

THE CLARIFICATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Overcoming the Pitfalls of the Spiritual Path

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Spirituality Today

Spirituality is very popular these days. In any ordered world, it should always be. After all the spiritual quest seeks to answer the most fundamental questions about the nature of existence. These questions include: What does it mean to be human? What is our place in the universe? What are the motivating impulses that create and influence the nature of the world around us? How can we live a beautiful, creative life inspired by the divine in each of us? What are the causes and remedies of suffering? What makes for a fulfilled, rich, and enjoyable life? Who and what is God? These core questions have been approached by multitudes of minds in millions of ways for as long as human beings have been able to ask questions about the world around them.

The answers to these questions determine the outcome of every aspect of our lives. For example: They determine our philosophic beliefs about the nature of reality; they give us our religious inclinations of proper ways to approach and worship divinity; they mold our character and define the criterion for mental health and disease; they form the basis of our cultures by defining societal ethics of right and wrong behavior; they determine the desire for certain political ideologies to reign based on rule of the people or divine right of kings; they influence the trends in our scientific discoveries and technological needs based on the acceptable application of knowledge; they define the meaning of life and death and establish our customs and taboos surrounding these processes; they replace us to larger worlds around us including other kingdoms of

nature here on Earth, and to the Cosmos as a whole; and finally, they indicate our future

direction while helping us bypass the mistakes of our past.

In this light it could be said that spirituality, and the quest for truth, is the single most important reason for Being we know of. It is our divine right and prerogative to use the human ability to question to ask quite openly and frankly, WHY? Each of us wants to know why. Even a small child of minimal intelligence can be seen with an eagerness of face, and joyful continence of being in the process of enquiring why? Why is the sky blue? Why do I have roes? Why is daddy bigger than mommy? Why was I born? Why? Add to this what, where, when, and how, and you have the five key elements which make the mind work. The desire to know. There is only one question more grand and more mysterious than these, There is the question of WHO? Who? The only question which indicates not a relation to the mind, but one to the heart. The question which by its very nature indicates that a fundamental part of our being is not only to reason, but to relate. (And someday I will finally meet WHO. For years I remember hearing about who. After all, whenever my questions of what, when, why, where, and how could not be answered, the inevitable answer was Who Knows? Add to this the replies: who said it, who's got it, who did it, who wants it, and who cares, and you have an understanding of why who became such a mystery to me, and such a very important

entity for me to get to know).

As each one of us in our hearts and minds lift up the torches of truth and struggle to answer these fundamental questions, we enrich the greater whole. We add to the overall fabric of knowledge that can be drawn upon in solving the problems and mysteries in our lives. In living out the application of our answers, we add co collective wisdom and ensure a better world for future generations. Thus our beliefs about the world become the living lighted lamps of knowledge. As this light is transmitted in a loving and inclusive fashion to future generations, it allows for greater joy and more stunning harmonious interplays in the future of our world. Knowledge correctly applied becomes beautiful, aesthetic. It becomes inspiring to us all. It is alive and "in-spirited."

Knowledge as inspiration for living, is spirituality in its reflected state. Spirituality in any one's life equals therefore their capacity to live out of spirit, or in a more basic sense, to live in-spirit, thus becoming an inspiration for others. As others are infused with this spirit they in turn become more divine. This divinity is reflected via the courage of one's convictions, the inclusiveness of one's understanding, the ethical guiding of one's actions, the clarity of ones thinking, the loving and harmless expression of one's feelings, and the dynamic and purposeful orientation of all of one's activities. In short, one is a benefactor to life in all of its expressions. The mind relates to the heart, and every other aspect of existence. With this as a guidepost, can there be any more noble or glorious reason for being alive?

As the full realization of the power of a spiritual life penetrates our being, we can easily become stunted. Either from a tremendous sense of inadequacy to the task, or from a subtle arrogance that presumes we have accomplished much more than we have. Both the over and under estimation of our true innate capacities leaves us in a precarious position. The tragedy of any life, is that it was only partially fulfilled. The ecstasy of any life, is that fulfillment is expressed within every

timeless moment. This capacity for fulfillment comes by relinquishing everyday that which is not in accord with our true nature. Thus, in constantly emptying out, we allow for a continuous replenishment and refinement. Purity exists within this balancing motion, for the purification of anything involves the constant distillation of the virtuous from out of what has now become toxic.

