

AN INTRODUCTION TO A SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO LIFE

Some thoughts on approaching life from a spiritual perspective An example of how this translates into romantic relationships

Sometimes life throws you a curveball. Or more accurately, life consistently throws us curveballs! Plans become derailed, relationships fall apart, careers end, friendships go through rough patches and our health goes through ups and downs.

Perhaps we have moments where we doubt our sanity and wonder why things aren't working out the way we want or planned. We may question what else we are supposed to do to be happy – or continue on just striving and striving wondering if we are going to ever really be fulfilled and content with our lot in life.

Or perhaps our plans do proceed as desired, yet somehow fail to deliver the real result we were seeking – a feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction. We may feel satisfied that we have accomplished something that we set out to do. That is certainly worth celebrating.

Yet a nagging feeling that all isn't as it could be may still persist. Deep within we may wonder if we are heading on the right track, if this is all there is meant to be, if there are perhaps some answers to our difficulties, or some sense of meaning to life, that has as yet eluded us.

Perhaps we are so busy making the next set of plans that we avoid dealing with the mess of life for a time. But eventually, just like the clothes in the laundry basket piling up, the mess has to be sorted through.

Usually dealing with life's mess is considered an unappealing task (unless you are procrastinating, in which case, all sorts of tasks like cleaning the bathroom and reviewing our life can become inexplicably appealing in that moment).

From a spiritual perspective, however, dealing with a messy situation in our lives is a very exciting opportunity.

Instead of judging the mess as a bad thing (such as an indication of how lazy, incompetent, stupid or generally inferior we supposedly are for being human and having made a mistake), a spiritual response to a big mess (or life crisis or seemingly unresolvable problem) is different.

Spiritually, when confronted with a big life challenge, or even a little one, we are encouraged instead to think in terms of an opportunity to clean up, clear out and start again in a different way. In one word, we think of *growth*.

Change for the sake of it can be interesting, but not necessarily growth inducing. Growth from a spiritual perspective is about much more than change. It is about transformation that leads to a new level of being – a new sense of ourselves, a new experience of our place in the world, a new life.

Transformation is the result of spiritual growth. Just like the child grows into an adult physically, and hopefully at some point emotionally and psychologically, our growth leads us to a new manifestation of ourselves. Transformation is about growing into a more authentic version of yourself.

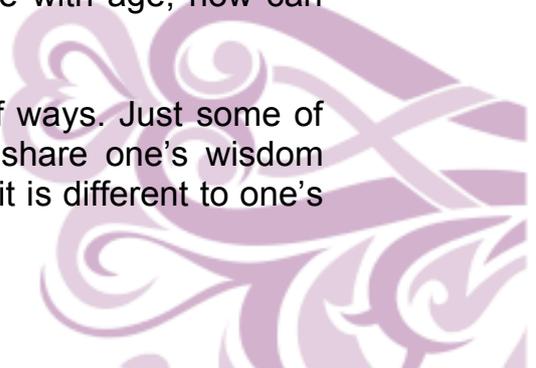
Let us get one thing straight from the get go – spiritual maturity and age, position of authority or leadership, even the mantle of guru or teacher – do not necessarily go hand in hand. Some children are incredibly spiritually mature and some adults are more like children in adult bodies.

As those spiritually mature children grow, they will learn a lot through growing into an adult in the physical, emotional and psychological sense and be able to share their spiritual wisdom in greater ways because of that growth.

As the adult who is more like a child spiritually (and possibly emotionally and psychologically) grows, he or she will also be more able to share his or her uniqueness with the world and we will all benefit from that – as will the individual in question (because it can feel really good to be who we are and share it with others).

So if spiritual maturity doesn't necessarily correlate with age, how can we spot it?

Spiritual maturity will be evidenced in a number of ways. Just some of hallmarks of spiritual maturity are being able to share one's wisdom whilst accepting the wisdom of others especially if it is different to one's



own, the ability to laugh at oneself without ridiculing oneself, and the willingness to grow (we all have the capacity for growth, but some of us are just so stubborn and unwilling - but if I could get past that personality characteristic, then I bet anyone can!).

Spiritual maturity is also evidenced by a willingness to let life direct one's course without surrendering a sense of personal responsibility and initiative (for example, life can send all sorts of people and experiences to me, and I cannot control who I will meet or when, although I am responsible for how to I choose to respond to the people and experiences that come my way).

This is rarely easy – we tend to want to control things and situations and decide when and how we want our experiences delivered to us (or is that just me?). With spiritual maturity however, we learn to trust in life and go with the flow, whilst taking action and doing the best we can with where we find ourselves in life.

