

Chapter 10

Cultivating Spiritual Virtues

Topics in this Chapter:

- * Improving your life from the inside out
- * Letting virtues arise naturally
- * Unfolding your honesty, compassion, and humility

Spirituality is not just about learning new ideas or doing spiritual practices. It also requires applying what you learn to your daily life. Spiritual is as spiritual does.

Thoughts and actions that bring your soul and the world higher are called virtuous. Hold your decisions and actions up to the light of spiritual wisdom and ask: Is this action right? Is it kind? Is it helpful? Is it just? Is it harmonious? Is it educational? Is this action or decision taking into consideration the bigger picture of the world? Is it enlightened, intelligent, beneficial, honest, humble, and compassionate? Do your actions express the best in yourself rather than the lower pulls of the senses or base emotions? Are your actions being guided by spirit? Are they offered with a clear mind and a pure heart?

Don't worry if you haven't always been virtuous in the past. Today is a new, fresh day. If you weren't spiritually virtuous yesterday, you can be spiritually virtuous today. If you didn't act with spiritual wisdom yesterday, today you can be spiritually wise. If you were a thief, today you can stop being a thief. If you've done something wrong in the past, today you can do things right.

Discovering How Spiritual Awareness Brings Virtues

Although you can and should make efforts to act in a virtuous way, the good news is that spiritual awareness itself inspires you to be naturally virtuous.

The more you understand the spiritual nature of this world and the deeper unity of all things, the more it makes sense to act with honesty, compassion, surrender, and humility. With a more universal vision, spiritual virtues are not so much qualities that you must force yourself to express, but are seen as the best and perhaps only way to respond to the world.

Here are some initial tips for increasing your spiritual vision and virtues:

- Take time to contemplate and consider your priorities and always strive to put first things first.
- Do your best to be more helpful than harmful – not only to yourself or to people you like, but for every single person and living being on this planet (including this living planet!) Stay loyal to the ultimate good.

- Move beyond black-and-white thinking to a bigger, more inclusive awareness. Big-picture thinking is part of spiritual “growing up.” Realize that not everything fits into neat little boxes.
- I’ll let Buddha give the last of these virtue tips, as he taught his followers quite simply to, “Abstain from evil, do good, and purify the mind.”

Jesus also offered advice to his followers about the importance of not just being a groupie but also putting his words into practice and building a strong foundation for their spiritual journeys:

Spiritual Wisdom

Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.

– Luke 6:46-49 (Jesus)

Watching virtues arise naturally

Once you understand, realize, and experience the greatness that is your divine birthright, spiritual virtues come naturally. Therefore, the easiest path to cultivating virtues is to stay focused on your life as an expression of pure spirit. With an expanded spiritual awareness, you naturally speak, think, and act with greater strength, confidence, self-respect, and integrity.

Spiritual awareness guides you to move in harmony with this conscious universe. A solid spiritual nature protects you from the muddy waters of desire, greed, and other not-so-spiritual qualities that can bring you down.

One way universal guidance increases your virtues is by presenting you with situations that challenge you to rise into greater levels of honesty, goodness, generosity, and purity. When your intention is focused on spiritual development and growth, life’s challenges also come along with the grace to benefit and evolve from them.

Your inner peace, spiritual happiness, and self-respect are powerful tools for growing into new virtues. Have you noticed how when you’re feeling happy and full of love, you’re naturally kinder and more generous with the people around you? In the same way, when you develop greater respect and love for yourself, you discover, day by day and year after year, that you naturally become more virtuous. And these virtues will be real — not plastic, manufactured, or ready to fall apart at the first gust of the winds of challenge and temptation.

Spirituality in Action

Krishna's list of virtues

Chapter 16 of the *Bhagavad Gita* offers a powerful list of spiritual qualities to contemplate and cultivate. You can use these positive words to create an empowering affirmation. Go through this list of virtues and say, "I have fearlessness; I have purity of heart; I have steadfastness in higher knowledge," and so on:

"Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in higher knowledge, charity, control of the senses, sacrifice, study of scriptures, austerity, straightforwardness, harmlessness, truth, absence of anger, renunciation, peacefulness, absence of crookedness, compassion towards beings, freedom from covetousness, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness, vigor, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, absence of hatred, absence of pride."