As we live together as one human family, on this small and delicate planet we call home, we also find that the spiritual life not only embodies our ability to actualize our innate divinity, but it is also comprised of the sacrifices we are willing to make to the collective to live as an integrated whole. This constant interplay of self and society determines the overall balance of life. Knowing one self enough to distinguish the course of one's destiny, yet knowing the world enough to see the place of one's destiny within it, is the ultimate challenge. For an individual obsessed with his or her destiny at the expense of the needs and wishes of the greater whole, is a despot, no matter how noble the cause. And a society that does not allow for the contribution of the bright lights within individuals to shine forth into humanity, is suicidal, dooming itself to live in darkness and despair.

Within this balance (known in diverse religions as the "Middle Path," "the narrow way," "the Tao," "the straight path," "the cross," and so on), we see men and women in all countries, of all creeds, of all inclinations trying to make their way through life in such a way that others might benefit from having known them. Each has their own "spirituality." Each their own talents, each their own distinguished contribution to and understanding of truth. If they are truly guided and inspired from above, they also possess a keen understanding of just how limited they are. There is a deepened respect for life, and a determination to see it honored. For life is the most precious and fleeting of gifts. How quickly and brief is one hundred years of time. With this in mind, we realize that our time is too short to be led astray into

bypaths of self-delusion, and dangerous mistakes of "so-called spirituality" gone astray. Balance must be maintained. The pitfalls to actualizing our being must be removed so we may finally discover *who* we are, and come to *know* the true nature of our existence.

The quest for spirit must continue to guide us. As we seek out our "spirituality" we can begin by examining our motives. For what purpose do we hope to advance this study? For whose benefit? In what way is it to be used? Which techniques and paths should we follow? How do we know who the right teachers are for us? Or, perhaps we would do better in teaching ourselves? What difficulties will we encounter? How do we recognize when we have simply fallen into self-deception? What guidelines do we use for progress? And how should we begin, if we have not already started? The answers to all these questions are distinctly private ones. For average people, it is hard to distinguish appropriate answers for they are easily impressed and led. They are also too often blind to their inner selfish motivations. For them, it is best to find competent guides to help them achieve a sense of independence and insight. Knowledge as to which guides to choose is essential for their part of the journey. Due to their ignorance, they are susceptible to following teachers who do not exemplify "spirituality," but rather egocentricity on the rampage. These teachers are usually full of knowledge, but use it subtly for their own advantage. Followers become dependent sheep under their care. Any follower who attempts to go beyond the initial sheep stage is "artfully slaughtered." "The disappearance of these talented and bright lights is cleverly explained away, and fear and intimidation are used to keep the other "sheep" in line. Beginners need a clear sense of ethical standards indicating the guidelines that their teachers should follow. If these ethics are not followed, then they are best to leave the teacher without any sense of regret. In fact, they may even wish to involve the proper authorities if circumstances are extreme.

For more advanced people, trial and error

has given them a better sense of discrimination. They are more independent and liable to think for themselves. They are also learning to be more immediately responsible for their wrong motivations. (This is sometimes known as I.K., or instant karma). For them, a teacher is less necessary. Instead, a supportive professional peer group should be sought out to help them establish equal relationships and lead them away from the subtle temptations that may trap them into pride and satisfaction over their accomplishments. They will also find themselves collecting followers. Followers will naturally gravitate to them simply because they know the individual has something to give.

This natural tendency to collect followers is another reason a professional peer group is helpful. Followers are usually very eager and naive. Like small children they flatter their leaders with enthusiasm and energy. This produces heady temptations for the leader. One temptation is succumbing to the admiration and inadvertently developing a "God complex." This complex causes one to believe one is infallible, that one knows all, and is all powerful because of what one knows. If continually fed, this will lead towards a tendency to dominate others. Our professional peer group keeps this temptation in line. They remind us we are only human, and indicate to us that we still have a long ways to go.

For the very advanced, they suffer a different dilemma. Because of what they know and have experienced, fewer peers and teachers are available to them. These people are given the task of pioneering. They become trailblazers whether they wish to be or not. If they are not cautious they may succumb to loneliness and isolation. In this way, the fruits they have to give are spoiled. Abundance becomes waste. Only the constant dedication to worship (there is always a greater entity than one's self, even if not seen, only felt), and the active life of work (serving the needs of others) can keep these people balanced. In this way they are not stagnated and life continues to be

a joy even if there are fewer people who can penetrate the inner recesses of one's heart.

In answering the questions of our spiritual nature there are other difficulties apart from finding the right guides, and this relates to the question of finding the right path. A few short years ago, the "right path" was more evident. In a world where horses, mules, and camels were our methods of transportation, our range of experience was limited. Just one hundred years ago, it was a days ride to the next town twenty miles away. Now in the same time span, you could rocket outside of the Earth's atmosphere for a few hours, take a look around, and come back down in the space shuttle in time for dinner. In other words, the entire planet has been opened up to us. The question of which path to chose literally boggles the mind and takes some time just to get a bearing of where to go.