The process of spiritual maturation, or growth rather than mere change, offers us a healed version of ourselves and our lives. Spiritual perspective suggests that whatever behaviours, beliefs about ourselves and our lives that led us to create the big mess in the first place can be transformed into new, more empowering and satisfying behaviours, beliefs and actions. We aren't just trying to spray paint our current car into a different colour, we are looking for a whole new car!

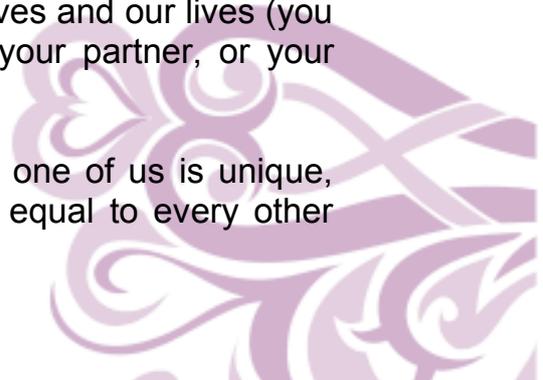
We just need to know how to get our spiritual growth process started.

Fortunately spiritual growth is natural (if not always effortless) when you remember some of the basic spiritual principles.

Some basic principles of spirituality are choice (no matter what you may think, you always have at least one alternative available – we often mistake the experience of not having alternatives that we *like* as meaning that we don't have any choices but that isn't true), freedom within ourselves (even if we don't always feel free outside of ourselves such as if we were to feel shackled to a job or relationship that we experience as stifling we are always free (there is one principle) to choose (there is another) how we respond).

Another principle is that of responsibility for ourselves and our lives (you are responsible for yourself and your life – not your partner, or your employees or employer or even a higher power).

The other key principle of spirituality is that each one of us is unique, simultaneously divine and human, and spiritually equal to every other



human being (yes – even a guru, megastar, millionaire, humanitarian or saint as well as the criminal featured on the evening news).

As such we will all make a contribution to humanity (even if it is an unconscious and painful contribution, you are still a part of our human species and still have an offering to make – so I say, why not choose make it conscious and uplifting?).

Remembering these principles will help you shift your mindset to see where spiritual maturation is unfolding in your life at present (and it will usually at first be in the form of an obstacle, problem or challenge).

So once you are at the point of realising that maybe spiritual perspective could help you, that maybe you are being asked by life to grow and mature spiritually and that you can heal the problems in your life, with a bit of help, what next?

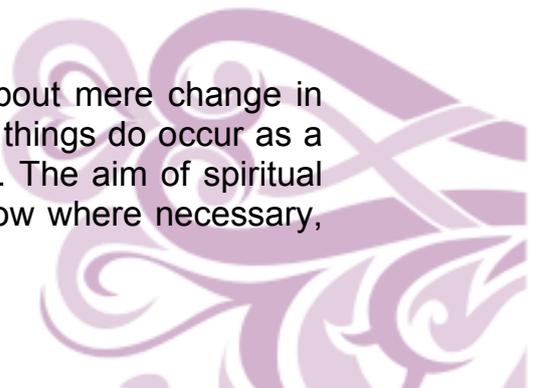
Fortunately spiritual perspective doesn't hand out meaningless advice like, "OK, so go change, think differently, act differently and your life will change". If that is all there was to it, wouldn't we all be doing it right now?

This isn't a particularly helpful attitude in that it deals with surface. Just do things differently OK? Hmm. I prefer to change whatever it is underneath that is causing you to act in a way that needs to change for your wellbeing – then a new behaviour becomes far easier to bring into your life and sustain in the long term.

From my perspective and experience, your life can look different on the outside, but on the inside you can still feel very much like you do right now. An example is the girl who has lost a lot of weight but still reaches for the large sizes in the clothes shop or feels self-conscious about her body size when she walks past a group of giggling girls, imagining they are ridiculing her.

Another example is the man who wins the lottery, fritters it away on useless items using his wealth to temporarily prop up his self-esteem rather than using his wealth as an opportunity to grow internally. He finds himself right back where he was financially, buying lotto tickets and hoping for a miracle to provide him with enough money to fulfil himself, twelve months later.

As we have said, spiritual transformation is not about mere change in circumstance, behaviour or action. Although these things do occur as a by-product of spiritual growth, they are not its aim. The aim of spiritual growth, or any real growth, is to mature, to out-grow where necessary,



to evolve, to enter into a relationship with life itself and imagine that it is helping and inspiring and sometimes pushing you to grow.

