

The Qualities of Spiritual Maturity, Part 1: Non-Idealism

At the end of his modern spiritual classic, *A Path With Heart*, Jack Kornfield reviews ten qualities that he thinks characterize someone who has “come of age” in their spiritual life. The ten traits Kornfield identifies have inspired me to write down some of my own thoughts about each of them.

Quality #2: Non-Idealism

When we first come to a spiritual life – battered and traumatized by a life without moorings or guidance, desperate for some solace and peace of mind – we are naturally attracted by the promise of something completely different. We eagerly lap up the stories of heaven, the Pure Land, liberation, nirvana, and enlightenment – especially those that present the spiritual goal as a place or condition wholly different from our present situation.

A truly inspired spiritual life begins with a profound disillusionment with one’s current condition. We give up on finding any real and lasting happiness within the purely secular life (“samsara”) and embark on a search for a radically different alternative (“nirvana”).

This stage is both necessary and beneficial at the beginning of our practice. We should be dissatisfied with the unhappiness and suffering that characterizes so much of life up to that point. We should be dissatisfied enough to do something about our dissatisfaction! Disenchantment with our nonreligious lives motivates us to work for improvement. Without it we won’t even start the hard work necessary to bring about a change.

It’s also important initially to have ideals — visions of what should be and who we could become. We set up new goals for ourselves and we then work hard to try to reach them. We look to the examples of the spiritual heroes of the past and immerse ourselves in their hagiographies. We may in this phase idealize our teachers, ministers, rabbis, or clerics, regarding them with starry-eyed admiration and a somewhat naïve and innocent reverence.

But as we mature in our spiritual practice we begin to recognize that dissatisfaction with who we are and the lives we are leading cannot in and of itself bring about the goals of happiness and contentment. In fact, endemic discontentment turns out to be the problem, not the solution. We also come to understand that harboring unrealistic ideals keeps them perpetually out of our reach, leaving us perpetually disappointed; and putting our teachers and spiritual heroes on pedestals just sets them up to fall.

Repeatedly failing to reach our aspirations is obviously a recipe for frustration and depression, and if it happens often enough over a long enough period of time, the natural tendency is to give up altogether.

This phenomenon of constituting and grasping to, but never reaching, lofty spiritual attainments seems fairly common among practitioners. We posit what I would call surreal goals, wholly different from our commonplace reality, and then we deploy the conditional: Unless and until I become (and here fill in the blank according to your tradition: an omniscient Buddha, a perfected saint, an angel of light, or whatever) and the world I live becomes (again, pick your idealized version of a perfect environment—a heaven or “Pure Land”), I won’t be satisfied with myself and with my life.

If we’re honest we can’t really say that such surreal visions of the goal are totally impossible. Who really knows? Such seemingly fantastical ends might indeed be realizable some day. But what most of us can say with certainty is that ideals like these are radically different from the reality we are experiencing in the here and now. In comparison to such idyllic, pie-in-the-sky future scenarios our present lives might very well look rather shabby and ordinary.

Focusing too much on remote and extraordinary attainments can easily function to increase, rather than decrease, our discontentment with our present lives. At some point in our spiritual evolution, ideals cease to be useful and simply exacerbate the problem of unending dissatisfaction – of the “craving” and “thirst” the Buddha identified as the principal cause of suffering. When we reach a certain stage in our spiritual maturation, we need to begin to systematically disabuse ourselves of the fantasies and dreams that undermine our contentment with reality as it is. As we ripen on our path, we become less naïve about the real purposes and aims of the spiritual life. It will ultimately be more conducive to our happiness not to obsess about surreal goals. Rather, we must fully embrace life in a way we might describe as hyperreal.

We come to see our lives, here and now, as having the potential to be experienced as perfect. We realize that it is not the externals of life that need to change but only our perspective on them. And we understand that it is nowhere other than in samsara that nirvana will be found.

As we grow in our wisdom and spiritual sophistication, we begin to take both a more realistic (“hyperreal”) and more optimistic view of what our present reality has to offer – the potential that ordinary life has to be a heaven on earth. And we begin to feel that the perfection of the self will come not by trying to become someone else but by discovering our own true, in-born nature.

It perhaps begins to dawn on us that the only thing that’s keeping us from the supreme goal of perfect contentment is our own discontentment with ourselves and with reality as it is – a discontentment fueled by unrealistic idealism and unrealizable expectations.

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I explore the subject of nonidealism at greater length in the concluding chapter (“Good Enough to Be Perfect”) of my book, *A Spiritual Renegade’s Guide to the Good Life*. To order your copy, click here: <http://goo.gl/MIINq>