Because television exposes us to a variety of knowledge and approaches, we are also exposed to a bewildering smorgasbord of philosophies. Pick up the channel changer and you can be immediately exposed to mythological master minds, scientific agnostics, fundamentalist Baptist preachers, Kung Fu monks, Rambo warriors, slap stick comedians, Japanese samurai, Ozzie and Harriet ideal families, American Indian rituals, Latino lovers, and a host of other bizarre, "normal," and marginal ideas of how to live in the world. Compare this rapid impact of ideas to the time honored traditions of the past twenty to thirty centuries where knowledge was handed down from generation to generation within the secure confines of one's culture and well defined belief systems. If you learned anything it was from the local sages. And you only learned as you were carefully examined and tested. Therefore, it might take a lifetime of apprenticeship to be exposed to what you might now encounter in just a month or two.

This rapid blending and merging of cultures around the globe is opening us up to a great period of confusion and instability as to the answering of fundamental questions on our

spiritual reason for being. With television exposing us daily to new ways of thinking, feeling, and believing; with new reams of information being discovered and disseminated almost every second; with change so rapid there is no belief system or stable structure to support it; the entire aspect of spirituality becomes convoluted. In many instances, we are not sure what to believe. And without some coherent belief system, what then? CHAOS, INSTABILITY, COMPETITION, ANXIETY, DISEASE, MISUNDERSTANDING, INABILITY TO COMMUN~CATE, all problems plaguing our world in greater intensity today. At the same time we are also confronting in this curious and dangerous mixture added VITALITY, CREATIVITY, INVENTIVENESS, and GENIUS, which are manifesting themselves in greater frequency.

The present instability gives us an opportunity for great pros and cons to effect our world. The problem is one of maintaining balance. In other words, in our continuing quest to know, HOW do we allow for the new, without totally dismantling, and tearing apart the old? How do we educate ourselves to change harmoniously and graciously, so our desires and ambitions do not leave us out of control? And finally, how do we find or create a large enough structure to support the mixture of belief systems rapidly clashing into each other, so they do not eat each other alive (and the planet with it), in the process? Oddly enough, the answers are all found in the domain of TRUE SPIRITUALITY. The spirituality that has been lived by the true lights in humanity's history throughout time. The spirituality these great teachers called us to live by was practicing the principles we know to be true within every moment of our daily lives.

The Ground Spirit

Before we begin to sort out the diversities of spiritual experience and belief, before we delve in to the blocks that inhibit spiritual realization and life, we must first examine the

question of what is spirit itself. In other words, what is the unifying principle from which all diversified views and experiences of spirit pour forth from: What is the ground which unites them, relates their roots at every level, even though the trees seem to be separated above? This "ground of spirit" has been called a number of things in various belief systems. In science, it is known as Energy. In philosophy, it is the one True Reality. It is Being. In religion, it is God. This includes the Belief that all Gods are ONE. (I and the Father are ONE," in the Christian faith. ALLAH, or "ALL ONE," in the Islamic faith for example). God is both Transcendent (and is worshiped as being apart from us in the deifications of Jehovah, Yahweh, Christ, Buddha, and a variety of Sun Gods and Moon Goddesses); and God is Immanent (in terms of a divine spark being within us. This is the "Christ in you," or that which comprises your "Buddha nature" to name a few examples). In metaphysical disciplines, this "ground of spirit" is also the ONE ABOUT WHOM NAUGHT CAN BE SAID. The Abyss. Kether. All Knowledge. Unity Consciousness. The VOID. The Nothing. The Darkest of all Darkesses, where no light exists. It is the Eternal Now. The Womb of the Great Mother.

In other words this "ground of spirit" includes the roots of every name, concept, and idea ever given to describe the world around us and to answer the question of Why? Each name or idea ascribed to it limits and crucifies it immediately into time and space. It fails to truly describe itself, because the words are simply definitions, not experiences. This concept is easier to understand if you apply yourself to a simple exercise. Take a moment to get a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. At the top of the page write in bold letters your name. Now, spend a few moments answering the question, WHO AM I? If you are like anyone else you may find yourself quickly frustrated. Maybe you put down that you are a certain age, race, nationality, religion, occupation, and sex. Perhaps you noted a few of your physical characteristics and interests.

Maybe you even feel confident that the ten to fifty words you wrote on the piece of paper adequately describe you. Maybe you do not. Now, throw the piece of paper away. What has happened?

