

ACCEPTING THE CYCLES OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

From "A Path with Heart" Chapter 12 by Jack Kornfield

If we have ideas about how our practice should unfold, these will often get in the way, preventing us from honoring the phase that is actually with us.

Every ancient system of wisdom teaches that human life unfolds in a succession of stages: childhood, a period of education and learning, a period for family life and meaningful work, and a period for contemplative practice. In the Native American traditions, these evolving cycles are honored in rites of passage that enable each community member to enter new stages of life with full consciousness and support. Modern psychologists, such as Erik Erikson, also speak of an inevitable succession of stages that make up a wise and meaningful life.

Just as there is beauty to be found in the changing of the earth's seasons and an inner grace in honoring the cycles of life, our spiritual practice will be in balance when we can sense the time that is appropriate for retreats and the time that is appropriate for travel, the time for settling down and planting roots, and the time to have a family and children. By honoring these cycles, we honor the natural law of the universe in the Tao or the dharma of our own lives. The poet Wendell Berry speaks of this in his poem called "The Law That Marries All Things."

*The cloud is free only to go with the wind.
The rain is free only in falling.
The water is free only in its gathering together,
in its downward courses, in its rising into the air.
In law is rest
if you love the law,
if you enter singing into it
as water in its descent.*

In the beginning we may erroneously imagine spiritual practice to be a linear journey, traveling over a certain landscape to a faraway destination of enlightenment. But it is better described as a widening circle or spiral that opens our hearts and gradually infuses our consciousness to include all of life as a spiritual whole. In earlier chapters we have spoken of the way that the same issue will recur for us over and over in our practice at each new level. Inevitably, the question of how to navigate transitions in both our life circumstances and our practice will also recur. Twenty-five years ago Ram Dass described the cycles of spiritual life in *Be Here Now*.

Practice is like a roller coaster. Each new high is usually followed by a new low. Understanding this, it makes it a bit easier to ride with both phases. . . . There is in addition to the up-and-down cycles an in-and-out cycle. That is, there are stages at which you feel pulled into inner work and all you seek is a quiet place to meditate and get on with it, and then there are times when you turn outward and seek to be involved in the marketplace. Both of these parts of the cycle are a part of one's practice, for what happens to you in the marketplace helps in your meditation, and what happens in your meditation helps you to participate in the marketplace without attachment. . . . At first you will think of practice as a limited part of your life. In time you will realize that everything you do is part of your practice.

Change comes to our lives not only from shifts in our inner needs, but also from shifts in our external circumstances. The nature of existence, the Buddha taught, is ceaseless transformation. How can we find a way to honor these natural cycles of life in spiritual practice? First, we must respect the changing cycles

that life brings us and accept the inner tasks they bring. In this way, our spiritual growth can develop naturally along with them. While this may seem obvious, our society has lost touch with these rhythms, and in many ways we are taught to ignore them. Young children are force-fed discipline and early academic training instead of being free to play and learn in healthy ways. Many middle-aged men live out a prolonged adolescence, and many women struggle to stay young as if to avoid maturity altogether. Old age is seen as a defeat to be resisted and feared. We have few role models of wise men and women at any life stage, no helpful initiations, and few rites of passage.

When we respect the natural cycles of life, we find that each of life's stages has a spiritual dimension. Each stage contributes wisdom and experience that we will draw upon in our spiritual growth. For example, one of the major sources of our spiritual consciousness is found in our earliest life—the benevolent oneness of existence in our mother's womb. Our consciousness holds in its depths this memory and the possibility of oneness, and we draw on it in meditation. Then, as an infant, we experience the freshness of seeing, feeling, and touching the world for the first time, the immediate physical presence of our senses and our own needs. Reawakening this immediacy, recapturing a spontaneous unbroken trust in what we know and feel, is central to finding our spiritual ground in later practice.

