

Where Are We Going? The Fate and Failings of Contemporary Spirituality

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In the past forty years the West has been inundated by a tidal wave of spiritual information that is currently crashing through the pages of popular newspapers, television programs, and the trendiest mainstream magazines. Meditation classes are offered at the United Nations, Hillary Clinton uses visualizations and relaxation techniques, yoga is taught in many of the world's largest corporations, and the spiritual lives of celebrities such as Richard Gere, John Travolta, and Tom Cruise are served up as offerings to an audience of spiritually hungry hero worshippers and voracious curiosity-seekers. Not only has mainstream spirituality gained popularity, it has also become Big Business. The New Age is a multibillion-dollar industry, and some of the most popular contemporary spiritual teachers and gurus have become notably wealthy dealing in the commerce of Truth. Yet essential questions that are often taken for granted still remain: What is "spirituality" all about anyway? Is the human spirit really evolving? Is anything "new" actually happening in the development of spiritual culture in the West, or is our fascination with New Age seminars, yoga, and meditation nothing more than spiritual masturbation? How can we make use of both the opportunities as well as the chaos before us to serve humanity in a meaningful way?

As it is being sold by the media, spirituality can be anything from taking a yoga class at the local Nautilus to having an amateur astrology reading to learning how to walk on fire at a weekend workshop. New Ageists serenely urge us to accept our own personal, tailor-made path to comfort while calling it truth, and crown as "spiritual" anything that has the color purple in it, includes the word "meditation," or has ginseng on its list of ingredients. Zen rock gardens are sold in the Pittsburgh airport in the Discovery Channel store, and once sacred prayer *malas* can be bought for a quarter out of K-Mart gumball machines. If they were not so full of emptiness, the Zen masters of old would surely be turning over in their vats of cremated ash!

The fact is that, in addition to whatever else it may be, spirituality is also a fad. It is a popular item, a household term, a commodity that is bought and sold for millions, an identity, a club to belong to, an imagined escape. Its accompanying authorities serve as Mommy/Daddy figures, icons, imagined saviors, projected lovers, confidants, and guides to make our lives more pleasant and workable. The Dalai Lama is referred to as "cute," "peaceful," and everything short of a movie star, while movie stars such as Richard Gere and Steven Segal are revered as spiritual role models and even tulku.

Placing spiritual labels on every phenomenon and individual who is mildly exceptional does bring in greater revenue and increases the self-esteem, power, and status of individuals associated with the newest hip teacher or the hottest technique. Yet such labels are an immense disservice, both to the sincere but neophyte spiritual seeker, who often cannot discriminate between a genuine Tibetan tulku and a crystal healer, and to critical outsiders who watch intelligent men and women with strong egos get rich by co-opting weaker individuals' fantasies of angelic salvation. Whereas authentic spirituality far transcends these superficial categories, in a modern culture that lacks a substantial matrix for

discerning subtle differences in qualities of spiritual experience and leadership, it is often difficult to discern the worth of spiritual “merchandise” that is offered.

Devaluing the Language of Spirituality

One does not have to be a linguist to appreciate how the vocabulary of the sacred traditions has been cheapened. When the language of “enlightenment” or “awakening” has integrated itself into mainstream Western vocabulary, it is bound to lose the sacredness of its essential meaning. Popular spiritual culture not only assumes understanding of the language of enlightenment, liberation, or awakening, but also presumes agreement among its members regarding what is meant by these words that were once reserved only for the most priceless and subtle realizations possible to humankind. They are words that practitioners of the great traditions did not dare whisper, much less presume to understand without decades of concentrated study and practice. In a culture where “enlightenment” rolls off our lips as easily as “*café latte*,” we can surmise that the term has lost its value. Ultimately, whatever “enlightenment” points to never increases or decreases in value, but we can and do fail to appreciate the preciousness and the precariousness of those possibilities within human consciousness that remain the most sacred.