For a truly illuminating experience, I advise you to actually do and contemplate this exercise. No cheating now? When you are finished, ask yourself, ARE THE WORDS ON THIS PIECE OF PAPER REALLY ME? I am not asking you to consider the question of do the words describe you. ARE they you? Maybe you are thinking incredulously, OF COURSE NOT! I know the words are not me! What a silly exercise! Now extend the exercise and take another piece of paper and write at the top of it, your word for God. (Energy, Allah, "the Force," Sky-spirit, Jesus, Buddha, Great Mother, whatever you want). Now answer the question, WHO IS GOD? Again take some time to give your own definition. When you are finished, throw the paper away. Ask yourself this question now, ARE THE WORDS ON THE PAPER REALLY GOD! What do you notice!

If you are very honest with yourself, you will have to answer that the words are not really God. They define and describe your perceptions of God. Just as the other words described and defined your perceptions of yourself, but were not you at all. Words are just that. They are words. In that words help us define the world around us, they are very important. Because words relate us to people, and places, and things, they are the most intimate connection for understanding something. But, they are not the person, place, or thing we are describing! (This explains the paradoxical statement in the Christian Bible which states in John, verse 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word *is* God, in that it describes Him intimately. But the Word is *with* God, in that God exists alongside the word, and exists in relationship to it, not as a part of it.)

God, or the "Ground of Spirit" is that Presence or entity which goes beyond any puny attempt to give it thought or definition. Just as

numerous individuals would describe you in a number of different ways, words and definitions describe "God" in a number of different ways. The unfortunate tragedy occurs when we begin to argue over the words and definitions. Imagine for a moment two of your closer friends or family members arguing over a few words that describe you. One person declares that you are honest and kind. The other declares they have seen you occasionally cheat and lie. Perhaps both are true of you. At certain times and places in your life, you have both been honest, and been negligent and become dishonest. Suddenly, your friends or family members in a flash of anger begin to fist fight. One person picks up a stick. A few moments later the other person is dead, The remaining friend turns to you and declares the whole thing your fault. What would you do?

In a similar way, we humans practice a spirituality based not on the "Ground of Spirit" which gives us the living experience of it, we practice a dogmatic spirituality based on heated arguments over words and definitions. Just as we stand horrified as the people we love kill themselves over petty arguments of our true nature, imagine the horror divinity must feel, as the beautiful creations in Nature maim and kill each other in petty arguments over the definitions of reality and God! Truly the "mind is the slayer, as well as the revealer of the truth." Because the mind can describe the "Ground of Spirit," but it can never make up for the living experience of it. You can talk about a travel log of a certain country and people. You can look at the pictures and see the faces, but it will *never* make up for the experience of actually having gone there.

The difference in people who talk about spirituality and those who practice it, is the realm of experience. Whenever we actually experience something, different qualities come into play. We are more sensitive, tolerant, and humble in the light of authentic experience. We rely less on words to convey it and often fall back upon, "I guess you just had to be there." Imagine for a moment some of the experiences you have had in life. Childbirth, an

accident or illness of some kind, an athletic or artistic high, a moment of standing in awe before an aspect of nature. Use your creative imagination to try and relive the experience. No doubt you immediately move into sensory awareness. You remember it, but not so much in the form of words, but through the medium of your senses such as taste, touch, smell, sight, sounds. After having re-imagined the experience, take out a piece of paper and try to write about it. What happens?

Unless you are particularly facile with the poetic use of converting images into words, you are likely to find yourself completely frustrated and at a loss. There is just no way to accurately describe it. Very likely the only people who will truly resonate to the depth of your experience are others who have had a similar one to it. Without words, they know what it is like to give birth to a child, have a fatal illness, watch a parent die, climb to the top of a mountain, survive a near fatal crash, overcome an addiction, come out of a war or natural disaster alive. They have a better sense of it, so they are more likely to be gentle with you, compassionate and understanding. They are less likely to throw intellectual theories at you of how the experience should be, and then have a fit when you try to explain how the experience was. The intellectual theorists, if they are succumbing to the illusion and glamour of untested ideas, are likely to be more rigid and demanding. They will be more judgmental and fixated. They will not give you a sense of being seen, heard, or validated in your experience. Even people who have had a similar experience but insist on a narrow definition of it will fall into this trap. (An easy childbirth! NO WAY, MINE ALWAYS TOOK HOURS AND HOURS! YOU MUST BE LYING!)

These tendencies to move away from the "Ground of Spirit" into its definitions constitute the pitfalls we must constantly be on the lookout for (no matter how advanced the seeker). If we keep in the forefront of our minds the realization that "spirit" can never be adequately defined, we will be safeguarded.

