

The Importance of Being Earnest

An essential quality of spirituality is earnestness. This is being honest with ourselves about what we know and what we don't know. It is also our willingness to see what needs to be seen and to follow that thread wherever it may lead.

What a teacher can do is point to the door, but you have to walk through it yourself. No one else can do that for you. The greatest guru in the world can't sprinkle magic dust and awaken you. They *can* make you feel good and perhaps give you an energetic high, but in terms of true awakening, it is *you* who must take responsibility to walk that path yourself. Your own integrity is indispensable.

This is your own unique journey. Your journey won't look like anyone else's. There may certainly be value in reading about the spiritual journeys of others, but it's important to realize that your journey will be different than theirs. In terms of how you get there, how awakening initially appears, and how life after awakening unfolds, your journey will be unique.

It is necessary to have the attitude: "I am willing to commit myself wholeheartedly to this path wherever it may take me. When the time comes, I will choose to look at those scary places within myself that I haven't been previously willing to look." This degree of integrity and personal responsibility is essential.

Taking personal responsibility on the spiritual path doesn't mean that we abdicate our interaction with Life; it's actually engaging fully with Life and learning from Life. To do this, a useful perspective is to see that whatever happens is actually happening for our own benefit. This is equally true for both pleasant and challenging situations. Pleasant situations are easy: we can feel grateful. When challenging situations arise, it is still possible to have an attitude of: "Okay, Life is giving me this challenge right now. I have the opportunity to learn something about myself and about Life in this moment. Rather than trying to make the challenging situation disappear in order to feel better, I will remain present and allow it to unfold." This attitude has real power and will greatly accelerate your journey.

Being present for every situation doesn't mean that we don't take appropriate action. For example, if we're in a relationship that's just not working month after month, year after year, then there's a time to walk away. We can be grateful for what's been learned, and yet it may still be time to move on. Sustained suffering is not usually beneficial, unless, of course, you have no other choice.

Our ability to feel our way through the darkness comes down to personal integrity, a willingness to see what's arising. We may not have a choice about what's arising within us or what happens to us, but we always have a choice about how we respond. This is taking responsibility for our own emotional state.

By looking at what happens in our lives from this perspective, we come to see very deeply how we function and react to our interactions with others. We have the opportunity to notice the areas where we still might have some shadow work to do. On the spiritual journey it is valuable to see where we get caught and fall out of alignment with Life. It's only our integrity, earnestness, and

self-responsibility that provide us with the compass and the clarity to move through Life's inevitable challenges.

One of potential obstacles with this degree of self-reliance is that we may tend to disregard our interactions with others and become insulated from the world. But it is exactly our interactions with others that points out where we still may have blind spots. When we react to others, it is time to look within. We can recognize that our own happiness and peace is not dependent on outside circumstances, or what other people do. It's totally an inside job.

If someone says something that we find offensive, we can't change what was said, but we can choose how we respond. We might notice that the challenging input is coming from the other person's conditioning and be present enough to choose whether to get hooked into a mind-based dialogue or not. It is a freedom to find out that we do have the choice to be present for whatever comes our way, without blindly participating in it at the same level. This doesn't mean dissociating from others. It really means that we can stay present and compassionate regardless.

One of the ways that we can have a sense of connection and compassion with and towards another person is to recognize that we ourselves have often said something or acted in a certain way out of our own conditioning. If we can see and accept that in ourselves, we can also see that it may be present at a particular moment in another person.

Compassion is more than something we try really hard to do in order to be more "spiritual." It is really a recognition and acceptance of how we all were molded by life before we knew what was happening. We are not responsible for our conditioning, but we are responsible for seeing our way through it. Doing so is a benefit to ourselves and others.

Conditioning includes both genetic conditioning and what was imposed by our environment, especially by our parents or lack thereof. When we realize that unskillful conditioning was absorbed in innocence when we were just trying to get by, whatever sense of blame, guilt or shame that we may hold about these behaviors tends to drop away. We are not denying that the conditioning exists. We can acknowledge its presence in our lives. It is acknowledgment coupled with non-judgmental observation that frees us.

Earnestness is absolutely essential to get us through such challenging work. It can feel a little like self-surgery. If we opt for just wanting the pain to go away, we will get lost in distractions and/or addictions of every sort. It is earnestness that holds us on course. We cannot find our way home without it.

When we react out of our past conditioning, we are coming from prior programming. Our actions are automatic and lack vitality. When the conditioning starts to drop away through our allowing it to be seen, we begin to notice that we are responding more creatively to situations and other people. There is more flow in our lives. There is less drama because we are not always getting caught in our reactivity. The energy that was imprisoned by our unskillful behavior is freed up to respond more appropriately to Life's challenges. We feel lighter.

The undoing of conditioning does not have to happen before awakening, but you will have to walk down that road eventually. It is our own innate sense of earnestness that keeps us moving towards our more complete expression of the Divine.

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