

Everyday Life as Spiritual Path

By John Welwood / excerpt from Ordinary Magic — Introduction

As children we have all felt, at least occasionally, a powerful sense of wonder at being alive in this world. Yet in growing up, we mostly lose that sense of magic. As we become caught up in worldly ambitions and burdens, life becomes increasingly routine, humdrum, and one-dimensional.

Magic, as I am using this term, is a sudden opening of the mind to the wonder of existence. It is a sense that there is much more to life than we usually recognize; that we do not have to be confined by the limited views that our family, our society, or our own habitual thoughts impose on us; that life contains many dimensions, depths, textures, and meanings extending far beyond our familiar beliefs and concepts.

The loss of a sense of the magic and sacredness of life is also happening in our world at large. In traditional cultures living closer to the natural world, people had a more immediate sense of larger forces shaping their lives. Gods and demons were near at hand. And the culture provided rituals and symbols that helped people remember the larger sacred dimension of life in the midst of their daily activities. Walking, eating, lovemaking, working—indeed, every activity and life passage—were endowed with religious or symbolic meanings that helped individuals connect with the larger, universal forces shaping their destiny.

Now that we have become disconnected from the cycles and rhythms of nature, we frequently seem to miss the whole point of being here at all as we rush through the whirlwind of our busy lives. Yet being busy is not the main problem. What does it matter whether we have ten things to do today or just one, since we can do only one thing at a time in any case? The problem with having ten things to accomplish is that while doing one, we are often dreaming or worrying about the success or failure of all ten. The speed and compulsion of our thoughts distract us and pull us away from where we are at each moment.

The word *detract* is particularly useful here. It suggests losing traction, losing our ground—which is precisely what happens when we slip and fall away from being present. It is only in the stillness and simplicity of presence—when we are aware of what we are experiencing, when we are here with it as it unfolds—that we can really appreciate our life and reconnect with the ordinary magic of being alive on this earth.

Wakeful Presence

Our society would have us believe that inner satisfaction depends on outer success and achievement. Yet struggling to “get somewhere” keeps us perpetually busy, stressed-out, and disconnected from that essential inner resource—our ability to be fully present—which *could* provide a real sense of joy and fulfillment. Our life is unsatisfactory only because we are not living it

fully, because instead we are pursuing a happiness that is always somewhere else, other than where we are right now.

Nonetheless, many of us do manage to carve out some niche in our life where we *can* be fully present; and this is usually where we wind up feeling most fulfilled. Indeed, the things in life we most enjoy—lovemaking, beauty, creativity, sports or strenuous exercise, new and challenging situations—are those that bring us here most fully. Artists often feel most alive when their work demands their total attention. Great athletes become still and centered in themselves when playing because they are totally on the spot, having to keep their attention on the game at every moment. All real enjoyment, success, and excellence depend on this ability to be present.

Presence is like the air we breathe; it is essential for our life, yet so transparent and intangible that we rarely give it particular attention or importance. For instance, as a writer I can easily become distracted by the results and rewards of writing—the finished product—and fail to see that what I value most about it is that it helps me focus and connect with myself more fully in the present moment. Yet when I give more attention to the product than to the here-and-now experience of writing, I lose my enjoyment and much of my effectiveness. Similarly, if athletes become distracted by hopes and fears about winning or losing, they will lose their stillness, their presence, and most likely the game as well....

Cultivating the capacity to be fully present—awake, attentive, and responsive—in all the different circumstances of life is the essence of spiritual practice and realization. Those with the greatest spiritual realization are those who are “all here,” who relate to life with an expansive awareness that is not limited by any fixation on themselves or their own point of view. They don’t shrink from any aspect of themselves or life as a whole.

Ordinary Spirituality

The word *spirituality*, like the word *magic*, often carries with it rarefied and otherworldly associations. That is because the life of the spirit has become divorced from so-called “real life” in the world. For much of history, in both Eastern and Western culture, spiritual practice has been the province of priests, monks, and nuns—those who have renounced ordinary life and retired to a monastery or hermitage. Meanwhile, the world of family life, daily work, business, and commerce has gone its own way, becoming increasingly disconnected from a sense of larger spiritual values.

Yet we can no longer afford the luxury of a spirituality that is separate from the world. Even if we had the time and inclination for such a pursuit, the increasingly precarious condition of our planet and its inhabitants cries out for greater involvement and concern than ever before. The difficult problems facing us on all sides—the environmental crisis, the breakdown of family and community, the loss of humanity's sacred traditions and values, the decline of education, the widening gulf between rich and poor, the increasing speed and stress of modern living—call for a new vision of human purpose that goes beyond just getting and spending.

Human life on this planet can survive and prosper only if there is a radical shift in consciousness. We need to realize that the purpose of being here is not to conquer and control, but to serve something larger than ourselves: life itself and our fellow beings. To that end, we need to develop a grounded spirituality, one that can affect the quality of life on this planet through being thoroughly committed to the here-and-now....

Living in Two Worlds

Spirituality, as Chogyam Trungpa simply defines it, is “a means of arousing one’s spirit, of developing a kind of spiritedness” that allows us “to have greater contact with reality.” In this sense, spiritual practice need not be associated with religious observances or traditions, or with other-worldly pursuits. Indeed, every great spiritual tradition contains teachings, often hidden in its core, about overcoming the separation between worldly and spiritual life. This deeper wisdom insists that the vertical search—for meaning, transcendence, or depth—bears real fruit only when it intersects with the horizontal search—understanding how to live in the body, on the earth, in families, or in the marketplace, with dignity and compassion. The Jewish tradition regards the body as the sacred temple of the soul; the Star of David is composed of two overlapping triangles, one pointing toward heaven, one toward earth. In the Christian tradition the cross is a sacred symbol of the meeting of horizontal and vertical, spirit and flesh, temporal and eternal. And Zen and Vajrayana Buddhism teach that *samsara*—the world of spinning confusion—is inseparable from *nirvana*—the realization of freedom, truth, and inner peace.

To be human is to live in two worlds. Our posture, with our head raised to heaven, and our feet planted firmly on the earth, perfectly expresses our dual nature. So if we seek only to transcend this world, or if we only succumb to it, we lose half of our humanness. The human soul becomes impoverished when we try to escape the contradiction at the core of our nature. It evolves and develops through living in the polar tension between heaven and earth, spirit and animal, expansion and contraction. Indeed, we can never be fully present unless we recognize and honor all of who we are, including both our expansiveness *and* our limitations.

The most powerful kind of spiritual practice, then, involves bringing these two sides of our nature together—cultivating our larger expansive presence in the midst of our daily round, while also facing and working with all the obstacles that stand in the way of that. Here, in the intersection where the two sides of our nature meet, we can begin to re-member the sacred, or magical, quality of existence.