Spirit, like the air we breathe, cannot be confined. And it must always be this way. For the "Ground of Spirit" exists in the realm of the un-manifest. It resides behind time and space as we know it. To reach the "Ground of Spirit" in spiritual practice means we enter that state where all thought, all sensation, all identity, all sense of separate individuality is completely annihilated. NOTHING REMAINS! The dual world ceases to exist. The mind and its ability to create thought forms is destroyed. Male/female, good/evil, black/white, life/death do not exist. There is only emptiness, a void, the ground or womb of pure spirit. A vacuum, or black hole, where the old is dissolved and only pure potentiality remains. The potential of a new child, species, cosmos waiting to be reborn out of the womb of spirit, back into time and space. Back into the manifest world where a new play of the opposites will be born. These opposites will once again wrestle against each other until they harmonize, blend, and synthesize to create something more holistic and beautiful.

To understand this, more so to have been given the Divine Grace to experience it, completely reorients the life of any one person. With Reality known for a fact, it becomes evident that the world surrounding one is merely an illusion. Outside of this time and space continuum, it does not exist. Inside this time and space, the world appears real, in fact, it is very real! But only because we are living at the vibration which stabilizes it, making the world seem solid and permanent, when it is absolutely not. On the contrary, it is in a state of continual flux and change. Change is threatening however. It speeds things up, destabilizes us, takes the world apart, creates chaos. At least until it settles into a new pattern and rhythm. Entering the "Ground of Spirit" is like entering a different dimension. The rules are totally foreign making it surreal for a time. Until you adjust to the new world. Then the world you left behind seems oddly foreign and out of place, even if you had known it over fifty years.

To use an analogy, imagine the

consciousness of an atom, that tiniest of substance, trying to comprehend the Being that you are. Trying to live, move, and have its being at the frequency vibration of a human being, instead of an atom. It sounds impossible. In fact, it is. For the human being can perceive and try to comprehend that which is lower, but that which is lower can not fully be aware of, or in any way comprehend that which is greater or above. In the same way, the human being cannot comprehend "GOD." The only way we can do so is to AT-ONE with that consciousness, which must totally obliterate our own. Thus our awareness of ourselves disappears. Our sensory world disappears and we are left with NOTHING, nothing but the ground of spirit.

To maintain this state of awareness, we would have to die, have to physically disintegrate. For these bodies cannot contain it. Just as an atom cannot contain us. But, at the same time, if we can "incarnate" or sustain just a piece of it, we are impregnated by the spirit, and have expanded our everyday state of conscious awareness in a much greater degree. The longer and greater our experience of the Ground of Spirit, the more transformed and changed we are. The more we are able to refine the human vehicle, the more we can sustain and nurture the new birth inside of us. In this way, we learn to live more clearly in the Reality, and pull out of the illusion of the mind, the glamour of the emotions, and the maya of the physical world and body.

Spirituality is a dual process then. It is the pull inward and upward into the ground of spirit where greater and greater at-onements can be made. And it is the push downward and outward where these realizations are worked out, stabilized, refined, and uplifted along with those around us. This four-fold direction is a spherical movement. It pulsates in 360 degrees. It radiates out from the center of Being into the world of Becoming. Thus we become greater and greater Beings, and the evolutionary spiral lifts us upwards and onwards. This process does not occur in a vacuum away from other human beings. If we

are to still live, move, and have our being in this time and space, we must readjust to the frequencies of the world around us.

With each new incarnation of spirit, these frequencies will be higher and more refined, making the everyday world a little more difficult to reside in, and causing us to be more discriminatory as to our contacts. But, this should not occur in a separate sense. This is not a withdrawal away from others because we cannot abide to be with them. This withdrawal is more inward as a place and residence in consciousness. We continue to walk in the world, we may even enter the darkest corners of it, if service calls us to it. But we enter it as radiant stations of light, causative to the environment around us, as an agent of that light. We identify with the Ground of Spirit giving us our common humanity with all. At the same time we learn to reserve our intimacies for only those of equal presence of mind, and we stand receptive to only those who can genuinely light the continued way for us.

Even in reaching the "Ground of Spirit" where all conceptualization dies out, where we have become "reborn", is it fair to say we have "found God?" Most likely not. The experience may be so awesome, so powerful, so mind altering that it seems like God at the time. And for many years it may remain the closest thing we have had to "knowing God." It is extremely unlikely however that God can be confined even to the most ecstatic moments. There is always something greater than anything we can conceive or experience. Just look at the technological advances of our times. Every time we think we have surpassed ourselves, we find another way to improve pn things all over again. Our understanding of spirituality is like this. It is not stagnant, it changes. Perhaps it is not as intense, maybe it matures a little slower, but it changes and alters our perceptions of it nevertheless. In this way we constantly evolve and are constantly "reborn" and created anew. It is an adventuresome process. Sometimes painful, other times joyous, but always residing within, behind, above, in front, and below us. It is us.

