

What is spirituality? A personal exploration

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Spirituality involves the recognition of a feeling or sense or belief that there is something greater than myself, something more to being human than sensory experience, and that the greater whole of which we are part is cosmic or divine in nature.

Spirituality means knowing that our lives have significance in a context beyond a mundane everyday existence at the level of biological needs that drive selfishness and aggression. It means knowing that we are a significant part of a purposeful unfolding of Life in our universe.

Spirituality involves exploring certain universal themes – love, compassion, altruism, life after death, wisdom and truth, with the knowledge that some people such as saints or enlightened individuals have achieved and manifested higher levels of development than the ordinary person. Aspiring to manifest the attributes of such inspirational examples often becomes an important part of the journey through life for spiritually inclined people.

The spiritual journey involves first healing and affirming the ego so that positive states are experienced; with secure self-esteem, belief in self-worth and a capacity for love and generosity, a person becomes less constrained by ego defences. An opening of the heart is an essential aspect of true spirituality. In this regard one may question the spiritual nature of masochistic religious practices such as self-flagellation, which is based on a belief in the wickedness inherent in the body rather than on any real connection with, and therefore compassion for, the body. This illustrates the fact that religion does not always serve the progress of spiritual development but may get side-tracked into practices that create pride, feelings of superiority etc. or else lead to a person becoming bogged down in unworthiness, guilt and shame - all of which emotions are commonly suffered by psychiatric patients. In short, religion will be taken up by a person in a way that inevitably reflects their own level of development and maturity.

The development of spirituality is generally recognised as requiring some sort of practice or discipline in order to make 'progress'. This can involve the aspirant in paradoxes such as non-striving, the gateless gate, or coming home to oneself. Contemplative practices such as prayer and meditation are the common denominator of many religions and the foundation of spirituality. Without them, personal growth is much slower and haphazard. A teacher or mentor is usually recommended.

Spiritual development often involves spontaneous happenings that cannot be accounted for scientifically and that may be attributed to an external force, for example: grace, or angelic or divine interventions. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus is one such dramatic example. Development may not

necessarily be an instantaneous event but can happen more gradually as when going through an experience of severe illness, or a terminal diagnosis, when the fragility of life is revealed and a person re-evaluates the meaning of their life.

Whether there is any objective reality to the beliefs of spiritually inclined people is an area of debate and controversy, often taking place in the arena of philosophy as a discipline independent of the beliefs that supposedly taint the intellectual capacities of those who are spiritually inclined. As a sociologist friend said when he was studying the devotees of Prem Rawat, who founded the Divine Light Mission in the early 1970s: 'If you are inside the group you don't have the objectivity to study the phenomena, but if you are outside the group you don't really *know* what it is you are studying.' So research often stays in the safe arena of behaviour, which is superficial and can be uninformative or misleading. A documentary film was made for television about the Rajneesh commune in 1984, showing people in Dynamic Meditation jumping up and down in noisy catharsis, with their eyes shut, some with eye-masks on. The presenter of the film failed to convey anything about the purpose of this active form of meditation and did not enquire at all about anyone's internal experience, remaining content to sensationalise an appearance of weirdoes doing something outlandish that looked ridiculous without appropriate explanation.

Religion formalises certain aspects of spiritual awareness into a coherent belief system that can be taken on trust, even if the person has no direct experience of the Divine: for instance, a person might believe that Jesus is the son of God because that is what the Bible teaches whereas another person may have had a vision of Jesus in person telling him/her that he is the son of God. Direct experience of truth as opposed to intellectual knowledge is considered key in mystical experience.

The belief systems of religion extend beyond the individual's experience to his/her role in society and morality-based rules are formulated to govern relationships and activities. Usually religion is manifest as a collective through church, mosque, synagogue or temple, and is involved with community as much as with individuals. This provides a real framework through which the 'greater than me' can start to be experienced.

