

Walking the Spiritual Path: A Contemporary Perspective

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Spiritual development is akin to being on a long and arduous journey. Often called the *Path*, traveling it requires that an individual inwardly recognize the soul, and be committed to more fully expressing it in everyday life. Though long and difficult (at times), it is a journey that everyone must begin, in this life or another. The Path eventually leads a person to the summit of human evolution—perfected consciousness and enlightenment. Because of this, an understanding of the Path can be helpful when trying to walk it. To understand the Path we must first remember that human consciousness is dualistic. Essentially, there are two parts to the mind—a lower and higher division. The lower portion is connected to the ego (personality), and is usually the focus of our day-to-day consciousness. The higher portion contains qualities such as compassion, understanding and wisdom and is related to the soul. The soul and personality therefore form a fundamental duality within each of us.

As a prerequisite to walking the Path, one must *consciously* recognize this duality within him/herself. When clearly seen, an individual begins to yearn to express the soul more fully in all aspects of daily life. Within the privacy of his or her thoughts, a solemn pledge is then made. It is a vow to strive to be the soul deep within, and to adopt a set of spiritual disciplines in support of this end.

Interestingly, this is the deeper meaning behind the use of the word *disciple*. To strive toward the soul is to be a disciple of the soul. From a certain perspective, discipleship and the Path are interdependent notions. The two go hand-in-hand. Indeed, in some esoteric literature the spiritual journey has been called the *Path of Discipleship*.

An Impersonal Approach to Life

Many people believe that the Path is an outer journey. Though this is an understandable assumption, it is nonetheless a misperception. Instead, the Path is better understood as an inner passageway. To walk it necessitates that an individual strive to be the higher consciousness s/he inwardly senses. As such, it is more true to say that the Path is a psychological thread leading to the place where one's higher nature is found—the soul.

However, it should not be assumed that the Path has no relationship to outer life. It clearly does. A person's way of life always reveals his/her states of consciousness. The outer circumstances of life simply mirror the nature of the mind. When on the Path, a changed attitude toward life will invariably ensue. This is evidenced in a new and emerging set of values to live by, often to the dismay of society.

For example, the incentives of life become more impersonal. Society's encouragement to acquire wealth and prestige lose their persuasive power. Personal wants and desires become less significant, and the needs of the whole grow in importance. The more one identifies with the soul, the more impersonal and decentralized s/he becomes.

When consciousness lets go of its preoccupation with its individuality (ego), it then expands. Because of this, a person will begin to

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subtly sense humanity's oneness, and the motivation to serve will inevitably appear. Stated differently, the decentralization of consciousness leads to the recognition of oneness, and this gives rise to the impulse to serve. As such, life becomes increasingly service driven and impersonal.

Prerequisites of the Path

The requirements for walking the Path have changed over time. For many centuries the emphasis has been on the sacredness of love and its power to transform human life. Historically, love has been viewed as the centerpiece of spirituality, and that the way to God was through the heart. Yet, just as everything in creation is evolving, our understanding of the spiritual Path also changes over time. Though love is an essential quality of the soul, the higher mind is equally important.

As the rightful companion to the heart, higher mind is indispensable when on the journey toward enlightenment. Unlike the lower mind, with its emphasis on knowledge, the higher mind is the custodian of wisdom. Through it, we are able to grasp broad and abstract truths. It is therefore important to blend mind and heart, for they support each other. Love always insures that oneness is felt, while the mind conveys the soul's wisdom and purpose.

Spiritual Service: A New Paradigm

So much of the Path obliges us to assume responsibility for the welfare of humanity. Service is therefore an essential component to soul consciousness and discipleship. Yet in our contemporary understanding of the Path we see that the nature of service has also evolved. It has become something much broader and more encompassing.

In the past, service to those who are suffering has been the emphasis. The legacy of this is

found in the great humanitarian initiatives we see today. Of course, this is good and must continue. However, the higher understanding of service moves us to widen the context through which it is rendered. To know the oneness of humanity is to know that service is

possible everywhere, and in every circumstance.

Modern-day discipleship encourages us to realize that social systems are also evolving expressions of life. Whether we consider politics, business, education or the arts, all are living forces struggling to evolve into a higher form. As such, service can (and must) be rendered within every social institution.

Walking the Path requires that people see societal systems in this way. It is to know that all institutions are essentially spiritual, and all are venues where upliftment can be offered.

The Dark Night Experience

Travel along the Path is by no means consistent and steady. Often an individual will feel deeply aligned to his/her soul, only to later feel spiritually lost and bereft. Though such experiences are frustrating (to the personality, not the soul), it is something that naturally occurs. This is the basis for the *dark night of the soul* experience as initially conveyed by St. John of the Cross in the 16th century.

The dark night experience only occurs because there is still imperfection in the personality's relationship to the soul. Sometimes the personality unwittingly causes the dark night experience. Yet at other times the soul is the instigator. When the personality triggers the event, it is because its selfish tendency is reasserting itself. This causes the Path to become darkened and obscure, at least temporarily.

When the soul initiates the darkness, it is for the purpose of arresting the hastening person-

ality. The personality yearns to unite with the soul, but has not yet purified itself properly. At such times, the soul will cast a cloud of darkness over the personality, thus forcing it to more honestly appraise its readiness (or lack of it). Such dark night experiences are built into the nature of the Path itself, and are inescapable.

Concluding Remarks

To walk the Path requires that a person become conscious of his/her own duality—the soul and personality. From this realization, a commitment to live and express the soul's wisdom naturally ensues. Personal desires gradually (and inevitably) yield to the evolutionary needs of humanity. Service to the

larger whole is therefore a feature when walking the Path. And, though there are times when one loses sight of the Path, most often, such blindness is only temporary. Darkness is sometimes necessary, for it adjusts the personality as a prelude to receiving greater light.

Initially, to step onto the Path requires that we reverse our thinking about it. Though discipleship is proven through a life of service, this is merely an effect that arises when on the spiritual journey. It is not the Path itself. Instead, the Path is best understood as an inner passageway leading to one's authentic identity, the soul. In this regard, the ancient aphorism holds true—“*to find the Path one must become the Path.*”