We are it. And so it goes.

The Fruits of The Spirit

After we have experienced the Ground of Spirit, the one true Reality, we then re-enter the world and recognize the relativity of everything around us. We perceive that everything is defined, perceived, and created along the common structures of the Universal and Collective Mind. Everything is relative to the state of this mind. Everyone we meet is conditioned by their beliefs held in the mind, and limited by their definitions of what they are perceiving and experiencing. This knowledge of the relative nature of the world can lead us into a deeper experience of life. Instead of a closed and judgmental nature, we are open, enquiring, exposing ourselves to a diversity of life beyond anything we had ever imagined before. We begin to take a more friendly attitude towards life. We know more keenly than ever before the sorrows and misfortunes of the world, but we see them in a larger context which gives us hope and direction. In this way we affirm life and seek to understand, appreciate, and aid it more deeply.

Residing in the "Ground of Spirit" we obtain a disposition that recognizes the divinity in everything around us. Similarly, we understand more clearly the purpose, place, and function of everything as it connects up with the larger whole. Beginning with ourselves, we assess our talents more accurately and accept our particular dharma or destiny with grace and freedom. We work to actualize the newly planted seeds in ourselves. With more insight, we can better protect and guard this precious process, allowing it the time it needs to blossom of its own accord. We also recognize the ways we may now use our gifts to benefit and nourish a larger whole.

This shift from getting into giving is another indication of spirituality bearing fruit. It demonstrates a fundamental reorientation to life. We see our place in the world as being an agent to reveal the capacity to have and give "life more abundantly." With this new

awareness, we approach everything we do with a more conscious orientation. The way we speak, talk, work, play, eat, dress all become tools to help demonstrate the divine at work in us. We are agents of light, love, and power. Entrusted with a great responsibility we "pick up our cross and follow" the path of those teachers and servers before us who sought to lift the burdens of a troubled world around us. Each and every day is another chance to ask the question, "How can I help?"

This shift in orientation from getting to giving is the most noticeable fruit of a spiritualized life. There are other fruits that can best be summarized in a list of qualities. Qualities are the subtle features that define the nature or class of anything. The higher the quality of anything, the more difficult it is to obtain and the more discipline is required to maintain it. Consider a great musician or artist. Years of practice and refinement go into producing the sense of effortless grace that accompanies the performance. The same is true of fine craftsmanship, a professional skill such as speaking or teaching, and the finesse with which any efficient business is run. Quality has the natural tendency to beautify and rarify something. This process takes time to produce. Often the longer the incubation period, the more beautiful the results. Also, the higher the value placed on something, and the more likely it is to become immortalized influencing generations and multitudes of minds to reach greater heights of inspiration and vision.

The qualities I am about to list, are basic guidelines which can help us understand when we are in the presence of someone who seeks to live from the "Ground of Spirit." It should be remembered that these qualities should not be approached as impossible ideals we can never reach. We may never climb the mountains surrounding us, but we can still appreciate and be inspired by their beauty. We may even venture forward and try our hand at climbing upward to discover the higher terrain. In the same way, we need to approach these qualities as inspirational guidelines to touch and inspire

our everyday lives. With these as guideposts we can begin to distinguish the way we are from the way we want to be. We can set goals for ourselves to work on a particular quality every new year. At the end of the year we can chart our progress. In ten to fifty years time, we may surprise ourselves in discovering we have absorbed the qualities within us to a large degree. The mountain is no longer as tall. The effort to climb it not so dangerous. The ascent is halfway over. The air is fresher and clearer. With our face towards the sunshine, we look forward to pressing onwards, leaving fear and doubt further and further below.

In assessing these qualities in ourselves the true test comes not only in self-examination, but in discovering from others how they view us. The people who live with us day in and day out are the best resources for telling us whether we are truly practicing what we are preaching. Even our enemies may have uncommon wisdom about us. For a true enemy is adept at knowing our weaknesses and flaws, otherwise how could they attack us? Our dealings with our enemies also tell us much about the resiliency of these characteristics. It is easy to exemplify spiritual qualities in an atmosphere where you are loved and pampered. How much more difficult to maintain the same composure in an environment where we are despised! The beauty of play acting is it gives us a chance to face the enemy ahead of time on safe turf. How many of us take the time to create scenarios where we must face hostile forces and overcome them from a spiritual center? The true warrior paths to truth (the martial arts, military, etc.) know the vital significance of these exercises. Therefore in studying these characteristics we can ask ourselves (or others if you can) what strengths and weaknesses we possess in each area. Then we can consciously create "test laboratories" which help us overcome the weaknesses so we can better inspire and serve others in our lives.