If only we could say honestly and without shame, “I engage spirituality as a hobby,” or “I want a spiritual practice that will give me some peace of mind but without any commitment or discipline,” or “I’d like to keep spirituality as my mistress, but maintain comfort and security as my spouse,” or “I want to be seen as a spiritual man or woman because that will make me more sexy.” If we could simply admit, “I’m a New Ager,” “I’m a fashionable Buddhist,” “I’m an imitation Hindu,” “I’m a wannabe guru,” or “I’m a bliss chick.” Or perhaps we could use more simple, straightforward delineations, such as “I’m a serious spiritual aspirant,” “I’m a seeker of moderate interest,” or “I’m a part-time, casual spiritual tourist.” Instead, our unconscious and automatic egoically-based tendency is to upgrade our ordinary activities into something of spiritual meaning and import. Yet by settling for counterfeits in this way, we take part in devaluing the price of spiritual diamonds, somehow content to parade around in amulets made of rhinestones. It is not that we consciously wish to invest in a fraudulent commodity, but rather that this quality of egoic identification tends to be a common outcome of trying to live a spiritually meaningful life in a Western, capitalist, psychologically wounded culture.

When we are unable to make clear distinctions about what we want and what we are willing to pay for it, which until now Western spiritual culture as a whole has largely failed to do, the end result is a confusing mixture of ancient terminology with contemporary roles, a devaluing of the function of the genuine spiritual master or guru, and an overall cheapening of contemporary spirituality. Making distinctions, even if the reality is unflattering to ego, allows us to recognize without shame where we are *right now*. We hardly need Ram Dass to remind us that “being here now” is the only possibility for authentic transformation.

The Quest for Mystical Experiences

Even in the face of overwhelming evidence that for the vast majority of people, psychedelics and weekend workshops do little, if anything, to create a circumstance of lasting transformation, we all still want to get high. We want the experience, and we somehow still believe it is going to mean something. Maybe now we are looking to Ayahuasca instead of LSD, or pseudo-tantra instead of free love, or Chinese herbs instead of valium, but by and large we still believe that if we hit just the right altered state, somehow we will stay there, or

we will have the ultimate revelation that will prompt us to permanently change all of our life-negative habits into those of a bodhisattva.

But even as I rant about the quest for a spiritual high, I acknowledge that there are many people who do gain tremendous benefit from mystical experiences, whether they originate from sex, drugs, meditation, yoga, or music. Mystical experiences do have their place in spiritual development, particularly in a culture that is skeptical of anything outside the borders of our conditioned cognitive capacity. Still, in most cases our spiritual triumphs fall into the category of “An Experience I Once Had.”

When mystical experiences become our obsession, and we run from workshop to teacher to fancy esoteric tradition looking for the next high, we have taken a great detour from the needs of our culture—a culture that is obsessed with boldness but devalues subtlety; that is infatuated with excess but scorns simplicity; that honors selfishness while mumbling about service. It is a culture in great need of those individuals who, in spite of all odds, yearn to re-enliven Western soil with the energy of Truth—individuals who are willing to live simply, make necessary sacrifices, and go against the coarse grain of spiritual materialism.

It is my belief—or my wishful thinking—that we are slowly arriving at a collective understanding that there are no shortcuts to spiritual maturation. Authentic spiritual development occurs through years of mental and physical discipline, ruthless self-honesty, and self-observation. It occurs by allowing oneself to be affected by both the suffering and the joy in life in such a way that genuine compassion for others finally begins to emerge.

The Myth of the New Age

Thank God—or Goddess, or Gaia, or whatever it is politically correct to call It these days—that we are putting to rest the myth of the New Age that we are an exclusive breed of humans singled out at this unique time for special attention and blessings. It is high time we got over the Western narcissism that prompts us to feel that we are somehow more special than all the other human beings that have existed on the planet for the past six billion years. When I’m at yet another seminar in which the group proclaims with innocent wonder what a “special and unique” configuration we are, I have to stifle my gag reflex.

There have always been prophets and prophecies, and everyone and everything once wounded in this or any other lifetime yearns to feel that he or she is somehow special and therefore especially loved. Social Psychology 101: Take a whole culture of human beings wounded by families, governments, and schools that were too out of touch with their hearts and bodies to give them real love and the result is an entire culture crying out to be special and exceptional and deathless. Enter the Age of Aquarius.

