



Excerpt

DANCING WITH FIRE

A Mindful Way to Loving Relationships

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Taken from Chapter One: Off the Cushion and Into Life

The spiritual path and the path of intimate relationships have often been viewed as incompatible – like mixing water and oil. Pursuing the sacred has often meant renouncing personal love and the seductive pleasures of the flesh. Yet, what if the longings for spirituality and an alive, juicy intimacy turn out to be part of the same sacred longing pursued in different ways? It dawned on me that I don't have to choose between living a spiritual life and desiring intimacy – in fact they complement and support each other. I'm inclined to think that pursuing one path with a commitment to truth and curiosity naturally leads to the other path.

Spirituality: A Hazardous Word

I must confess that I hesitate to use the word “spiritual.” It is tossed around so carelessly that its meaning is often lost. Yet it is precisely because I feel so irked by its reckless use that I feel drawn to explore the deeper *felt sense* of spiritual life -- and to consider what it offers and what it requires from us. Rather than dispense with a word that has been used for millennia, perhaps it is better to become sensitized to its routine abuse and clarify its meaning.

It is always treacherous to define spirituality, for it points toward a domain of experience where words fail us. At the same time, if we relegate it to some otherworldly status, we divorce ourselves from our human experience. While words can never quite captures it, they can perhaps point toward it -- as if with an awkwardly brandished elbow.

My use of the term “spirituality” refers not to any particular religious ideology, but rather to something within us that feels irresistibly drawn toward experiencing more love in our heart and connection with life. Such a path leads to the elusive happiness we seek, which is linked to caring about other's well-being. As the Dalai Lama sees it, “The purpose of life is to be happy...love and compassion bring us the greatest happiness...The need for love lies at the very foundation of our existence”¹ The essence of Buddhism is to help others if we can; if we can't, then we at least refrain from hurting them.

A spiritual life invites us to live according to certain values -- doing our best to help people and our world. Such values are not limited to the confines of our head; they become vibrantly alive as they merge with our bodily-lived experience. A spiritual path means cultivating qualities of being that include compassion, joy, openness, and gratitude, which connect us with people and the world. Happiness comes not by chasing after fleeting pleasures, but by coming to relish a growing gratitude for the gift of being alive. We recognize that living inside everyone is a yearning for awakening and happiness and we feel drawn to create conditions to help people on their sacred journey.

Being on a spiritual path has more to do with our walk than our talk. The most spiritually inclined are often too self-effacing to identify themselves as such. They might cringe if anyone suggested that they were living a spiritual life. Yet, their expansive heart, humble speech, and responsiveness to other's feelings may be more robust than those who preen themselves with religiosity.

A Spirituality that Embraces Intimacy

The time is ripe to pursue a spiritual life that is interpersonally engaging. Our spiritual quest is given grounding through intimate connections; the fertile stream of spiritual practice nourishes our relationships. A spiritual path invites attention to our inner life in a way that connects us to what lives and breathes outside of ourselves.

Through unspeakable tragedy, the Jewish spiritual writer and teacher, Martin Buber, came to devote his life to being present and caring in his relationships. One day Buber was meditating and praying in his room when a young student knocked on his door. Buber listened politely as the student shared what was in his heart, but he was not fully there because he wanted to continue his meditation. Perhaps sensing his distractedness, the student soon left. Shortly thereafter, Buber was horrified to discover that he committed suicide! Buber later learned from a friend that this young man came with a need to better understand his life, which Buber did not pick up on because he was eager to return to his spiritual practice.

Gripped by the realization that he had not been attentive and responsive to this man's suffering was a pivotal moment in shaping Buber's vision of bringing spirituality into everyday relationships. The essence of faith, he realized, is not "the pursuit of ecstatic experiences but...a life of attentiveness to others."ⁱⁱ For Buber, engaging with people is at the heart of what it means to be a spiritual being.

ⁱ His Holiness The Dalai Lama, *In My Own Words*, edited by Rajiv Mehrotra, Carlsbad CA: Hwy House, 2008, pp. 1,3.

ⁱⁱ (Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, "Paying Attention;" *Christian Century*, August 22, 2006; p. 24)