Keynotes for Building Spiritual Character

MAJOR

Loving Kindness

In thought, word, and deed this energy reaches out to others, illuminating, uplifting, and healing all who come in contact with it.

Goodwill

Directing your thoughts, words, and actions to produce good in others, and to move humanity along the path of wholeness and wellness.

Forgiveness

The ability to let go of hatreds, resentments, and grudges so that the energies of love and goodwill can prevail.

Sacrifice

The spontaneous and joyful giving of oneself and one's resources to assist others. The ability to surrender that which is no longer important or has lesser importance because it has been superseded by the needs of another.

MINOR

Responsibility

Based on self-consciousness, the ability to be held accountable for one's actions and the acceptance of larger duties according to one's capabilities

Discrimination

The ability to observe, analyze, and sort out the lesser from the greater inducing one to make more aware and correct choices

Free Will

The power to make independent choices involving one's thoughts, feelings, and actions and the willingness to be responsible for decisions made.

Humility

An adjusted sense of right proportion giving a true and balanced point of view anent one's talents, responsibilities and work.

Simplicity

The ability to operate from a set of principles and values which guide one's life, and the capacity to live free from excess and indulgences.

Detachment

Seeing oneself and others objectively thereby giving discernment as to essentials, the ability to take a calm and impersonal look at things.

Serenity

"Peace of mind" which brings poise in the face of all difficulties, the calm at the "eye of the storm."

Selflessness

The ability to put others needs before one's own, based on inner strength and conscious choice to do so, versus submissive or passive surrender.

Courage

Risk taking, standing on one's own, and holding fast to principles and convictions which may be contrary to other's opinions.

Integrity

Living truth as one knows it, being honest, wise, noble, and just in one's relationships with self and others.

Perseverance

The power to endure, to be patient, one pointed, and steady which allows for the accomplishment of tasks which one has implemented.

Sharing

Based on the recognition that we are all linked together by the laws of economy which circulate goods, an outgoing attitude and response to assist others in achieving what one has been able to acquire in goods, wisdom, and peace of mind.

Harmlessness

Approaching life in a constructive and positive

fashion, based on a state of mind and inner motivation led by understanding, inclusiveness, and the desire to produce good.

Balance

The practice of moderation in all things and the ability to see and weigh opposing forces allowing therefore a spirit of compromise into solutions.

Solitude

The ability to laugh at oneself, to not take life so seriously, and to experience fun and joy in living.

Sense of Humor

The cultivation of inner quiet and the appreciation of standing alone which allows for the inner self to grow and become steadfast.

Devotion

The focusing of ideals motivating us to become like those ideals, while still maintaining a just sense of proportion and compassion for not being perfect.

Joy

An attitude of positivity that contributes to our ability to receive and give pleasure in the simplest and greatest of experiences. Silence, the knowing when to keep quiet, stilling the emotions, refraining from impulsive speech, and assuming a stance of listening and observing.

Intuition

The ability to sense the meaning behind things leading to comprehension via knowing and experience.

These brief summaries give you the basic essentials of each key word. For greatest effectiveness, pick a word which represents a weakness to you. Make a commitment to spend at least one to three months reflecting on the word. Write it on a card and every morning and/or evening reflect on your utilization of the quality throughout the day. Make notations of your progress. In this way you meditate upon

and absorb the quality into your being. At the end of the designated time period review your notes and summarize your overall progress. If you need to, continue with the same card, otherwise proceed to another quality and start all over again. In reviewing the list you may have noticed that some qualities that you believed should be on the list, were not. These include the qualities of Will, Love, and Intelligence. It has been said by some people that the Will to Love Intelligently is the true demonstration of WISDOM. In carefully reviewing the listed qualities, you might discover that some fit under the various categories of Will, Love, and Intelligence. Actually, all the qualities involve the exercise of these fundamentals. Let us briefly consider these a little further. Will in its essence is the capacity to formulate a purpose or intention, and to hold steadfast to this purpose until it is manifested. The more your capacity to hold steadfast, the greater your will. The more expertly you manifest the intention without deviation, the greater your power. WILL POWER is the key to all discipline. Without it, you have nothing but good intentions that were never acted upon. Will is therefore dynamic, positive, causative, and direct.