The debate about the status of spiritual beliefs such as the existence of God, the meaning of life, the absolute existence of moral laws, and many more such, typically appears to reach an impasse between mature spiritual seekers and the sceptics. To the spiritual person the sceptic appears like a blind man trying to say something about sight when it is absent in himself, and the spiritual person appears to the sceptic as a vulnerable person motivated by emotional needs to find some delusional area of comfort or support. For a believer there is no need to prove in any rational way that God exists as his existence is self-evident in his creation. For others, while the evident order within the universe at macro- and micro -levels is sufficient to demonstrate that there is an intelligence at work much greater than the human mind, this does not justify naming it as God. Since neither side can understand the other, the debate will no doubt continue indefinitely.

It isn't clear why some people have a spiritual dimension to their lives and some simply don't. Certainly it is not something that can be reduced to a cognitive belief system. The core experience is of not being alone, of being somehow connected to

something greater, or of being in relationship with a higher self, higher beings or God.

Spiritual or transcendent beliefs can refer to a benevolent or to an indifferent force. The Christian ethos reinforces the benevolence of God and as such signally fails to explain the place of suffering in the grand scheme of things. The abuse suffered by innocent babies and children has no relationship to the concept of an all knowing, all powerful, wise and benevolent God, and to my mind completely destroys the internal consistency of the Christian faith. When I asked a fundamentalist Christian how he could explain that God allows abuse and torture and extreme suffering, he could only answer that 'God moves in mysterious ways' which seemed to me an abrogation of his own intelligence. But perhaps he was simply saying that the real meaning of the opposition of good and bad in human experience was beyond his understanding, as it is mine.

It is often a conscious appreciation of the ultimate mystery that is life, the universe and everything in it, that characterizes the spiritual seeker. The sceptic confines himself to rational enquiry while the spiritual person knows there is more to understanding than logic and reason; in fact he knows that true understanding goes well beyond logic and reason into the deeper truth of not knowing.

In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha explains how human nature generates suffering and how to transcend the inevitable misery of unconsciousness and come to a place of wisdom, serenity and acceptance. The Eightfold Path delineates a realistic way to achieve the happiness we all desire through consciously dropping unhelpful patterns of resistance and attachment. Buddhists like to speak about 'skillful' actions or behaviours; this leads us to the crux of the spiritual life – there is a drive for self-improvement, to rise up out of unconsciousness and the misery it generates to a state of greater illumination; to think and behave skillfully rather than randomly or immaturely. The means to achieving this come through accepting things as they are instead of being driven to emotions and actions by the forces of attraction, repulsion or indifference. Suffering is defined as the result of not accepting reality as it is.

In outlining a way to overcome reacting to the world limited by our self-preserving instincts and prior conditioning, the Buddha gave spirituality a direction that surpasses the confines of religious doctrine and as such may be perhaps part of the fundamental definition of spirituality. Hesitantly, I offer my own definition consistent with the Buddha's path: spirituality is the indefinable urge to reach beyond the limits of ordinary human existence that is bounded by unconscious forces and self-interest, and to discover higher values in ourselves and to live them consistently in our relationships and roles. It involves developing practices that aid us in rising and expanding, perhaps beyond the merely good to the transcendent, in the process of looking inwards rather than outwards for our own morality and guidance. Above all, it means becoming a more loving and compassionate human being, in thought, word and deed.

What are the implications for mental healthcare? Patients consumed by anxiety or dulled by depression have little scope to cultivate a spiritual path when they are under the sway of distorted thoughts endlessly being repeated over and over in their

minds. These thoughts are mistaken for facts. Spiritual development requires successive degrees of freedom based on the realisation that thoughts are not facts but simply transient mental phenomena, as indeed are our emotions. Increasing numbers of patients are discovering this through mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, which in bringing a person to the here-and-now creates the mental climate in which this deep spiritual insight can help relieve anxiety and depression.

Neuroscientific research is showing that with the practice of mindfulness, the cortex of the brain literally grows, with an increase in grey matter and more gyrification. Could this be the next evolutionary step for humanity, with meditation opening the doorway to changes and developments that we currently term spiritual but which may in future be deemed normal, even basic?