

Impediments to Spirituality

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There are things we do that may prevent us from growing spiritually. In some cases, we live in a constant state of prevention and are not even aware of it. It is only when we become aware of ourselves and our emotions that we have a chance to remove these barriers to our spiritual growth and development.

What are these impediments to spirituality, how do they affect us, and how can we release ourselves from them to become closer to the Divine? This article explores some of the more common impediments to spirituality, including:

- Anger
- Sadness
- Hatred
- Arrogance
- Selfishness and greed
- Intolerance and closed mindedness
- Mistrust
- Impatience
- Wanting and needing
- Resentment
- Fear

There may be other impediments that you think get in the way of your spiritual growth and that are not discussed in this article. If so, feel free to share your experiences with Robert at rmeagher@istar.ca.

Anger

Anger is a debilitating emotion that robs us of spiritual energy and takes us away from our place of peace and happiness. Anger is a powerful defense mechanism of the ego. When we become angry, our usual response is one of attack—sometimes verbal, sometimes physical and sometimes in passive aggressive ways. By attack I mean projecting our anger (our ego) outwards to something or someone else, as a means to avoid having to look at ourselves and our role in feeling angry. Getting angry is often a diversion from having to take responsibility for our own actions.

In their book The Heart of the Soul: Emotional Awareness Gary Zukav and Linda Francis insightfully discuss anger. “Anger is righteous and self-important. Anger does not listen to, respect, or care about others. It makes others wrong, to blame, inferior, or inadequate. It cares only about itself. Anger wants what it wants, when it wants it, on the terms that it wants it. It assumes the roles of judge, jury, and executioner. There is no appeal”. [p. 130] Zukav and Francis go on to share that “Anger is rebellion against circumstances or others. It is the pursuit of external power—the ability to manipulate and control. The purpose of anger is to alter the behavior of others and, by doing so, make the one who rages feel better”. [p.172]

We have all witnessed people getting angry at a situation when it is really themselves they are angry at. First, these people do not recognize their own role in their anger and, second, choose to turn that anger outwards at other people or things as a way to bolster their already-low self esteem and convince themselves they have no responsibility in the matter or situation that made them angry. They are saying to themselves... “This is not my problem or fault. It was *someone else* who created this situation and, therefore, it is perfectly acceptable to vent my anger at them.” How many people have we seen get mad at someone or something when they really are not mad at that person or situation, but are actually angry at someone or something else? This anger is mis-directed because they cannot even bring themselves to be angry at the source of their anger—in most cases themselves.

Turning anger inwards is no better or more productive. When this happens, we create all sorts of dysfunctions that lead to a potpourri of self esteem issues that in turn lead to maladaptive behaviors and actions. Turning anger inwards is a destructive approach to dealing with our anger and is a major inhibitor that keeps us from loving ourselves.

All anger comes from a place of fear (to be discussed later in this article). Knowing where anger comes from, and working on the source of our fears, will enable us to let go of anger and the stunting affects it has on our spiritual development.

Sadness

Sadness is another emotion that prevents us from seeing the world accurately. Sadness comes, in part, from forgetting who we are and the abundance that exists within each of us. It keeps us from feeling joy, gratitude and appreciation for what we do have.

Sadness is the absence of happiness—like hatred is the absence of love (to be discussed below). When we lose sight or perspective of our true and only purpose—to be happy—we feel sadness.

Sadness often results from feeling deprived of something or someone—like when something does not happen we were planning, or we lose something or someone, or something does not turn out the way we thought it would. Sadness takes away our ability to think from a joyful perspective and creates barriers to growing in spirit.

No person or event passes through our lives without leaving an imprint. Some may even say that no person or event passes through our lives by coincidence. Everyone and every event are brought to us for our learning. No matter how wrong, negative, or sad a situation appears, it was brought to us for our growth. There is an opportunity to learn from everyone and every event we come upon. By recognizing this principle, we can eliminate much of our sadness associated with those events that do not appear to be positive and beneficial at the time.

Hatred

Hatred is a by-product of anger (see 'anger' above); it accompanies anger on its path toward darkness. Hatred is a visceral dislike for something or someone. More so than anger, hatred obliterates the opportunities and possibilities associated with love. Hatred and love are two diametrically opposed instances—each going in the opposite direction.

Hatred for other people is particularly damaging to our spiritual growth. Projecting anger toward another person or persons only gets returned to us in some form. It is the old adage of “what goes around comes around” at work.

In his book Becoming Enlightened, The Dalai Lama describes hatred this way, “...hatred is a riled-up state of mind that is based on exaggeration (of another person, or your own pain, or even of a cause of pain such as a thorn) that makes it seem more unpleasant than it really is; hatred rages against that object and drives us to do harm to it”. [p. 131]

Arrogance

Arrogance is an illusion that is created when we place ourselves above or below someone or something else and think we are separate and different from the other person or thing. Placing ourselves in a position of 'difference'—whether we perceive we are above or below—is putting ourselves in a position or place that simply does not exist.