Life can inspire us to reach for something more by showing us someone who moves us, or offer us an experience of something we love, like dancing, singing or writing. Life can inspire us to be grateful by seeing a person with far less fortune than us. Life may help us by sending people to us who encourage us to pursue our dreams. These are the gentle, kind and loving ways that life can support us.

Life may also encourage us to be content, to acknowledge the beauty and grace that is right in front of us, and ask us to be at peace with the contribution we already make – whether we think it is small or unimportant, I can guarantee you that it is in the eyes of Spirit and to human evolution very important indeed.

How often do we listen to these gentler ways? Do we even pay attention to the needs, yearnings, dreams and desires that we have within us? Sometimes we are so worn down by social conditioning and expectations of those around us, and us of ourselves, that we have lost contact with our deepest dreams and desires. Perhaps we banish them to the domain of childhood fantasy or silly daydreams. Maybe we pay no attention to the myriad of positive encouragements that we receive from life to excavate those authentic urgings, and instead attempt to go on with 'life as it should be'.

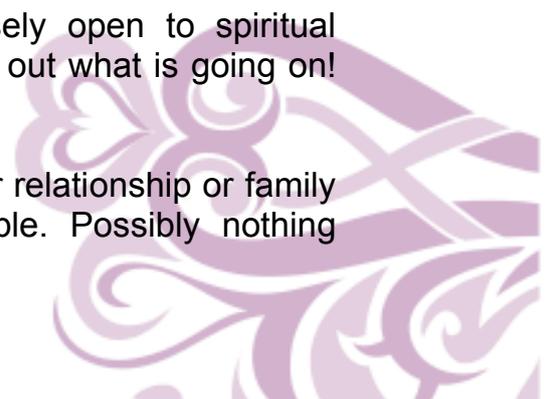
It is usually after some time on the 'life as it should be' (rather than as it is, wants to be and can be when we live true to ourselves) that we hit a wall.

This is usually about the time when life stops helping and supporting gently and begins to give us a mighty shove towards growth. I call this 'spiritual crisis' and it usually feels like an internal crisis of some kind.

It can be a frightening time because it is an internal situation and there may or may not be anything external that can be pinpointed as the exact cause of the inner distress – or there may be too many external 'causes' that one doesn't know where to start to begin unravelling the chaos that they feel subject to from without and within.

Very often this is when people become intensely open to spiritual perspective – because they really need it to work out what is going on! There really is a silver lining in every cloud.

Perhaps they feel that life, or work, or finances, or relationship or family or issues of health have become unmanageable. Possibly nothing



seems to be bringing relief from the pain, emptiness, confusion, uncertainty or distress that they feel inside (even if they never show it on the outside and everyone assumes that they have it all 'together').

It was certainly that way for me many years ago. I had pursued a career in law and was suffering under an increasing weight of mind and body, struggling with depression, chronic recurring fatigue and a growing sense of despair and panic. I just knew that something was not right, but I didn't know where to turn or what to do to get out of the mess I was in. I remember that I felt very alone, lost and yet still pig-headedly determined that I could just push my way through my difficulties and 'win' (even though I rarely actually wanted what I was 'winning', I just thought I should achieve it), just as I had done previously.

My spiritual crisis occurred when I finally realised that winning what other people wanted me to win wasn't making me happy and was in fact slowly leading me down a path to severe depression and agoraphobia (all sorts of obsessive compulsive behaviours, phobias and anxieties, including panic attacks are ways that your inner self communicates with you that you are in spiritual crisis, even if you are busy trying to convince yourself everything is OK – as Alice Miller has said, the body never lies).

Spirituality suggests that you don't have to pretend that all is OK if it isn't. Spiritual perspective suggests instead that acknowledge when things aren't working for you and learn to outgrow your situation.

You can in fact learn to experience life as a classroom, or a playground, or a school, or a game. Spiritual perspective suggests that you may need to learn a different set of rules to those you were taught as a child in order to get the most out of your life and yourself.

Spirituality is more personally demanding than imagining that you can have everything you want handed to you by some benevolent higher power if you are a good girl or boy, and yet it is more empowering and personally satisfying, because it lets you take the reins to your life firmly in both hands and chart your own course.

Spirituality is a harder philosophy to live by than merely imagining that everyone else is the problem, or fate has just dealt you lousy relationship cards, for example, and yet more empowering and exciting because it promises that if you decide to take responsibility for making the changes within yourself that you need to make in order to grow, you can eventually be and have what you want.



Spirituality has another side to it too. Spiritual perspective says 'you are powerful, you can learn to heal yourself and live a life that feels fulfilling, passionate and authentic to you – even with its unavoidable ups and downs, you can live your truth with conviction and success'.

