

The Qualities of Spiritual Maturity, Part 8: Embracing Opposites

Quality #8: Embracing Opposites

We take ourselves to a spiritual path because we realize that we are in need of direction. We have become weary of feeling lost and confused and are (finally!) interested in some clear instruction on how to live the good life. We come to conclusion that, left to our own devices, we will repeatedly mess things up, as we have so many times before.

We all are at the beginning very much like Arjuna in the great Hindu classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*, who has hit the wall and begs his teacher, Krishna, to instruct him:

My limbs sink in despair and my mouth is parched. My body is trembling and my hair stands on end. The magic bow slips from my hand and my skin burns. I am unable to stand still; my mind reels. Everything seems like it's been turned on its head, Krishna.

I am afflicted to my core by the flaw of deep depression; my mind is totally confused about what is the right thing to do. I beg you to tell me clearly what is best. I am your student; please teach me. I surrender myself to you. (1.30-31; 2.7)

And so it begins. We look for a systematic set of instructions and a teacher who can teach the rules to us, and then we do our best to conform our behavior and thinking to those rules. We surrender ourselves to our discipline and practice, relieved to find a structured code that will help us navigate through life.

After living so long with ambiguity and confusion, the spiritual life feels safe and grounded. Finally we have some real guidance, some clear direction and fixed points of reference. And because one feels so protected and secure, some practitioners never move beyond this stage. They hold onto the security of certainty as if it were a fortress that would safeguard them from the chaos outside. Things are black and white, absolutely right or absolutely wrong. Gray areas are intolerable, reminiscent of the anarchy and uncertainty they believe they have escaped through embracing the spiritual life.

But for other practitioners, such absolutism about their understanding of the world and the people in it begins to soften over time. They begin to feel truly secure enough in their spirituality to bravely open themselves up to ambiguity and ambivalence, even to paradox and contradiction.

As Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman has remarked, a mature spiritual practitioner needs to develop a high tolerance for cognitive dissonance. Things and beings are complex, and the deeper one penetrates beyond and outside of our zones of comfortable fundamentalism, the more one finds only fluidity and ambivalence, groundlessness and instability, paradox and conundrum.

We learn to embrace opposites rather than grasp to self-righteous certitudes.

A truly mature spiritual practitioner comes to recognize, for example, that no one (themselves very much included) is absolutely good or bad, right or wrong; that everyone, without exception, makes mistakes and is in need of forgiveness, and that everyone also has good qualities that can be celebrated and emulated.

A simplistic view of people – as either flawless paragons or defective subordinates – gives way to a more nuanced and accurate evaluation of oneself, one's friends and colleagues, one's teachers and exemplars, and one's enemies. Dropping both the idealizations and demonizations we perhaps once traded in, we accept ourselves and all other human beings for who we all really are: fallible creatures capable of both angelic goodness and devilish nastiness.

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.

I explore some of the paradoxes in the spiritual life – the need to both relax and work hard, to both renounce and cultivate desire, to be content but not complacent – in Chapter 9 of *A Spiritual Renegade's Guide to the Good Life*.