If we must focus on a distinction about the time that we are living in, perhaps it should be the capacity for self-destruction that has never before been so near or so probable. Ironically, it is precisely *because* things are so bad that there exists the possibility for a collective sense of urgency toward self-understanding to arise.

Many of us have come to appreciate the reality that we are motivated more by self-preservation than by service, by fear than by love. As the dangers of human extinction become increasingly real, and forces of greed, selfishness and lust for power pervade, there appears to be emerging a stronger collective desire to understand the insanity of our present predicament. In the world of Western spirituality, the overall movement toward transformation understandably appears to be most potent in those countries where suffering is strongest. Even if the desire for liberation originates from a wish to be relieved from suffering, the glory of the authentic spiritual path and practice is that it transforms even

neurotic motivations. If there is something to the New Age, I think it has to do with the increasing urgency we as a collective body have toward finding a better solution to our suffering than virtual relationships and Weight Watchers, plus some degree of freedom to pursue our search without being labeled as wicked witches and idealistic hippies (at least most of the time).

The Chop Wood, Carry Water Syndrome

There is a growing consensus in the Western world that we must engage a quality of spiritual life that consists of the stuff that ordinary life is made of. Cave dwelling for Westerners is not only impractical, but there is no way we are going to work through early bonding issues and sexual dysfunction while sitting in a cave in the Eastern hemisphere trying to transcend life. As Jack Kornfield and other spiritual leaders of our time have suggested, it is pointless to get caught in ecstasy if we can not do our laundry with dignity. And for most of us the latter is the greater task.

However, true to the Western psyche's laziness and desire for all things cheap, we have begun to co-opt modern adaptations of ancient teachings, such as "chop wood, carry water" which urges us to discover spiritual practice in ordinary life, as an excuse to indulge in any excess we please while not committing to a life of consistent spiritual discipline. Meanwhile, we convince ourselves that we are "practicing" every time we do the laundry, that we are doing tantra every time we have sex, and that we are engaging in "conscious parenting" each time we take our child to school or to a yoga class at the Y.

Although the great teachers of our time are encouraging their students to engage spiritual practice in the context of their daily lives—as they should—this does not mean that everything in ordinary life is particularly spiritual. Reading literature on mindfulness in the workplace does not assure us good karma just for showing up at the job. Spiritual discipline has to do with the mood and quality of attention and presence we bring to each activity, and oftentimes we are only capable of bringing such a focused attitude through the cultivation of internal discipline over many years. When we insist upon calling everything we do "spiritual" just because a popular teacher told us that God is in the small things, we have again fallen into the familiar trap of self-deception and spiritual lethargy.

To walk the middle road means we take our lives as they are and wholly embrace the events of our lives the circumstance of our spiritual practice. The middle road is not the easy road. For Westerners prone to living in extremes, it may be the most difficult path of all. The middle road is neither celibacy nor the sexualization of everyone and everything. It is neither a steady diet of hamburgers and Coke nor an austere macrobiotic or fruitarian regimen. It is neither workaholism at our dotcom nor fleeing the system because we "don't buy into it." Instead, it is treading the razor's edge of maintaining awareness and integrity in a culture that beckons us to escape into either a paradisiacal or hellish fantasy of reality, neither of which is true.

The Question of the Spiritual Teacher

The subject of the spiritual teacher or guru is both a land mine and a gold mine, and I will address it here only as a general overview.¹ Many people in the West continue to have a very immature understanding both of the function of the spiritual teacher or guru and of themselves as students or disciples. Having grown up in a culture in which most if not all of our role models—from parents to teachers to governments—have been predominately motivated by selfishness and ignorance, it is no wonder that we distrust our spiritual

authorities, and also that our spiritual authorities often end up untrustworthy in spite of the best of intentions.

