

## The Qualities of Spiritual Maturity, Part 7: Flexibility

### Quality #7: Flexibility

In an age of relativism, it can be very hard to commit to one path, one kind of practice, one set of truths. We are all aware that the spiritual marketplace has many alternatives on offer. With so many choices we can get confused or, at best, believe that maybe it will suffice to just cobble together a personalized, idiosyncratic belief system using bits and pieces from the traditional systems.

Adopting a spiritual practice is like buying a car, and there are plenty of different cars available on the lot. Each one of the authentic spiritual traditions – the Toyota, the Chevrolet, the Saab, the Volkswagen – runs fine, constructed as it is with compatible pieces that integrated easily with one another. But if we try to engineer an amalgamation with some parts taken from the Honda, some from the Ford, and some from the BMW, the result will be a car that will not run properly.

So it is crucial, if there is to be real progress, to make your choice and put your roots down into one well-crafted system. And nowadays a spiritual shopper should probably take his or her time about making such a decision and do some exploring around to see what's out there. But that period of investigation and window-shopping can easily be drawn out indefinitely, in which case one never even begins the hard work of trying to conform one's behavior and thought to a systematic procedure of retraining.

A deep and serious spiritual practice requires an act of commitment, and the resolution to stick with a particular path even when – *especially* when – it gets hard. The temptation to bail will be great when things become tough and doubts arise, and without that commitment and dedication the practitioner will never have the opportunity for the big breakthrough that is the reward of persistence through adversity.

Having made the commitment to a particular path and having disciplined oneself to persevere through all the twists and turns in that path, in the course of time a mature spiritual practitioner moves into a different phase, one marked by more flexibility and suppleness. Having learned one system well, one can from that vantage point appreciate the beauty in other traditions in a way that would have been impossible without the first phase.

Because we have spent years drilling deep down into the intricacies of one method, we are able to gain a much more genuine respect for other religions and spiritual paths. We come to truly admire the integrity of other systems because we have seen the profundity of our own. And we begin to fully realize how there are many authentic spiritual paths, each one following its own course, but all of them leading to the same goal.

This sophisticated recognition and valuing of alternatives then begins to reverberate back on our own practice. Our understanding of our own spiritual path becomes less inflexible and strictly disciplined and more open to different possibilities. We begin to feel confident enough to think about applying methods and practices from other traditions when it seems appropriate, advantageous, and complementary. If we are steeped in Tibetan Buddhism, for example, we may wish at this stage to incorporate meditational techniques we learn from a Zen or Vipassana master. If we have learned well the Christian path, we may find it useful to adopt techniques for generating religious ecstasy from the Sufis or Hare Krishnas.

Most importantly, we relax any kind of judgmental fundamentalism we may have acquired about our own chosen path. From the standpoint of the strength that comes from commitment and discipline, we gain tolerance and appreciate of different spiritual options and a more relativistic and adaptable attitude about our own.

Utility rather than fidelity becomes the principal criterion. What would work best here, what would be most skilful in this situation or context or stage in my spiritual development? We move from strict adherence to a single programmatic system and evolve a more creative attitude about our spirituality, one that begins to sense the freedom and joy that is the fruit of years of disciplined practice.

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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.

For a set of daily practices that would be applicable no matter which of the authentic spiritual traditions you find yourself attracted to, see the Appendix of *A Spiritual Renegade’s Guide to the Good Life*.