Recognizing the signs of a sage

Spiritual sages tend to live by their own rules, or more accurately, by divine rules that have been revealed to them through their inner wisdom, intuition, and deep-souled guidance.

When most people hear that someone is living by his or her own rules, they assume that these personally designed rules would be more lax and easy than common, traditional societal rules. However, spiritual sages generally hold themselves to a higher degree of virtue and discipline than most people do.

Although different spiritual sages have different styles, ideas, and behaviors, certain qualities are usually present in one form or another, including obvious virtues, such as kindness, honesty, and purity of thought and action. An ancient text called *Yoga Vasishta* describes in more detail some of the signs and qualities that often manifest in the ways and actions of spiritual sages.

Even if you don't consider yourself to be a spiritual sage, you can still contemplate these qualities from the *Yoga Vasishta* and hold them as aspirations and signposts in your own unfolding spiritual journey:

- **Although externally engaged in worldly actions, the sage has no attachment in his mind to any objects whatsoever.** He behaves like an ideal citizen and friend of all. Outwardly, he's busy, but at heart, he's calm and quiet. He's free from the restrictions of caste, creed, stage of life, custom, and scriptures. He doesn't work to get anything for himself. His face is never without the luster of cheerfulness on it.

- **In the company of the humble, the sage is humble.** He plays as a child in the company of children; he is a youth among the young; and he acts as an old man in the company of the aged ones. He is full of courage in the party of the courageous people and shares the misery of the miserable ones.
- **There is nothing the sage has to achieve.** He therefore performs and gives up actions without much concern, like children do. In spite of his being occupied with actions appropriate to the time, place, and circumstances, he isn't touched by the pleasure or pain arising from them. He is full of mercy and magnanimity even when surrounded by enemies. He regards his activities as a part of the cosmic movement and performs them without any personal desire. He never hankers for the pleasures that aren't in his hand, but enjoys all those he has. The idea of "I" and "mine," of something to be achieved and something to be avoided, has died within him.
- **No purpose of the sage is served by any activity or by abstaining from activity.** He, therefore, does as the occasion suits him. He's a great worker. He works without any anxiety, egoistic feeling, pride, or impurity of heart. He's a great enjoyer. He doesn't discard the pleasure he has or desire the pleasure he doesn't have. He finds equal pleasure in old age, death, misery, and poverty, and in ruling over an empire.
- **The life of a liberated sage is really the noblest and happiest life.** From him, goodness is scattered all around. Having seen him, having heard about him, having met him, and having remembered him, all creatures feel delighted.

Be Careful

Even as you strive to become more virtuous, don't get too stuck in judging how virtuous your actions are or how unvirtuous other people's actions are. Although virtuous actions are important for a powerful and positive spiritual journey, these virtues shouldn't distract you from focusing on the divine spirit that exists beyond this material world of both virtuous and nonvirtuous deeds. As the poet Jelalud'Din Rumi's invitation says, *"Beyond the ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there lies a field. I'll meet you there."*

Spiritual Wisdom

Acting from conscience

Here Swami Sivananda describes some of the common ways people approach situations when they don't have the benefit of spiritual virtues, ending with the right answer coming from the power of self-reflection and assessment that is called conscience. Whenever you're about to make a decision in your life, you can check your motivations against this list:

"Cowardice asks, 'Is it safe?'

Avarice asks, 'Is there any gain in it?'

Vanity asks, 'Can I become great?'

Lust asks, 'Is there pleasure in it?'

But conscience asks, 'Is it right?' Conscience prompts you to choose the right way instead of the wrong and informs you that you ought to do the right thing."

Understanding how one virtue leads to another

As you become more aware of your spiritual nature and the spirituality of all things, you naturally begin to think and act in greater accordance with the higher good of all. Here are some ways each virtue can inspire more virtues, beginning with the search for higher truth that has brought you to read this book:

- **As you seek truth**, your own sense of honesty strengthens, clearing the way for you to see more clearly into your pure, spiritual heart.
- **As you look into your heart**, you discover and appreciate the presence of spirit and become more content with who you are, how you are, and where you are.
- **As you become more content**, worldly attachments and desires naturally dissolve into the light of your peaceful, happy heart.
- **As you become free from limited desires**, your faith and surrender increase, inviting the beneficence of universal grace to guide your steps.
- **As you allow yourself to be moved and guided by divine grace**, your humility keeps the dastardly ego from tripping your steps (find more on this dastardly ego in Chapter 3).
- **When your ego is kept at bay**, your tendency toward dissatisfaction expands into gratitude for the perfection of everything.