It *also* says, 'you are not alone, you can't control everything and there are so many ways that life can lovingly help, support, assist, inspire and encourage you – so laugh and relax and let it happen!'.

If you are suffering from depression, addiction, recurring relationship struggles, obsessive or compulsive behaviours or thoughts, confusion about your work or your direction and purpose in life, then it is highly likely that finding and deepening your natural spirituality could be the answer you didn't know you were seeking!

My wish for you, dear reader, is that right now you feel more at peace with who you are and where you are in your life, and yet are filled with hope for a brighter tomorrow and a clear understanding about how you can bring that into being and the knowledge that you are brave and wonderful enough to be able to do so.

To take what we have considered above and put it into a practical application, you may like to look at how a spiritual approach can be brought to understanding relationship dynamics and what healing may come from such understanding with the examples below.

Relationship problems from a spiritual perspective

Relationship problems can be seen as a gateway into spiritual learning that results in personal growth – and improved relationships!

Some people thrive on relationship dramas, but many of us don't enjoy the difficulties and problems that can arise in relationships. What we can do is acknowledge that we wish to eradicate the problem but understand that it may well be a symptom of a deeper relationship issue.

If we treat a problem as an invitation to look at what is going wrong and an opportunity to understand an issue, then we can learn, do something about it and not only eradicate the problem, but grow the relationship and ourselves as individuals!

One of the most powerful relationship challenges is managing the degree and expression of *closeness* or togetherness versus *separation* or individuality in the relationship. There are degrees of healthiness in



this range, and sometimes one of the key elements of compatibility in a relationship is finding the person who has a similar desire to you in terms of balancing relationship needs with individual needs for space and differentiation or life outside of the relationship.

The extreme ends of this range of togetherness versus separateness results in two unhealthy forms of relating.

At the range of unhealthy togetherness there is the experience of co-dependence and enmeshment, clinginess and abandonment fears (demanding too much presence in relationship, too little boundary or none at all).

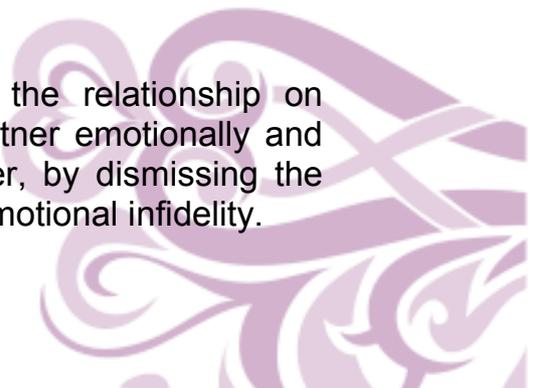
For some people, very often those that have had their boundaries shattered as little ones, this will be the ideal fantasy bond of absolute closeness, no secrets, nothing separate, just absolute safety and bonding as a parent could have with a young child before the stage of healthy separation and individuation between parent and child was meant to begin (with these people, this stage was very often diminished by an overprotective, though likely well-meaning, parent who protected and micro-managed the child out of their own fears rather than a clear assessment of the child's needs).

For someone with healthy strong boundaries and a sense of individuality, such a bond may often feel claustrophobic and overwhelming although they may enjoy the feeling of closeness without wishing to blend with the other person.

At moments of claustrophobia, a feeling of repulsion and overwhelm can arise which can generate an very strong desire to get away from excessive closeness and often the party in question is flung to the other extreme of excessive or unhealthy separateness, trying to bring a sense of balance back into themselves and their relationship by redressing the imbalance.

Unhealthy separateness is more than just taking time out, personal space, a night out with the boys (or girls) or even deciding to keep some things private and separate from your partnership or relationship. Infact many would consider that these things are a good sign of healthy sense of separate self within the context of a relationship which keeps things interesting.

Unhealthy separateness is basically 'departing' the relationship on some level – perhaps through punishing your partner emotionally and psychologically by refusing to relate to him or her, by dismissing the sanctity of the relationship by sexual, financial or emotional infidelity.



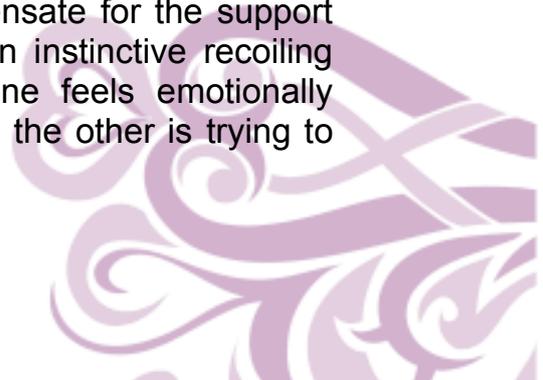
Some examples of these actions may be having a sexual encounter or affair with any person other than your partner, blowing joint savings on something that you have not agreed upon as a partnership, or discussing private matters to do with your partner with a third party in an inappropriate manner (in the sense of turning outside the relationship rather than towards it for resolution of conflict).