In the past forty years we have swung the pendulum from blindly throwing our minds and bodies at the feet of Eastern gurus and Zen masters, to stubbornly insisting upon full autonomy from all traditional systems of spiritual authority as sources of necessary guidance. On the one extreme we have Asian men and women in robes and turbans and saris who are so entirely unfamiliar with Western psychology that they consciously or unconsciously take unpardonable advantage (financial, sexual, psychological, psychic) of our cultural weaknesses. We, as Westerners, in our desperate craving for love and acceptance and emancipation, and in our lack of precedence for appreciating the qualitative distinctions between genuine and fraudulent teachers, have often chosen ineffective authorities and then related to them through a series of psychological projections that draws out the worst in them. We then blame them for being the very thing we helped turn them into.

On the other extreme, we are so full of delusions about our own power, so stubborn in our insistence upon independence in all domains, and so mistrustful and fearful of being taken advantage of yet again by a projected mother or father figure, that we have all but rejected the value of spiritual authority in our lives. We publish books on the direct path to God with no intermediaries, or on the supremacy of the inner guru or inner self or inner child, and reassure ourselves that we can find our way to the heart of the universe without any form of external human help. The likelihood of our success is about equal to that of a secretary on Wall Street dressed in high heels and a mini-skirt scaling Mount Everest without a guide. It could happen, but it is far more likely that she would get killed in a landslide and nobody would ever hear of her again, or that she would hike back down to the bottom after the first half-mile, complaining that all the available guides were too patriarchal and physically or emotionally abusive and that she was more suited to cross-country skiing anyway.

Many of us need a teacher and yet do not know how to choose one, or even how to relate to a teacher in a mature manner once in relationship we have found him or her. One approach to this predicament has been to establish a rigid code of morals and ethics for spiritual teachers. If the domain of mastery of the soul operated according to ordinary and linear learning, this would not be such a bad idea. However, when we insist that those individuals empowered to instruct us in the mysteries of the universe operate according to a conventional perception of morality, we put them in handcuffs and limit the movement of their teaching and our own learning.

The more ideal approach, I believe, is to find our way into maturity as students and disciples. To ripen in our own self-knowledge and basic psychological sanity so that we turn to teachers for the right reasons. To be realistic in our expectations and begin to see how our own weaknesses as students play a significant role in creating the difficulties we encounter in relationship with our teachers. Then we can appreciate our teachers for the help they provide in forging depth in our souls and clarity in our perspectives without feeling victimized every time they do not appease our psychological needs.

The Destiny of Spiritual Literature

If I may indulge my rant a bit further, I will say that the world of spiritual literature is going to hell: magazines, books, all of it. It is not that first-rate spiritual literature is not written. It is written daily and with tremendous fervor and integrity. It is just that once again it has a hard time competing with the flashier counterfeit options. When it gets published it often does not get into mainstream bookstores, when it gets into the bookstores it rarely gets

placed “face out,” and when it does not get placed face out it does not sell. The authors are rarely interested in self-promotion, and the publishers can not afford to publicize books that speak to a reality that is hard to bear. Feel-good literature is simply more popular.

I once wrote a letter to the editor of one of the glossiest New Age magazines in the Western world suggesting they had blatantly compromised the integrity of their purpose in capitulation to the modern market of spiritual ignorance. I went into gory detail. The editor of the magazine personally called me up to tell me it was the most substantial letter they had received in years, but . . . The “but” was that “the board” (meaning the people whose income depended upon the marketability of their product) would not print it. She apologized on behalf of her conscience. Then it happened with another spiritual magazine, whose editor told me my writing was too provocative, and then another. Somewhere along the line, it seems that martial law was declared on all spiritual publishing that does not bolster the ego and make the reader feel mushy inside.