- **When you glimpse this universal perfection,** you attain the gem of equal vision, seeing that everything is made of divine spirit.

This list shows how each virtue leads to and nourishes the next. Of course, you can contemplate many more big and small virtues besides those named in this chapter. I simply present a few of my favorites to help get the ball rolling.

Gaining the Power of Truth through Honesty

It wasn't by chance that I chose to put honesty first in this exploration of virtues. In my ever-so-humble opinion (don't worry, humility is next!), honesty is paramount on the spiritual journey. After all, the goal of that journey is to attain the highest truth.

Some people make efforts to appear more virtuous than they really are, which isn't quite honest. This tendency brings up a subtle distinction — the difference between making efforts to become more virtuous and merely putting on an outer show without developing true inner virtues. If you put on a plastic smile to hide the sadness you're feeling, that can't be called true happiness, and if you appear to perform good actions just for show, that is not true virtue.

Some have been tempted to substitute an outer-bandage approach of *appearing* virtuous instead of creating real, deep, lasting, and profound spiritual transformation. Here are several problems with this acting-more-virtuous-than-you-are approach:

- **You can't hide who you really are.** Along with the fact that you live in a conscious, intelligent universe that knows what is and is not truth, your subconscious thoughts are also constantly being expressed to other people through everything that comes out of you, including your body language, subliminal speech patterns, and all the ways you express yourself. Even though others may see only what you want them to see on a conscious level, and even if you may seem to fool others by being dishonest, you can be sure that their inner intuition (and the universe itself) is quite aware of any incongruities between your apparent outer virtues and your perhaps not-quite-so inner virtues.
- **The false can obstruct the real.** If you display outer virtues that aren't based on inner sincerity, you may come to think you're virtuous, and others may think you're virtuous. However, this false presentation can actually keep you from doing the inner work necessary for true transformation. Obviously, you need to act appropriately and keep your thoughts, comments, and actions more or less "in the box" when you're in public situations, such as work environments. However, in the privacy of your own home and mind, you can look honestly at what you really feel and think about things in your life. Otherwise, your false image of peacefulness may keep you from doing the inner work required to grow from that circumstance and find true peacefulness. With a happy spirit, you can see and acknowledge the truth of who you are and what you feel so you can grow steadily into greater fields of virtue. The virtue of honesty in the form of self-examination ensures that when you display virtues, they are real.

- **Only true virtues will be there when you need them.** Of course, acting in a virtuous way is always a good idea and tends to inspire more spiritual awareness in your life. Acting happy and thinking positive thoughts can help bring more happiness and positive actions into your life. However, unless you develop virtues that are real and true, you won't be able to apply them to all the events that come up. Remember, life is going to throw some surprises your way — it's inevitable. If you're honest with yourself, whatever real virtues you have will be ready to guide you through all the intricate mazes of this strange ride called life.

Be Careful

Although honesty is a great virtue, it should come with a measure of kindness and consideration. In the name of honesty, you shouldn't just unleash whatever unsavory thoughts and feelings may be bubbling up inside you upon whomever is unfortunate enough to be the one triggering them. The idea is to be honest and decent at the same time.

Discovering the perks of being truthful

Well, aside from Mark Twain's observation that *"If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything,"* being honest can also bring other benefits.

Being honest is a powerful statement to the universe that you trust the world around you, and, more importantly, that you trust and respect yourself. For example, if you're upset about something but have heard that spiritual people never feel upset, you should still honor what you are truly feeling rather than hiding your honest thoughts and feelings just to fit into what other people say you should be feeling. Being truthful with yourself and others empowers your self-examination, self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-respect. Here are a few quick ways to increase your honesty:

- **If you say you're going to be somewhere on time, do your best to be there.** Don't wait until the last possible minute and then hope and pray that there won't be any buildup of traffic as you race dangerously through streets, only to be late and end up inconveniencing those who were depending on you to arrive on time. Plan your schedule so that you'll be able to easefully meet your commitments without creating unnecessary stress for others, for yourself, or for all the drivers who are unfortunate enough to be in your way.
- **Don't offer to do something for someone unless you really intend to do it.** You may feel really good while offering to do a favor or give a gift to someone. Some people become addicted to the positive feeling of being generous, but are not so enthusiastic about the less comfortable responsibility of following through on their offers and promises. Before you jump into the pleasant feeling of seeing someone's face light up with gratitude for your kind offer, be clear and committed that you are prepared to fulfill what you offer.

