

The Qualities of Spiritual Maturity, Part 9: Relationship

Quality #9: Relationship

A balanced spiritual life oscillates between solitude and interaction with others – between isolation and association, renunciation and engagement. While both of these poles are crucial to one’s practice, one or the other will become more prominent at different stages of one’s journey.

Most, if not all, spiritual traditions have emphasized the importance of renunciation and a certain withdrawal from the world. This disengagement from what once had been an all-consuming enterprise – pursuing a career, accumulating wealth and things, interacting within a network of interpersonal relationships, indulging in a variety of hobbies and pastimes – is necessary if there is to be space in one’s life for giving the spiritual quest the time and attention it deserves.

A serious spiritual life is inaugurated when one makes the decision to prioritize the spiritual over the worldly. One must, as Jesus said, make a choice between God and “mammon” – the divinization of money making, status seeking, and egocentrism.

“Renunciation” for most of us does not mean joining a monastery, moving into a cave, or even retiring to a cabin in northern Canada (although occasional short retreats at a comfortable retreat center might well be inserted into one’s lifestyle). But it does entail a reorganization of one’s priorities. We begin to privilege and make time for regular meditation, study, and self-examination and discipline – activities done in solitude as we enter into hand-to-hand combat with our own mind. While in this phase we might also join a community of like-minded aspirants, attend public teachings or services, and develop close relationships with a group of spiritual friends, the crucial work of reorientation and development of new habits of body, speech, and mind is initially done primarily on one’s own.

We start and cultivate a practice. But we also try to put our practice into practice. We begin to integrate more and more of what we have learned, studied, and meditated on in our solitude into the world of relationships – at the workplace, in the home, with our friends, and especially with those “challenging” people in our lives. The needle moves more toward the center of the spectrum between isolation and engagement. We make spiritual forays back into the world, but since our preparation is still a work in progress we also regularly retreat back into safety of our sequestered spiritual training ground.

Spiritual isolation – of either the individual or the closed group – can lead to spiritual pride and sense of superiority over others. A spiritually mature practitioner realizes that the purpose of the religious life is not become better THAN others, but to become better FOR them.

And so, as time moves on, it begins to dawn on us that the real point of our practice is to ready ourselves for full-time re-incorporation into the world of relationships – and not as a savior but as a servant.

Practice is practice for show-time, and eventually the spiritual practitioner must fly out of the nest and fully re-engage with society – with parents, children, partner, and relatives; with the boss, peers, and subordinates; with friends and enemies. Periods of retreat, formal or informal, become less necessary as the world itself becomes our meditation room, our yoga studio, our retreat cabin, our temple, our sacred place and time.

Jack Kornfield writes, “Mature spirituality is an acceptance of life in relationship. . . . Spiritual maturity honors our human community and interconnectedness.” No man or woman is an island; we exist interdependently. We come to be conscious of the other people in our world not for what they can do for us, and not for what they might do to us, but for what we can do for them.

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.

The question of what “renunciation” really means is addressed in a section entitled “Suffering and Its Causes: Looking for Happiness in All the Wrong Places,” which forms a part of Chapter Six of *A Spiritual Renegade’s Guide to the Good Life*.