Many people have their first spiritual experience in childhood that of an innate and natural connection with what is sacred and holy. The playfulness, joy, and curiosity of our childhood can become a foundation for the delighted rediscovery of this spirit in our practice. If our relationship with our parents is respectful and loving, that too becomes a model and foundation for respect and trust in all other relationships. Of course, if our experiences in the womb, as an infant, or as a child are bad ones, we will have great healing to do to reclaim our natural well-being. But these painful experiences may stimulate our longing for true well-being, and inevitably certain moments of every childhood will contain the seeds of awakening.

The independence and rebelliousness of our adolescence offer us yet another quality essential to our practice: the insistence that we find out the truth for ourselves, accepting no one's word above our own experience. As we move into the responsibilities of a young adult, we develop a compassionate concern for others besides ourselves. This ripening can bring us a sense of interdependence, the need for mutual respect and social justice that is a source of awakening to the path of universal compassion.

Adult life brings its own natural spiritual tasks and openings. We become more caring and responsible for our family, our community, our world. We discover the need for vision and feel a strong desire to fulfill our own unique expression of life. As we mature, a natural contemplative quality enters our life. We can sense a movement within to seek periods of reflection and to gain perspective, to stay in touch with our heart. As we age, having seen many cycles of birth and death, there is a detachment and wisdom that grows within us.

Each stage of our life holds the seeds for our spiritual growth. Our spiritual life matures when we consciously accept the life tasks appropriate for us. Unfortunately, in many spiritual communities there are some people who hope to avoid these tasks. These people may start at age twenty-five spending years trying to ignore their body or their creativity and then suddenly and painfully realize when they reach their forties that they did want a family or career. Or they may join a spiritual community and picture themselves living a lifetime like the Buddha, as a wanderer and hermit in splendid isolation. What they forget is that after a period of wandering, the Buddha settled down to spend twenty-five years in the same monastery, teaching and offering himself as a community leader. Even for those who commit their life to a monastery, there are necessary cycles, initial periods of training and solitude, followed by greater responsibilities for teaching, leadership, and administration.

Whether in a monastery, in our place of business, or in our family life, we need to listen to what each cycle requires for our heart's development and accept its spiritual tasks. The natural cycles of growth—developing right livelihood, moving to a new home, the birth of a child, entering a spiritual community—all

bring spiritual tasks that require our heart to grow in commitment, fearlessness, patience, and attention. The cycles of endings—our children leaving home, the aging and death of our parents, loss in business, leaving a marriage or community—bring our heart the spiritual tasks of grieving, of letting go gracefully, of releasing control, of finding equanimity and openhearted compassion in the face of loss.

Occasionally we get to choose the cycles we work with, such as choosing to get married or beginning a career. At these times it is helpful to meditate, to reflect on which direction will bring us closer to our path with heart, which will offer the spiritual lesson that it is time for in our life.

More often we don't get to choose. The great cycles of our life wash over us, presenting us with challenges and difficult rites of passage much bigger than our ideas of where we were going. Midlife crisis, threats of divorce, personal illness, sickness of our children, money problems, or just running yet again into our own insecurity or unfulfilled ambition can seem like difficult yet mundane parts of life to get over with so we can become peaceful and do our spiritual practice. But when we bring to them attention and respect, each of those tasks has a spiritual lesson in them. It may be a lesson of staying centered through great confusion, or a lesson of forbearance, developing a forgiving heart with someone who has caused us pain. It may be a lesson of acceptance or a lesson of courage, finding the strength of heart to stand our ground and live from our deepest values.

Spiritual teachers and gurus also face these unexpected cycles, times when their unfulfilled longings arise in them or when their community encounters difficulty. One highly respected guru in India was forced to reevaluate all he had taught when he discovered how much jealousy and competition there was among his students. Another teacher had desperately longed for a sabbatical, several years of retreat in the mountains, only to be appointed abbot of a famous temple after his own guru died. Some teachers may have to face the dependency they have created in the community around them, or even face their own dependency on teaching, at certain cycles in their practice. Difficult cycles are everyone's practice.