- **Make a point of keeping your word to yourself.** Keeping your word to yourself means that if you're not ready to change a habit, you don't begin one half-hearted attempt after another, each one doomed to failure. This half-hearted approach can dampen your power of honesty and resolution. Rather, wait until you know deep inside that the time is right for a change and then make the change fully and with total commitment.

Being honest with yourself

Honesty is not only about telling the truth to others, but also doing your best to tell the truth to yourself. When you are clear and honest inside and out, a more esoteric benefit of honesty comes into play: your words become more powerful.

This teaching is expounded in a scripture called the *Yoga Sutras*. In this text, the sage Patanjali explains that when you become completely established in absolute, total honesty, you also attain a kind of supernatural power: Your words begin to come true. You're able to declare a thing and have it be so.

Although this teaching may sound strange at first, it does make logical sense in terms of both the material and spiritual effects of honesty.

- **Material effects of honesty:** When you're continually honest, you get so used to speaking only truth that you take your own words very seriously. Then, when you make a commitment to yourself, you intend, insist, and make sure to keep it. With the power of intention present in every word you speak, your words become more powerful.
- **Spiritual effects of honesty:** Honesty brings you in harmony with the great eternal truth that pervades the whole tapestry of life. As Mohandas Gandhi observed, truth alone will endure; all the rest will be swept away before the tides of time. Because the ultimate nature of this universe is truth, practicing honesty brings you in alignment with the universal power of truth that exists behind all creation, thereby empowering your words and thoughts.

Leaving a door open for God's will

When you're sincere in your efforts to be completely honest, you may be less inclined to make absolute declarations about what you will or will not do in situations where unexpected obstacles could keep you from fulfilling your promise.

Many spiritual folks like to include with their declarations some form of "God willing" to acknowledge their awareness and acceptance of the power of God to either support or change their plans. Muslims often end declarations of intention with the phrase *Insha'llah*, which means, "As God wills it."

"Yes, I will be at the department meeting at nine o'clock sharp . . . as God wills it."
Try that one on your boss!

Understanding Humility

Some think that humility means that you have a low image of yourself, but in fact, spiritual humility is quite the opposite. Through recognizing the awe-inspiring universal perfection of spirit, you also discover your place within that perfection. As one ancient spiritual text explains, "From perfection comes perfection. Even if you take something away from perfection, it nevertheless remains completely perfect."

When you experience an expanded view of universal perfection meeting perfection in yourself, how can there be room for silly feelings of arrogance or pride? Therefore, as with all virtues, the essence of humility lies not so much in adjusting your outer actions and words to appear to be humble, but in shifting your inner state of self-identification so that humility is the only approach that makes sense.

Don't be so humble – you are not that great.

– Golda Meir

To adapt Golda's humorous statement to spiritual humility, I would instead say: "Be humble, because you are greater than you can ever imagine (and so is everyone else!)" Here are some questions that can help inspire your shift into spiritual humility:

- What if you could acknowledge your great qualities without feeling proud about them?
- What if you knew that only through divine grace have you been blessed with your good qualities?

- What if you felt as happy seeing someone else's positive achievements as you do seeing your own?

Humility allows you to bear the opinions of others without balking or feeling obliged to conform to their judgments. With humility, you have the presence of mind to consider every idea that comes your way, yet your guidance ultimately comes from within — from your blessed state of surrender, faith, and self-acceptance.

Consider

Don't take yourself so seriously that you are constantly trying to gauge and compare yourself with how others are. When you don't think about your individual qualities and circumstances too much, then humility comes naturally.

With humble self-acceptance, you gently accept who and what you are, and this acceptance brings you into a greater sense of who and what you *really* are. Humility can be like Popeye's famous line: "I yam what I yam," which, of course, is but a step away from the Lord's famous line: "I Am That I Am."