Love is a word that has been written about in so many ways, it would be ludicrous to assume I could adequately describe it here. In the fundamental sense in which I will be using the word in this text, love is pure inclusive reason. It is understanding and comprehension. Because one understands the pain of another, and the reasons behind how that pain came into being, they can make artful use of the quality of compassion. Compassion means "to suffer with." This is not drowning in the river of travail with another. It is empathizing with someone's pain enough that you are led to act in their behalf. You are propelled to help them. This impulse could not exist unless you perceived the person (or entity), as being similar to yourself. This similarity occurs to the extent of your inclusiveness. When we perceive something as similar to us, we are not afraid. We understand

it and are at home with it. When we perceive something as different from us it seems foreign and we respond with fear, hatred, and neglect. We will not assist the person we perceive as being harmful to our own well being. Therefore, love and compassion have to include elements of understanding and reason.

Motivated by love, possessed of will, we are still of no use if we do not also have the necessary intelligence. Imagine being in a car accident where the person next to you is severely wounded. Out of love, your immediate impulse is to help them, and you act on that impulse directed by will. Yet here you hesitate. What to do? How do you stop the bleeding? How do you check for broken bones? What if you should not move them? What if they are not breathing or their heart is stopped? How do you get help if you are unable to assist? Without knowledge, the person you cherish may fade away before your eyes. Another example can be related to the will to lose weight. You love the idea of being thin. You have even summoned up the necessary will power. Yet you do not have the slightest idea of what foods to eat, what exercises are best to undertake, what effects diet and exercise will have on a mostly sedentary body. Again knowledge is needed. The more precise and personalized the better. Intelligence then is the right application of knowledge. It is more than knowing the facts. It is knowing how to utilize and apply the facts correctly to get the best results.

Will, love, and intelligence like many qualities can be abused. These abuses will be examined in greater detail throughout the text. In fact, every virtue can become a vice if it is implemented in excess, or at the wrong time. These excesses represent the pitfalls which are encountered as we seek to walk the spiritual path. Simply by the nature of being on a journey, we are bound to run into the unknown, become sidetracked, stumble and fall down on occasion, or flat out succumb to severe difficulties. Being prepared as much as possible for these problems is something we are wise to

do at the beginning of our journey. This is the true function of maps or guides. The accumulated wisdom of other travelers who have run into and overcome difficulties helps us to have an easier time of it when it is our turn to go.

Some of the common pitfalls along the spiritual journey include believing spirituality is indicated by someone's position and ability to influence others. This inclines us to a superiority, inferiority complex. Another problem is the belief that spirituality means the demonstration of miraculous powers. We also think it means belonging to a special group of individuals who view the world in a similar way as we do (with the devil influencing all those who do not). We think it means valuing life at any cost (even if in doing so we cause the suffering of a larger and greater life form). We think it means our ingenious minds, powerful inventions, obtuse philosophical belief systems, impressive talents which stand out above and beyond the masses. Influenced by these definitions we inadvertently succumb not to the heart of divinity, but to the tendency to set ourselves up as the heart of the divine. Slowly, we convolute truth to serve our own glory, versus use truth to glorify the greater whole.

This subtle temptation to self-glorification is known by various names. More commonly, it is known as our own self serving ego. When the ego reigns we strive to push and shove our way into dominance over others. Towering above the masses with our extra-ordinary capacities, we neglect the fact that always something towers over us. Disregarding the precept of the greater always serving the lesser, we seek to make those with less capacity than ourselves into slaves whose sole purpose is to meet our every desire. Ironically, this self-serving tendency (which is sin in its basic sense), is most often succumbed to by those people who are succeeding for the most part in developing and revealing their inner divinity. Will becomes the Will-to-Power. Love converts into the Love-of-Selfishness. Intelligence reconfigures into Intelligent Manipulation for

Self-Gratification. Rarely do we see the souring of our intentions. Ardently we defend our actions as being necessary, even if the simplest of minds can perceive we are wrong. History is filled with the venomous wounds of people led slowly into the path of tyranny. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of years are required to assuage the cankerous sores.

Yet, despite the grave mistakes, apart from the deceptions and lies, the light of truth remains, and souls continue to break through the murky seas and remind us of who we really are. The battle of these souls is a courageous one. The healing power they possess is enormous. They wake us up, inspire us to move forward, and remind us that the Quest for light and love continues. After all, it is within the darkest of skies that the lights of heaven shine the brightest. So too, it is during the darkest of winters, that we are given the opportunity to reveal our inner light of divinity, and remind others that we are not so far away from home after all.

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