We are all one. We are all connected by a singular source of energy. We all came from this source and we will all return to this source. While in this human condition and existence, we take on a human body form but we are still all one. Someone explained it to me this way.

Imagine being on a beautiful tropical island. You walk into the beautiful turquoise ocean, dip an empty glass into the water, fill up the glass, and walk back up on to the beach. You have in your hand a glass of that great, vast, magnificent ocean. It is no different from the water in the ocean; it is just inside a glass. No matter what happens to that glass of ocean you are holding in your hands, whether you pour that glass of water onto the beach or spill it somewhere else, whether you consume it, or whether you let the glass stay in the sun until it evaporates, the water will return to the ocean. It will return from where it came.

Arrogance is a false reality. Arrogance simply cannot exist because we are no different than the other people around us. We are no better, no worse, no nothing. Drop your illusion of difference and begin to enjoy those people around you—they are who you are.

Selfishness and Greed

Selfishness and greed are based out of fear and the need to fill some unspoken or unconscious emptiness in our soul. By taking we momentarily fill a void that is perceived to be empty or depleted and reinforce the need for more of the same—a never-ending cycle and pattern of delusion.

Selfishness and greed comes from the lack of awareness that in taking we rob ourselves of the joy of giving. It is in giving that we receive, not taking. Selfishness and greed demonstrate a spiritual hole and unawareness that everything we need exists within us. Until we realize this, we will continue to look externally for our source of fulfillment and gratification.

Intolerance and Closed Mindedness

I once worked at an organization where one day the owner expressed concern about the new receptionist wearing a hijab to work each day. I enjoyed the receptionist wearing her hijab. Not only were the headdresses exquisite in their fabric and color, but it gave me a wonderful opportunity to learn something about the Muslim culture from someone who embraced their faith on a daily basis.

When I asked the owner what his concern was, he said he was concerned that if the receptionist was allowed to continue to wear her hijab, she may ask to pray during the day, "and then what"? Shortly after these discussions a new dress code policy was brought into the company that restricted certain dress and jewelry from being worn. When I was asked for my opinion of the new policy, I shared that I thought the policy was prejudicial, intolerant and closed minded. As they say 'in the business', my response was a CLM (career limiting move).

What was most disappointing to me about the above story and experience was not so much the intolerance itself, but where these emotions came from. The new policy was justified by the owner as being for "business reasons" but the intolerance really came from a place of fear.

Fear is at the heart of intolerance. Discrimination and prejudice against visible and not-so-visible minorities is far too common in our society these days. Our intolerance shuts us out from learning and growing. Our intolerance not only harms the person we are projecting our fear toward, but it also harms us. When we shut ourselves off from other people, we lose the joyful opportunity of experiencing their love, joy and happiness. When we demonstrate intolerance, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to grow in spirit.

Mistrust

Sometimes we lose our faith and trust that everything will be okay. Sometimes we lose our connection with the Divine and its role in guiding us through life. Sometimes we simply ignore the signs and signals telling us where we need to go and what we need to do. We mistrust in life.

As mentioned above, no person or event passes through our lives by coincidence. Everyone and every event are brought to us for our learning. No matter the person or the event, it was brought to us for our growth. We need not ask why this person showed up in our lives or why a certain thing happened to us; we only need to recognize we have something to learn from this person or event.

When we begin to trust in our path and recognize the events that take place in our lives, we begin to experience an understanding. This understanding is not only of our purpose here in this time, but it is an understanding of the connectedness among the people and events that pass through our lives. This understanding brings great peace and strength. When we accept our path, we begin to trust and grow in spirit.

A brief word on the concept or idea of mistrusting others: it is never other people we do not trust, it is ourselves we do not trust. If we mistrust someone, it is because we are projecting our own doubts about ourselves on the other person(s).

Impatience

Impatience is a classic symptom of not living in the moment. When impatient, we are projecting our desire to be in a future moment—to have something completed or in a different state than it is presently. Think about this for a moment: the past never happened and the future will never come. There is only now. There is only the present moment. When you think about life in this way, it is impossible to be impatient.

Over the years I have become more and more interested in the lead-up to an event and the joy it produces (i.e., being in the moment) rather than the anticipation of the event itself, until it arrives of course. Patience does not need to mean complacency. You can be excited about an upcoming event, but you need not live in the illusion of the future to the exclusion of the present.

Have you ever caught yourself day-dreaming? It is something we all do from time to time. Day-dreaming and other similar distractions take us immediately out of the now and into a state and place that does not exist. Eckhart Tolle has devoted entire works to the idea of the present moment, the *now*.

Wanting and Needing

I was recently in a local coffee shop waiting for a friend to join me for coffee. While I waited I could not help but overhear the conversation taking place at the table next to me. Two men were discussing their need to increase sales and profitability for their company. Their conversation was laden with apprehension and fear created by their 'need' to increase sales and profitability. The tension was palpable and I could sense it was the tip of the iceberg of the stress these two men felt about their predicament.