Be a humble drop of water

Here's an analogy to help you understand the nature of humility, using the common spiritual metaphor of a drop of water falling into the ocean and thereby becoming one with the ocean.

If the drop were to say, "I am the ocean," its assertion would not be false pride, because the drop has indeed merged completely into the water of the ocean, thereby becoming one with it.

However, if the drop were to say, "I'm the best damn drop that has ever merged into this ocean," then perhaps it would not be such a humble drop!

Resting in the humility of your heart

Unlike some of the other virtues, humility can be especially difficult to gauge, both in yourself and in others. I mean, if you think you're humble, what does that say? And if you don't think you're humble, maybe you're right or maybe you're just too humble to acknowledge your own humility.

When the light of humility dawns on the soul, the darkness of selfishness disappears and the soul no longer lives for itself, but for God. The soul loses itself in God, lives in God, and is transformed into Him. This is the alchemy of humility. It transforms the lowest into the Highest.

— Kirpal Singh

Consider

Staying free from harmful comparisons

Here are some tips to help keep you free from the habit of comparing yourself to others:

- If you see someone who seems to have a better situation than you — such as someone who has better looks, more success, a better attitude, a bigger wardrobe, or more happiness — you can use their example to improve your own situation. You can also transform harmful comparisons into positive opportunities by shifting your awareness into a higher perspective and lowering your focus on outer qualities and materialistic desires. You can strengthen your feeling of self-respect rather than using someone else's good fortune as an excuse for feeling bad about yourself or pulling out the cat claws to tear the person down.
- If you see someone who lacks some of your good qualities, you can keep pride and arrogance away by understanding that the person may have other qualities that are better than yours, by feeling a humble gratitude for the good qualities you are blessed to have, and by sending the person and everyone else blessings to be the best and happiest that they can possibly be.
- Rather than focusing on who is better or worse than anyone else, keep your awareness centered on the divine spirit that expresses through all. A vision of universal unity naturally brings with it the virtue of humility. Far from being a weak stance, true humility is strong, powerful, and grounded in your identification with the highest.

In some cultures, humility is expressed by bowing to one another or by reaching down to touch the other person's feet. I have witnessed some fairly humorous scenes with great beings meeting one another and practically fighting over touching each other's feet first to show their humility. I'm not saying that this behavior is a bad thing, but it's an amusing sight to behold.

Be Careful

True humility can sometimes look like ego or pride to those who don't understand the nature of this virtue. For example, if you know that your talents and achievements have come through divine grace, then you can receive praise for them with a smile, a nod of agreement, and a shared appreciation for those gifts. Still, even if your acquiescence to praise is coming from a pure sense of gratitude and humility, some may misinterpret it as coming from a lack of humility — giving you more opportunities to stay humble under the duress of their incorrect opinions.

Some saints and sages who, through humility, realized and proclaimed their oneness with God were misunderstood by those who had not achieved their elevated awareness. Some sages were punished, crucified, or martyred for proclaiming their higher identification by those who didn't understand their true state of humility.

The humble prayer of an unknown Confederate soldier

The following prayer, appropriately anonymous, shows how humility can fill even challenging times with great spiritual growth and significance:

"I asked God for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I may enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am, among all men, most richly blessed."

Protecting your virtues through humility

Here are just a few benefits that come from the virtue of humility:

- Humility, like its friend surrender, brings you to a place of greater inner freedom. You're not trying to impress others, but rather aspire to fulfill a greater destiny and be of service to all. With humility, you don't need to rack up huge credit-card debts to buy fancy furnishings and clothes to show off to your friends, but can make decisions from spiritual wisdom, intelligence, and self-knowledge.

- With humility, if you discover you've been doing something wrong, you are better able to see your error and take steps to correct it without being distracted by the ego's defense systems of making excuses and blaming others. For example, if you have failed to fulfill a promised commitment due to being swayed by a more pleasant opportunity, humility keeps you from trying to cover up your action by lying or blaming others. Instead, you can take note of the harmful effects of your selfish actions, take responsibility for your choices, humbly apologize to whoever was harmed by your transgression, and commit to yourself that you'll be more careful about giving and keeping your word in the future.
- Humility also keeps you from being overcome by guilt or shame due to any mistakes you've made in the past. Everyone at some point in their lives inevitably falls short of their greater aspirations. Maybe you took something you shouldn't have taken or said something you shouldn't have said. During such times, humility allows you to confront your erroneous ways without falling into the kinds of extreme self-condemnation, guilt, shame, or low self-esteem that can weaken your resolve and bring about even more failings. With humility, your love and self-respect for yourself stays strong as you focus on doing what is best in each moment.
- With humility, you know that you are an individual expression of spirit and can let that spirit express through you as a flow of creative inspiration. Your focus shifts from the usual concerns people have about what others think of them and moves into an egoless flow of action that opens the door to spiritual guidance and grace.

