

The Qualities of Spiritual Maturity, Part 4: Immediacy

Quality #4: Immediacy

The spiritual life begins when we turn away from putting all our hopes for happiness in worldly things like money, things, job, relationships, and endless entertainment experiences. We really start our quest for true happiness when we figure out that what we're really looking for cannot be found in anything outside of ourselves. We come to realize that the work to be done is on ourselves: the taming of the habitual mental afflictions, disciplining the monkey mind, and struggling to overcome our wrong views and dysfunctional philosophies.

In these earlier years, as we persevere in the grand struggle to rehabilitate ourselves, we look forward to future when we will be different – more self-possessed, more aware, more compassionate and loving, and, of course, happier.

We work hard to become the kind of person we wish to be, not the kind of person we feel we are. Dissatisfied with our present life – with our personal relationships, with our job, with our currently level of financial security – we learn how to create the karma for improvements.

In this stage of our spiritual career, we have ideals, goals, and aspirations, and these motivate us to plug away tenaciously in order to make progress, little by little.

And if we keep at, we do make progress, even though the improvement seems to occur at a glacial pace, so slow and incremental that we often don't even notice it. As we cultivate ourselves in the hopes of attaining a better future, we may start to observe that our labors are beginning to pay off. We start waking up happier, more content with life as it is and less focused on what we imagine it could be in a time not yet come.

Slowly, slowly, we gradually begin to drop the futuristic orientation (“I'm working towards happiness”) and shift our concentration more on the present as the locus of our goals. The spiritually mature practitioner learns that if we are to reach our ultimate objective (“nirvana,” “enlightenment,” “awakening,” “liberation,” “true happiness,” or whatever you wish to label it), it will not be attained “there and then” but only here and now. If we are only looking forward, we can miss what is right in front of our eyes.

Instead of hoping for major spiritual breakthroughs – those pivotal, and rare, moments of transformative mystical experience – one settles into the more quotidian quest for recognizing the miracles that are always all around us, but usually go unnoticed. A spiritual veteran becomes altogether more and more “hopeless,” dropping anticipation and aspiration in favor of immediacy and acceptance.

Seekers must eventually stop seeking and start finding. As we mature into our practice, we may come to realize that what we've been seeking has been here all along.

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.

Finding contentment in the present is the subject of Chapter Nine (“Good Enough to Be Perfect”) of *A Spiritual Renegade's Guide to the Good Life*.