect of behavior, understanding different ways of relating.

The progression is, the cycle, moving around into this morality again, it's noticing, more and more so, how what's fundamental to all forms of morality is this sense of compassion for other living beings, especially other humans. And it's not so much about following the rules as it is about really sensing what's good for somebody else, and then acting on the sincere desire for their good. So it's connecting behavior to compassion, realizing that the drive for moral behavior was coming out of a compassion; there's a compassion behind your desire to grow spiritually and morality is a way of expressing this. So you go from trying out new behaviors because someone tells you this is the way to behave and it may make some sense to you, but more and more so it comes out that really what the root of this is, is being compassionate.

And you start to make the connection in the opposite direction. Whereas earlier it was learning moving from head to heart, here it's moving from heart to head in that you're taking this inner sense of compassion, this sense that we're connected, that other people feel and perceive as I do, and connecting it with the wisdom that comes out of seeing things more clearly. So the desire to benefit others and then the seeing of what is the appropriate action in each situation—you move more and more into that and less and less into the abstract rules that you're trying to follow. So as it starts out it's adopting rules for behavior that make sense, and as it progresses it's more and more going into, "I have within me this moral sense that's built on compassion for others, and a wisdom to size up a situation and see what's needed." And it's bringing that out, it's making that connection, bringing that out more and more in your relations with other people.

Those are to my mind the three essential aspects of spiritual life. It's the learning—taking in new ideas through reading and listening—it's the practice of one thing or another, and then it's the reconfiguring your behavior to address areas where maybe your habits are detrimental to other people. Those are the three essentials.

Couple other things come to mind to tie this up. One is, even more essential is what brings you into spirituality in the first place, and keeping that alive [*laughs*] throughout this process because it's easy to get sidetracked. The word that comes to mind is faith—and this is not just a Christian term but it's used in other religions as well—and it doesn't have so much to do with adopting particular beliefs as it does with this trust in this drive for the spiritual life and a loyalty and a fidelity to that. So it's a trusting that this desire to grow, to move, to develop, is something that I'm going to, what? Commit myself to and, um, take seriously even though, you know, the full benefits or the outcome may not be known. I sense it and I'm going to commit myself to it. That's faith; it's a trusting, it's a relying on something that you really can't see or put a name on very easily, but you sense it.

And you're going to take it seriously, and it's a loyalty to that, you know, because the spiritual life, just like other aspects of life, it's easy to get sidetracked away from that.

Especially with, when you approach things initially, just taking in new information and adopting practices, it's easy to get into that space of outward spirituality and lose the sense of what drew you into it in the first place. I talk about this a lot, just keeping that alive, keeping connection with what's moving you into this so you don't get trapped in a cul-de-sac, like thinking that since this spiritual philosophy has been really feeding me this is what I need to do is just learn this and know this, and that's it. And then you get so involved with that you lose sense of what drew you into it in the first place. You gotta sense when it's time to move on, or to address other areas of your life.

So that faith, that trust and fidelity to this inward sense of movement, moving you towards something, moving you to a greater development, and not losing that, losing sight of that. That's fundamental and that precedes everything else and it extends through everything else.

The only other two things that are important to the spiritual life are less essential in my mind, and that is having a group to belong to and having a teacher or a guide of some kind. And I say they're not as essential because they're not always available, and if people don't have them they can still grow through those other things. I mean, learning new ideas, practicing something, and trying to configure your behavior morally are all things that anybody can do, pretty much. Any situation you're in, you can find resources for doing those things.

Access to somebody with enough experience and to whom you have the kind of connection that you feel there's something clicking and you're really learning from them, and they can give you, what? They can relate to you in a way that seems to move you forward; that's a little harder to find. When you do find it, though, you should take advantage of it [*laughs*]. I know in my own life I've had opportunities with people that I didn't take full advantage of—I'd have to think about why, but it's kind of the reluctance, I think, to expose yourself, to some degree. You want them to feed you without you having to come out and put things on the table for them to see. So a guide, spiritual director, teacher—however you want to call it—a mentor, somebody like that is valuable.

The last thing, that's not essential because it's not always accessible, is belonging to some kind of group. It's important because—

[Another voice:] Sangha?

Yeah—sangha, church, assembly, whatever you want to call it, being with other people—

[Voice again:] That's buddha, dharma, and sangha, isn't it?

Uh, let's see, does that map with what I said? To some degree [*laughs*]. This is not strictly Buddhism, this is, this is Alanism; take it with a grain of salt [*laughs*]. Yeah, the sangha is important, and it's important because if you have a community available that you click with, you're going to find that there's people in that community you don't click with,

and that's important for growing. To experience that and to reflect on that—why is this happening, why am I feeling shut off towards this person, why is it a problem, why are we rubbing the wrong way? So a community is important for support, for guidance, and also for the rubbing the wrong way. But just like finding a teacher, finding the right community for you, it's not always available or you can be in between communities or, you know, you just can't find the right one at a certain time. So I say it's not essential because people can still grow through the things that I was talking about earlier: learning, practicing, morality.

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