Spiritual Wisdom

Humble words

Here some great spiritual sages describe the importance of humility:

- "Those who aspire to greatness must humble themselves."
— Lao-tzu
- "It was pride that changed angels to devils; it is humility that makes men angels."
— St. Augustine
- "The tree laden with fruit always bends low."
— Ramakrishna

Wishing Everyone Well with Compassion

Compassion is another important spiritual virtue to cultivate. Compassion comes from an amazing ability human beings have to feel empathy. You see something happen to someone else and are able to feel it in your heart and soul. In fact, sometimes you may find it easier to have compassion for others than for yourself.

The spiritual thing to do in any situation is to wish everyone well in whatever lessons and situations they may be going through. Nobody gets it easy in life. Whether rich, poor, beautiful, ugly, intelligent, or ignorant, people have to deal with challenges and problems, regardless of their station and circumstances in life.

Some Buddhist masters go so far as to say that life is inherently made up of suffering. Realizing that everyone has to go through suffering and difficulties helps you create an umbrella of compassion that covers everyone.

Spiritual Wisdom

When we finally know we are dying, and all other sentient beings are dying with us, we start to have a burning, almost heartbreaking sense of the fragility and preciousness of each moment and each being, and from this can grow a deep, clear, limitless compassion for all beings.

— Sogyal Rinpoche

Compassion often comes from digested challenges. For example, you may go through a terribly difficult experience that brings up feelings of helplessness, anger, frustration, grief, or sadness. Then, the next thing you know, your concern for other people becomes stronger.

Perhaps someone doesn't offer you a helping hand when you need one, so you make a commitment to help others in the future when you see them in need. Or someone betrays your trust by breaking her word, and after experiencing the disastrous effects of her actions, you become more trustworthy to others in the future. After experiencing the pain of losing a loved one, you may be inspired to extend your help, care, and blessings to others who are going through the same struggles.

Be Careful

Compassion isn't meant to entangle you unnecessarily in other people's situations or to make you feel angry with whomever or whatever is causing another person to suffer. When you're guided and able to help someone, true compassion allows you to do so with a positive attitude, peacefulness, and a tenderness of the heart.

Increasing your power of compassion through empathy

Through empathy, you have the very precious ability to learn from watching other people's life lessons. You watch someone learn a lesson, and you are able to learn the same lesson without having to go through the same outer circumstances yourself. This ability to learn from other's mistakes is one reason why watching certain reality television shows can actually be beneficial to your journey – if you are watching them with a spiritual focus and intention to study human nature and the laws of nature.

As with all the virtues, increasing your spiritual awareness also increases your ability to feel compassion and empathy:

- **Your compassion automatically expands when you realize that we are all one.** Humanity is one great big family. And, in spirit, all people, beings, and things are one on an even higher level. Therefore, anyone who comes before you is, in a sense, a part of you. Their joy is your joy, their pain your pain, and your compassion for them is ultimately compassion for yourself. It is from this universal view that some Buddhists make the amazingly compassionate vow to save all beings from the ocean of worldly suffering before saving themselves.
- **Your empathy naturally increases when you clear away the inner cobwebs of anger, greed, and jealousy.** Think about the following:
 - Have there been times in your life when you were happy to see something bad happen to someone who you thought deserved the pain?
 - Have you ever seen somebody achieve great fortune and instead of feeling happy for them, found yourself overcome by that not-so-fortunate feeling of jealousy?

Consider

These kinds of negative tendencies keep you from feeling true empathy for others, and also keep your own good fortune far away. However, after spirituality uplifts your body, mind, and spirit, you become like a clear mirror that is happy to see good things happen to everyone.