Just as an aside, it must be noted here that in any case of abuse, turning for help outside of the relationship is often essential! Abuse may be verbal, psychological or emotional, as well as sexual and physical in nature. If you are in such a situation you may be being called spiritually to learn to own your worth and demand from yourself that you learn to care for yourself – so reach out for crisis centre help by contacting your local council for free counselling services or to the local court system for domestic violence assistance or even if you aren't sure, these are places to start for referrals. Pray to your angels to help you find the right assistance – it will come. Have faith. Take action. Be open to help.

Unhealthy separateness leaves your partner feeling that you have 'checked out' of the relationship even if you haven't actually ended it or left. The characteristic qualities of someone demonstrating the unhealthy extreme of separateness, rather than healthy and appropriate individuality within and without of the relationship, is refusal to engage, comment or relate, the building up of a wall that is impenetrable and a form of personal defence against the fear of the neediness of the other partner.

Interestingly, avoidance or unhealthy separateness stems just as much from abandonment fears as does excessive togetherness or enmeshment, but is just expressed differently – ie "I will not let you get close enough to be able to hurt or leave me" (this is demanding too little from the relationship in terms of presence, putting up too much boundary or a wall).

These two extremes of behaviour can arise for any number of reasons. They can be triggered or made more severe by financial stress, work problems, personal distress (perhaps a friendship gone sour pushes you to demand more from your partner to compensate for the support your friend is not giving you or vice versa) or an instinctive recoiling from intimacy or seeking out intimacy when one feels emotionally vulnerable, or a response when one partner feels the other is trying to control, judge or manipulate him/her.



The results of this behavioural dysfunction so common in our modern relationships is fairly predictable and often very painful. Here are some of the symptoms –

- One or both partners retreats into addiction to food, shopping, gambling, alcohol, sex (which may be with the partner and/or outside of the relationship), work (showing up in very long working hours that consistently take the partner outside of the relationship emotionally and psychologically and often sexually as well).
- Intimacy is diminished on emotional, sexual or spiritual levels (a sense that you just are not connecting) which can be healthy from time to time as a temporary experience because one of you is going through a deep personal process of change and you need more personal space to get through it, but sometimes this lack of connection can exist in a longer term scenario which is not so healthy at all.
- Sexual difficulties in performance, levels of desire for your partner decline and interest in sex wanes. Again this can be a natural and healthy sign of a growth period in one's life from time to time. If this is felt as emotional or psychological punishment, a form of manipulation or control by one partner over the other, is unable to be openly discussed between the partners or is consistently recurring, then this could be an indication of a significant issue to be dealt with.
- Recurring arguments that never seem to get solved about –
 - o financial contributions to the relationship being inadequate or enough to justify less commitment in other areas of the relationship
 - o sexual needs of one partner or lack of sexual desire in one partner
 - o issues to do with parenting of children
 - o how much weight a partner is carrying in respect of child rearing or household management
 - o certain behaviours with regards to spending, sex, food, clothing or physical presentation
 - o a child's behavioural problems regarding self-esteem, eating, acting out regularly in rage, violence against siblings or other children, excessive anxiety and illnesses and/or nightmares, bullying, bedwetting or concerns about physical appearance such as weight issues



These are just some examples of issues that can point to something more fundamental in the relationship between two partners.

Spirituality can help break the repeating and useless cycle, leading to a fresh perspective and a new way of working through the difficulties.

Here are some of the key principles to start with from a spiritual perspective –

I cannot control another person.

I cannot change another person.

I am not responsible for another person's behaviour, thoughts or feelings.

I am responsible for my own behaviour and can give myself permission to listen to and act in an appropriate way on my own thoughts and feelings.

I can learn to manage projection from and to my partner to create an atmosphere that is conducive to healing and change (in other words – I can see below the blame game at what is really going on here).

Certainly easier said than done to begin with, but once you work on the spiritual principles discussed in the first part of this article you are well on your way to finding a far more empowered way to be in your relationships and move forward towards creating more fulfilling relationships for yourself and your partner (and friends and so on).

Don't despair if you are in a dark place in your relationships – there is so much help available – you must learn how to ask for it and receive it.

Perhaps sometimes, when at our darkest places, we also need to remember that the only way is up! I pray that you may receive the best assistance and the best help for you at every time you need it.

With love and blessings to you on your path, dear one.

Blessed Be!

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