While the short story above may be somewhat extreme in its nature, the lesson is not. Wanting and needing create situations that result in dis-ease and stress. Letting go of 'want' and 'need' can release us from this dis-ease and stress. We live in a world and society so geared toward creating 'want' and 'need' as a form of consumerism. These things that we 'want' or 'need' are illusions.

I can remember when I began my meditative practice I acquired a comfortable cushion, some candles, a mala, and other items to create an alter-of-sorts for my meditative practice. I wanted to also get a prayer shawl, a meditation bench, and other items that would create a peaceful and comfortable space. I began to create a 'need' for these items where no need previously existed. This need created anxiety and stress in me

until I had what I thought I wanted or needed. It was not until my partner said to me, “Why do you need those things in order to meditate? Can you not meditate without any of those things?” He was so right! I had created a ‘want’ and a ‘need’ that was an illusion. I did not ‘need’ any of these items but I created a false reality that resulted in my ‘wanting’ and, then, ‘needing’ something. Once I gave up the ‘wanting’ and ‘needing’, I gave up my dis-ease and stress.

It may not be possible to remove all ‘want’ or ‘need’ from our lives. However, when our wants and needs are out of balance with our spiritual practice and growth, they lead to dis-ease and stress. This dis-ease and stress create barriers to our spiritual growth and to connecting with the Divine.

Resentment

Resentment is closely connected with anger. When we are angry, we are often also resentful. But where does resentment come from? In my experience, resentment is the result of not forgiving.

The downward spiral begins with anger. Let us take, for example, a situation where we are up for a promotion at the office and we are not selected. We become angry because we did not get the promotion. Our anger may be directed at the person making the decision and carry over to the person who did get the promotion. Our anger toward the person who did get the promotion evolves into resentment when we begin to think we should have been given the promotion. The resentment is a silent, passive aggressive form of attack. Our resentment stays with us for as long as we cannot bring ourselves to forgive the decision-maker, the person who got the promotion and, most importantly, ourselves.

Resentment has a belittling affect on our spiritual development. We know full well the barriers that resentment places in front of us, but our egos will not allow us to release ourselves from the resentment. The ego wants us to keep resentful so that we keep attacking and staying separate from the Divine. The longer we stay resentful, the worse we feel and the more resentful we feel—it is a vicious circle.

Learn to forgive and not only will resentment disappear from your consciousness, but so to will all the other impediments mentioned in this article.

Fear

Ah yes, fear: the final frontier; the antithesis of enlightenment; and nirvana when it is overcome. Fear is the single biggest impediment to spirituality. Entire industries exist and prosper because we are fearful: insurance; healthcare; financial; entertainment, etc. Without fear, these industries would simply be unnecessary and irrelevant.

I have a dear friend who is a psychiatrist. Over the years we have had some wonderful discussions on topics related to psychology and psychiatry. One ongoing discussion is about what forms the basis or foundation for someone’s personality. My psychiatrist friend believes it is self esteem. I suggest that if you want to truly understand a person,

understand their fears. What a person is fearful of explains their behaviors and actions—their personality.

Fear is a debilitating emotion. It can stop us in our tracks, prevent us from living our lives, and get us into all sorts of situations that result in crippling our spiritual development—and stunt our growth. Eckhart Tolle, in his book Practicing the Power of Now: Essential Teachings, Meditations, and Exercises from *The Power of Now* explains it like this. “The psychological condition of fear is divorced from any concrete and true immediate danger. It comes in many forms: unease, worry, anxiety, nervousness, tension, dread, phobia, and so on. This kind of psychological fear is always of something that might happen, not of something that is happening now”. [p. 27]

So what is fear? A Course in Miracles suggests that “fear is a symptom of your own deep sense of loss”. [p. 217] Another explanation is that fear stands for ‘false evidence appearing real’. Think about what the acronym of fear is, false—evidence—appearing—real. What we are seeing is something that is false; it does not really exist; it is an illusion. But it appears real because of evidence we perceive to be present; that is the illusion part. We perceive there to be some evidence or fact creating our reality of fear, but it is an illusion.

It was not until recently that I truly began to understand (an ongoing process) what the saying “you have nothing to fear but fear itself” really meant. Nothing can or will hurt us, except our own fear. Nothing can deprive us of anything, except ourselves. Nothing can even physically harm us—our spirit—because our spirit is not of this physical body form. All our fears come from ‘false evidence appearing real’.

But how do we stop being fearful? It begins by becoming calm and centred and continues with growing peace and happiness. “Fearlessness sows the seeds of happiness” writes Elizabeth Lesser in her book The New American Spirituality: A Seeker’s Guide. “First comes a loosening of fear; from this relaxation comes a growing acceptance of life on its own terms; then a sense of wonder awakens, one that is large enough to contain the many ups and downs that are natural of our physical, mental, and emotional makeups. All around us are the ingredients for happiness—happiness, but not perfection. Perfection is an idea; imperfection is reality. Happiness within the field of imperfection is a promise of the spiritual quest”. [p. 31]

What Do You Think?

What gets in the way of your living a spiritual life? You are invited to share your thoughts and experiences with Robert. He can be reached at rmeagher@istar.ca.

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