

The Spiritual Path:

“How am I doing on my spiritual path?”

The path to union with God

This focuses mainly on quotations from the seventh and final ‘dwelling place’ in Teresa of Avila’s Interior Castle masterpiece. Teresa saw this dwelling place as the final stage of the human spiritual path on earth. In this dwelling place the soul is completely absorbed into God. She calls this state ‘the spiritual marriage’: “The spiritual marriage ... is like rain falling from the sky into a river or pool” ¹... “all boundaries between the soul and God melt.” ² Humans can only maintain this level of union for a limited amount of time: “This union, I believe is very short. I don’t think that it ever lasts longer than a half hour.” ³ ... “The soul who achieves union with God ... must return to the everyday world to be of service to other souls on the path.” ⁴

Also, a person in the everyday world needs to spend time living in the now: “When praying, pray. When eating partridge, eat partridge.” ⁵ Teresa emphasizes that union with God needs to manifest increasingly in our daily lives: “If you are not loving your neighbor, you have not attained union.” ⁶ “You must remember not to build on prayer and contemplation alone. Unless you strive to live the virtues, you will never grow beyond the stature of spiritual dwarves.” ⁷

Union with God requires actively surrendering to God: “Do you know what it means to be truly spiritual? It means becoming a slave of God ... until we surrender to this divine slavery, we cannot expect to make much progress.” ⁸

Contributions from other authors are also relevant here. Meditation and prayer are significant aids in developing absorption into God: “The purpose of meditation is not to be able to concentrate on God but rather to be absorbed into God. As a sponge absorbs water, so our mind should be absorbed ... into God's presence. No hard work is required for this to happen, only the gentle discipline of bringing attention back again” ⁹ when it has wandered. This clearly refers to practices like Centering Prayer.

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The True Spiritual Path requires Transformation

Without transformation, the later stages of the spiritual path are beyond ordinary humans. For example, without transformation no ordinary person can realistically hope to come close to the level of union with God implied by the great commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30/Deuteronomy 6:5). Necessary transformation and absorption may take many forms: “Still your mind in me, still your intellect in me, and without doubt you will be united with me forever. If you cannot still your mind in me, learn to do so through the regular practice of meditation. If you lack the will for self-discipline, engage yourself in my work, for selfless service can lead you at last to complete fulfillment. If you are unable to do even this, surrender yourself to me, disciplining yourself and renouncing the results of all your actions.”¹¹

For most people, transformation and a high level of absorption involve becoming a wholehearted follower of religious leaders such as Jesus and the Buddha. As Richard Rohr points out, whole-hearted following is needed for the necessary transformation: “It takes great inner freedom to be a follower of Jesus. His life is an option, a choice, a call, a vocation for us, and we are totally free to say yes or no or maybe. We do not have to do this to make God love us. That is already taken care of. We do it to love God back and to love what God loves and how God loves! We either are baptized ‘into his death’ and ‘resurrection’ (Romans 6:3; Philippians 3:10–12), or Christianity is largely a mere belonging system, not a transformational system that will change the world.”¹²

To love what God loves and how God loves includes service to others, the world, and all of creation. This involves not only going beyond the separated self but also making good use of that self while we still have it: “One very important component of the struggle to develop oneself spiritually is service – service to humanity but also service to the world, to all of creation. One of the great tools to do that is the personality structure, including the ego, the sense of self.

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Paradoxically, you need to use that self well. It is the beast on which the Buddha rides.”¹³ Of course, we should also strive to live as impeccably as we can: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." — Micah 6:8

The path is human as well as Spiritual

We still think of ourselves as mere humans trying desperately to become ‘spiritual’, when the Christian revelation was precisely that you are already spiritual (‘in God’), and your difficult but necessary task is to learn how to become human ...