Spiritual Wisdom

Advice from Patanjali

Here, the ancient yoga scholar Patanjali offers helpful advice on how to respond to the different kinds of people you encounter:

- Be friendly with those who are happy.
- Have compassion toward those who are suffering.
- Have sympathetic joy toward those who are virtuous
- Be indifferent toward those who are wicked.

Being compassionate in today's world

Modern society faces a unique situation regarding suffering and compassion, mainly due to the prevalence of media. People today witness massive amounts of violence and tragedy without necessarily having to be present or involved with the situations surrounding them, as was the case with the wars, famines, plagues, and other disasters of ages gone by.

You sit down to watch a bit of television after a long day at work, and what do you see? On drama shows, you may see graphic shootings and an amazing array of troubles, woes, dangers, and fears. On news shows, you'll see a string of reports and stories about intense, often violent situations. Some tragedies are real, some are fiction, and most of the time it is difficult to distinguish between the two.

How do you respond to so many disasters as you sit comfortably on your couch or recliner? How many people have you watched be killed from the comfort of your home? Do you respond any differently to the real disasters than you do to the fictional ones?

The relatively recent explosion of news media has to some degree numbed the viewing public to their own compassion. I mean, just moments ago I had the television on and heard a quick teaser for news at 11 with a fast-paced professional news-anchor voice rushing to say, "We'll tell you about a local fire where several children were killed."

How can you feel compassion for each situation when you are constantly bombarded by disasters, any of which would have been the talk of the town in centuries gone by?

Watching the news compassionately

I witnessed a concentrated example of how compassion can be numbed when I left a decade of monastic life and began to work as an editor for one of the news stations in Los Angeles. Not only did I see intensely dramatic stories, but I saw them over and over while piecing the video footage together for broadcast. To be sure, this footage was a far cry from the spiritual wisdom videos I had been editing during the previous ten years!

News people have to learn not to let the disasters "get to them." You might say that they have to turn off their compassion to some degree, or they would be crying at every story. As just one of many examples of how numbed news people can become, whenever the Los Angeles police chased a car (which was a fairly common occurrence), our newsroom folks would watch all the angles of coverage on the television monitors that lined the newsroom walls. Several times, someone would go around the newsroom taking actual bets on whether the driver would live or die, as cheering or jeering filled the room, depending on who had won or lost the bet.

When you watch the news, understand that decisions are being made by people who live and breathe news, and who may see a horrific story as just another way to entice viewers to watch their show. Your mission as a spiritually aware person is to not get dragged into complacency, numbness, or anxiety, but to watch, care, trust, and remain anchored in spiritual awareness and faith all at the same time.

Compassion is often a byproduct of properly digested suffering. If you feel a sense of compassion for someone who is suffering — especially from a situation you have previously gone through — you're giving a signal to the conscious universe that you've got the message. You've properly digested your suffering from that challenge and have transformed your suffering into compassion for others.

With this shift from suffering into compassion, you won't necessarily have to go through the same kind of sufferings over and over in your life, as the same lessons come again and again, trying to break the shell of your heart to release the sweet nectar of compassion.

The lessening of suffering for yourself and others is just one of many ways that spiritual virtues help to create a happier life and a better world. More compassion, humility, honesty, and empathy equal less suffering.

Be Careful

Having compassion for those who are suffering doesn't always have to translate into making efforts to relieve them of suffering. Sometimes you're not able to help, and at other times, you may see people who are learning important lessons by going through certain hardships. These occasions are where your spiritual discernment comes in handy, allowing you to look at a situation and decide whether and how to express your compassion outwardly.

Spiritual Wisdom

Wise words about doing unto others

Being helpful to others is one of the primary tenets of spirituality and humanity. Here are some wonderful words of guidance about the Golden Rule:

- “What is unpleasant to thyself, that do not do unto thy neighbor. This is the whole law. All else is exposition.”
— Hillel
- “Try to do to others as you would have them do to you and do not be discouraged if they fail sometimes. It is much better that they should fail than that you should.”
— Charles Dickens
- “Behave to your servants as you desire God to behave to you.”
— Philo
- “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”
— Matthew 23:39
- “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”
— Dalai Lama
- “We may wonder, whom can I love and serve? Where is the face of God to whom I can pray? The answer is simple: That naked one. That lonely one. That unwanted one who is my brother and my sister. If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”
— Mother Teresa