We cannot overlook the fact that the best-selling spiritual books are either fundamentalist Christian literature or the products of master marketers such as James Redfield or Jack Canfield and Deepak Chopra—people who genuinely desire to provide products of value but who are also self-admittedly ambitious and successful businessmen. Writers with the most power or the strongest desire for fame and fortune win. That is how the game works. After years of attending both the New Age Book Fair and BookExpo America (BEA)—one of the largest book conventions in the world—and asking publishers what they look for in spiritual books, my balloon of hopefulness has been successfully deflated. Once in a while books like Pema Chodron’s *When Things Fall Apart* slip through the cracks and become a bestseller. But overall the trend is for short books, fewer words on the page, tidbits of wisdom that promise a happily-ever-after ending. “People just don’t want to go that deep anymore,” I was told by the editor of one of the most prominent publishers in the country. “And of all things,” publishers and editors add, “please don’t mention the word ‘guru.’ It frightens people.” My next book will not be popular.

Have We Gotten Anywhere?

I think we are finally at the point where we realize that much of what we have been doing has not worked. Many of those who set out in the sixties wholeheartedly in search of enlightenment, renunciation, and everlasting bliss have now been through at least a decade of therapy, struggled with the humbling hazards of parenting and marriage (and oftentimes divorce), and have hopefully become a bit wiser. Workshop junkies who learned to transcend their mind and separate from their neuroses for a weekend at a time now see, after twenty years, that although maybe some brand of enlightenment can be bought for a \$350 weekend, it will not last. This despair is a good thing.

The path of disillusionment is one of the most potent and instructive roads we can follow. It is the path of compassion through humility. Ram Dass said that when we really understand that suffering is grace, we think we are cheating. The great Persian mystic Hafiz wrote that suffering and despair ferment the soul like few human or divine ingredients can. Only when we finally admit to our own failure—to our own hopelessness, in the language of the Buddhists—does any significant possibility for something new and real emerge.

When we allow ourselves to become deeply disillusioned by our spiritual progress (or lack of it) while somehow not sacrificing our passion for God or Truth or Life, then perhaps we are getting somewhere. The Sanskrit scriptures offer the teachings of *neti, neti*. Not this, not this. We peel off layer after layer of the unreal and keep going deeper. If we are willing to

be ruthless enough with ourselves to begin to see that which we have refused to see; to recognize still another lie in the story we have created out of our lives; to bear witness to the deceitful nature of ego while making a stand for our basic goodness, we will have the fortitude to die with dignity to the unreal and allow the real to be revealed. This is an extraordinary possibility of human evolution.

What's Next?

Although I may sound cynical about the world of contemporary spirituality, I am unabashedly passionate about the possibility for we as a culture to grow out of our spiritual childishness and adolescence and flourish into the maturity of spiritual adulthood. If we as spiritual seekers and practitioners create a strong enough caricature of ourselves in the spiritual Disneyland of our creation, at some point we are going to break out laughing and begin to place ourselves in a rightful proportion that respects both our warts and our beauty.

The universe offers a gold mine of inner and outer resources if we are willing to learn how to mine them. We are truly fortunate to live in the Western world at a time in which we can say what we please and what we know and what we want to find out without literally getting burned at the stake; when some of the most notable teachers are just an airplane ticket away—if not simply a click on the Internet away; when we have access to scriptures that were previously locked up in pyramids and temples and available only to those who had sacrificed all luxuries in exchange for one morsel of the teachings. Now it is all literally available to us at our fingertips, and we are simply left with the question of whether or not we can find the courage, strength, and intelligence to make use of a situation that is as precious as it is precarious. No one with conscience can reassure us that it will all work out fine. If they do they are lying. The fate of contemporary Western spirituality is fully at the mercy of our own integrity and our own responsibility, both in each moment and in the seeds we plant through the integrity and intelligence, or lack thereof, of our participation in this process.

Regardless of where each of us dwells on this spectrum of spiritual pomp and possibility, it is true both that we are doing the best we can and that we have a long way to go. It is a truly endless highway—particularly if we consider that spiritual culture in the West is still at its beginnings. So while the New Age mountain bikers careen their way through the glitz and glamour of hip spiritual trends, many of us lag behind in the dust of their wake wondering where, if anywhere, this all leads.

ⁱ For further elucidation on the topic, see: Mariana Caplan, “Questioning Authority,” *Parabola* (fall 2000), pp. 100-104; and my forthcoming *Guru in the West: Authority and Discipleship in the 21st Century*, Thorsons, 2002.