We seem to have spawned centuries of people trying to be spiritual and religious, whereas our record of basic humanness is rather pitiful.¹⁴ While this appears to suggest some degree of separation between the human and spiritual sides of the path, the two sides are in fact, intertwined: “Know thyself and you shall know thy Lord.”¹⁵

Knowing ourselves, including the dark side of our nature

Teresa of Avila places great emphasis on knowing ourselves at all stages of the path: “The room of self-knowledge! How necessary this room is ... even for those whom the Lord has brought into the very dwelling place where He resides. For never, however exalted the soul may be, is anything else more fitting than self-knowledge.”¹⁶ Knowing our dark sides is especially important: “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”¹⁷ “Souls are sent back into the physical world ... for one primary reason: they have a mission to complete ... that assignment is personal tikkun”¹⁸ [Tikkun is Hebrew for repair, fixing, improvement]. “When we try to live up to the impossible image of a spiritually enlightened, knowledgeable, selfless, patient, forgiving, easy-going, supportive, generous superhuman, the dark side of our nature just gains in power.”¹⁹

Pain and Despair on the Spiritual Path

Pain can be a necessary and positive part of the spiritual path: “There is a flowering that can only occur through pain. This is the flowering of the heart.”

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“The soul who will enter the seventh dwelling must be purified by suffering” ²¹
Despair, darkness, failure, relapse, death, and woundedness can similarly be necessary and positive: “Each of our cries reached our Beloved, our prayers were heard, but love had to wait until we were desperate enough. As a friend was told in a dream, ‘You must reach the point of total despair.’ Because only then does the cry of the lover come from the very depths of the soul. Then the grip of the ego is shattered by the need of the heart.” ²² “The path of descent is the path of transformation. Darkness, failure, relapse, death, and woundedness are our primary teachers, rather than ideas or doctrines.” ²³

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¹The Interior Castle; A New Translation and Introduction by Mirabai Starr. Riverhead Books, 2003, p. 270.

² Ibid., p. 26. Ibid.,

³p. 129. Ibid.,

⁴p. 27. Ibid., ⁵p. 12.

⁶ Ibid.,

⁷p. 143.

⁸Ibid., p. 290.

⁹Ibid., p. 289. Edward Hays. Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim, Forest of Peace, 2008, pp. 266-267.

¹⁰ Eckhart Tolle. The Power of Now, New World Library, 1999, p. 187.

¹¹ Bhagavad Gita, trans. Eknath Easwaran. Nilgiri Press, 2007, 2nd ed. Chapter

¹² (The Way of Love), verses 8-11, p. 208

¹³ Dr. Robert Frager. "The Beast on which the Buddha Rides" in What is Enlightenment? Issue

¹⁴ Richard Rohr. The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See. Crossroad, 2009, p. 69

¹⁵ Hadith (i.e. tradition) often cited in Islamic mysticism, Sufism, and broader philosophical traditions. It suggests that by deeply examining one's inner soul, ego, and consciousness, one can ultimately recognize the divine presence.

¹⁶ Teresa of Avila. The Interior Castle. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Paulist Press, 1979, The First Dwelling Places, Chapter 2, Section 8, p. 42. ¹⁷ C.G. Jung. Collected Works, Vol. 13, para. 335. ¹⁸ Sapientia Mundi Press. The Wisdom of Isaac Luria. Kindle edition 2025, Kindle location 578.

¹⁷, Spring/Summer 2000, p. 91. Frager is a Sufi Sheikh, professor of psychology, and founding president of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, now called Sofia University, in Palo Alto in California.

¹⁹ Toko-pa Turner. Belonging: Remembering Ourselves Home. Her Own Room Press: 2017, p. 127. ²⁰ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee. Catching the Thread: Sufism, Dreamwork & Jungian Psychology. The Golden Sufi Center, 1998, p. 90. ²¹ Teresa of Avila. The Interior Castle; A New Translation and Introduction by Mirabai Starr, op. cit., p. 252. ²² Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee. Prayer of the Heart in Christian and Sufi Mysticism. The Golden Sufi Center 2012, pp. 21 -- 22. ²³ Richard Rohr. Job and the Mystery of Suffering, Crossroad, 1996, p. 25 4