

The Qualities of Spiritual Maturity, Part 6: Questioning

Quality #6: Questioning

There's good doubt and there's bad doubt, a questioning that comes from maturity and strength and a questioning that is the habitual response of someone who just prefers to remain disengaged and alienated.

Bad doubt is "bad" insofar as it perpetually keeps us from any kind of commitment. We refuse to take a side; we avoid having to be pinned down or make a stand, one way or the other. It's what we might call "lazy doubt," where questioning occurs in the context of an unwillingness to really make decisions on how to answer the big questions of life and instead poses as a kind of noncommittal smugness.

In certain circles nowadays, doubt in the form of cynicism masquerades as a kind of hip aloofness, where everything is just potentially the butt of a joke. We see this in much of modern comedy – the cooler and hipper the comedian, the more jaundiced and sarcastic.

As contemporary Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche has observed, "Our society promotes cleverness instead of wisdom, and celebrates the most superficial, harsh, and least useful aspects of our intelligence. We have become so falsely 'sophisticated' and neurotic that we take doubt itself for truth, and the doubt that is nothing more than ego's desperate attempt to defend itself from wisdom is deified as the goal and fruit of true knowledge."

This kind of "hip doubt" paralyzes and depresses. It is only when we overcome it that it's possible to make the commitment to a spiritual path.

And so, if we are desperate and beaten down enough by our struggle through life without any guidance or moorings, we surrender enough of our egoistic pride to begin a spiritual discipline. We connect to a tradition and find a teacher. We suspend our cynicism enough to devote ourselves to a structured method we believe will result in a life of less suffering and more happiness. We replace bad doubt and unceasing suspicion with faith, for faith is necessary if there is to be any real effort.

Having overcome the "bad doubt" and replaced it with confidence and trust in our chosen spiritual path, we try to adhere to the advice our mentors and guides provide. We learn the rules of how to live a good life and do our best to bend our will in a direction we have decided will have beneficial results.

But a mature practitioner also fully realizes the dangers of relinquishing his or her personal responsibility and autonomy. Faith in one's path and in one's teacher should never be "blind faith," and as one goes deeper into any spiritual practice a healthy kind of questioning, a "good doubt," is crucial to prevent another form of

“lazy doubt”: a complacent, closed-minded, fundamentalism that precludes learning and growth.

The spiritual life should be infused with a grown-up sense of responsibility for oneself, not an infantilized reliance on others. It should give us confidence to think for ourselves, and not to mindlessly agree with whatever others might tell us. Questioning in this context is in the service of a healthy independence that precludes unthinking conformity.

Ultimately, a mature spiritual practitioner honors his or her teachers not by remaining forever in the nest but by sprouting wings and learning to fly on their own. When one has learned the criteria for what to give up and what to take up, it’s the individual’s responsibility to apply those criteria to the constantly evolving challenges of his or her personal life.

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.

There’s a section entitled “Doubt and Faith” in Chapter Seven of *A Spiritual Renegade’s Guide to the Good Life* that goes into more detail on the subject of addressed in this posting.