Just as worldly life moves in cycles, each offering spiritual lessons, so too the techniques and forms of our inner spiritual discipline move through natural cycles. Usually we think that each different spiritual path follows a distinct practice, such as service to the poor, prayers and devotion, physical yoga, retreat from the world, or study and inquiry. But our spiritual journey will probably lead us to include many of these dimensions of practice in the course of our growth. At one period of our practice we may be greatly devoted to following a teacher, later we may find ourselves in a period of practice and investigation on our own. One phase of our spirituality may focus on detachment and solitude, while a later phase demands we extend our loving-kindness through service to others. We may experience periods of great attention to our body, periods of prayer and surrender, or periods of study and reflection.

As I noted in Chapter 6, my teacher Achaan Chah used to sense these cycles in his students and direct the conditions of their practice so they would consciously work with them. When he felt they were ready, he would assign students who were afraid of solitude and loneliness to a distant and isolated cave monastery far from the nearest village. Those who were attached to stillness and had difficulty with human interaction might be sent to a monastery along the Bangkok highway where hundreds of pilgrims stop daily to visit. Those who had difficulty with food might be sent to work in the kitchen, and those filled with pride might well end up cleaning bathrooms and toilets as their regular and mindful duty.

These cycles are formally incorporated into the training at certain Zen monasteries, where members of the community are assigned certain roles for a year or two as part of practice. These positions include being the master's attendant, who must learn the work of service, of responsibility and devotion, and who benefits by closeness with the teacher. Another position is the keeper of discipline. The keeper of discipline must carry the Zen stick and use it when students fall asleep at sitting. He shouts to keep order,

forcibly pulls errant students in line, and allows no excuses for sloppy or lazy practice. The opposite role goes to the care-giver of the temple. The care-giver brings extra cushions for those who need them, tends to the sick, helps with the overall coordination of the retreats, and offers all kinds of nurturing support. A student is assigned each role and expected to fulfill it, regardless of his or her own temperament. An even more interesting aspect of this training is that it rotates. After a year as the strict and merciless disciplinarian, one may be assigned to become a care-giver and overnight have to learn how to be tender and kind. One is expected to learn all these roles as a spiritual practice, to chop wood or carry water when it is time, to sit like a mountain, cook like a grandmother, and laugh like a Buddha.

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MEDITATION: REFLECTING ON THE CYCLES OF YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Sit comfortably and naturally, letting yourself feel present and at ease. Let go of any plans and feel the natural rhythm of your breathing. Then, when you have become quiet, reflect back over your whole spiritual life. Remember how you first became awakened to the life of the heart and the spirit. Remember the sense you had at that time of the possibilities, of the mystery, of the divine. Bring to your mind the years that followed, the early spiritual teachers and the sacred places that inspired you. Look over the following years, remembering the systematic practices you have followed, the cycles you have gone through, the situations that have taught you the most, the unexpected lessons, the times of solitude, the times of community, your trials, your benefactors, your guides, your recent practice. Be aware of the problems you encountered as well, their difficulties, their teachings.

Enjoy this reflection, seeing it as a story, an adventure, appreciating its cycles and turns with a sense of wonder and gratitude. Then feel yourself resting in this moment today with an openness toward your life ahead. Let yourself sense what may lie ahead of you: the next natural stages of your life, the incomplete areas of your life, the dimensions of spiritual practice you may be called upon to include. As your own spiritual guide, become aware of what situation might be beneficial for you. If your present life allows, should you seek a period of solitude and aloneness or choose to become involved in a spiritual community? Does your spiritual practice call you to a period of service for others or is it the season to devote yourself to your career, creativity, home, and family? Do you need a teacher, or is it best now to rest on your own resources? If your present life doesn't allow you to make those choices, what cycle are you being presented with? How can you best honor both your choices and your life situation and include them in the opening of your heart and the cycles of your practice? Sense how you can be true to yourself and true to the dharma, the Tao that is unfolding in your life.