

Chapter 11

Uplifting Your Whole Life

Topics in this Chapter:

- * Staying focused on spirit
- * Serving with love
- * Finding true abundance
- * Keeping good company

One of the most important aspects of spirituality is to see things from a broader, more long-term perspective. Spirituality connects you with a part of yourself that lives beyond the material world — beyond birth and death and the joys and sorrows of life.

Anchored in your spiritual depths, you're not as easily swept away by the waves of temporary temptations that give joy in one moment, but take away your joy in the next. You won't seek to fill your life with only fool's gold, while neglecting the real treasure of spiritual awakening. You'll be able to approach every aspect of your life with a positive and powerful sense of freedom, generosity, love, and service.

Moving from Worldly Limitations to Spiritual Freedom

Spiritual Wisdom

A boat may stay in the water, but water should not stay in the boat. An aspirant may live in the world, but the world should not live in him.

— Sri Ramakrishna

The Indian sage Sri Ramakrishna also describes the state of a spiritually aware person as being like a nanny in a rich family who brings up the child in her care with the same love as if it were her own, but who knows full well that she has no claim upon it.

In the same way, it is possible for you to live a successful and fully engaged life without being too attached to the specific external details. Whether you like, love, dislike, or try to change the details of your life, you can still experience spiritual freedom from the burdens that come with feeling too much attachment to things.

Consider

The key to this inner freedom is to look at life with a spiritual awareness that extends beyond your individual temporary circumstances.

Having the peaceful equanimity that comes when you're free from excessive attachments to things of this world doesn't mean that you lose interest in the events and responsibilities of your life, but that

- You ride the waves of life without being drawn underwater by the lows or getting overly elated by the highs.
- You stay inwardly peaceful even while dealing with urgent tasks.
- You remember the eternal nature even in the midst of time deadlines.
- You attain steadiness and contentment – qualities that are great friends for your spiritual journey.
- You remain free from the anxiety of needing to have everything be exactly as you think it should be.
- You act, strive, live, and give whole-heartedly while remembering that your greatest riches exist beyond the physical world.

Be Careful

Enjoying everything in your life is great, but getting overly attached to those things is not so great.

Rising above limited desires

How can you get off this roller-coaster ride of wanting and getting, wanting more and getting more — being disappointed and then relieved; happy and then sad? In answering this question, spiritual sages of many traditions have advised people to do the following:

- Remember the temporary nature of life.
- Loosen your focus on materialistic desires.
- Remember the underlying, imperishable, divine current that eternally flows behind, beyond, and within this topsy-turvy, ever-changing, undependable world.

A 7th century poet-philosopher from India named Bhartrihari wrote a famous treatise called “The hundred verses on renunciation.” In this section, Bhartrihari describes how attachment turns even blessings into fears:

With enjoyment, comes fear of disease
With social position, fear of disfavor
With riches, fear of hostile people
With honor, fear of humiliation
With power, fear of enemies
With beauty, fear of old age
With scholarship, fear of challengers
With virtue, fear of traducers
With the identification with body, fear of death
Everything in this world is done with fear
Renunciation alone makes one fearless.

Don't Forget

Renunciation doesn't just mean to renounce things, but to renounce your attachment to things.

Moving beyond desires and attachments

When you're dealing with desires, nothing is ever enough. Haven't you noticed that when you finally get something you've been wanting, you almost immediately begin to want something else? Desires are like hair that keeps growing no matter how many times you cut it. Desires, attachments, and sense pleasures can bring many troubles:

- **Desires and attachments keep your mind and heart occupied with things that won't last.** When making life choices, you may have to choose between momentary pleasures and eternal, spiritual happiness. Remember that eternal happiness also includes happiness in each moment – making eternal happiness the extra-special, super-deluxe, all-in-one deal.
- **Sense pleasures may bring temporary happiness, but can also block your deeper, long-term happiness.** Indulging your senses too much lowers your will power and limits your enjoyments to the outer surface of life. For example, scratching an itchy scab may bring some immediate pleasant sensations, but can also keep the wound from healing and even open your skin to infections. In the same way, indulging in too many sense pleasures can create various spiritual, mental, and physical problems and can keep you from experiencing the much more exquisite and long-lasting joys of spiritual happiness.

- **Worldly pleasures usually cause pain somewhere down the line.** Perhaps you lose what you once had or become bored after the initial excitement wears off. For example, you may be attached to somebody and feel really great when you're with the person, but when she's gone, those happy feelings may turn to sadness or loneliness. Or you may be thrilled to have someone respond in kind to your desire to get to know each other, only to become bored or irritated once the person has been around for a while.

Don't Forget

Rather than relying on other people or objects to make you happy, your best spiritual course to long-term happiness is to find the source of happiness within yourself. Then you can create a great life that includes all the people and things you like and love, but without having the kinds of attachments and desires that bring pain when the external situations change — as most external situations eventually do.

With non-attachment, you can let something go when you're done with it. This approach of letting go applies not only to worldly attachments, but also to spiritual ones. Suppose that you pick up a book at random and find words that give exactly the guidance you need to address the challenges before you – as though the words in this book are flowing to you directly from the lips of the beneficent universe itself.

When you have non-attachment, you can fully receive and appreciate a divine message without feeling obligated to spend the next 20 years reading the same book over and over again, regardless of whether it continues to have the same profound effect on you. Attachment makes you focus your energy on the outer form that has carried and delivered a blessing, rather than on the blessing itself. With non-attachment, the grace energy of the universe can guide you in the most efficient and powerful way in every moment, as you move more gently and freely with the flow of life.

Entering a vision of equality

Spiritual Wisdom

Everybody is unique. Compare not yourself with anybody else lest you spoil God's curriculum.

— Baal Shem Tov

One of the most important spiritual qualities to attain is the state of equality consciousness. With *equality consciousness*, you see the universal creative force behind, within, and expressing as each form, rather than only seeing the outer details of the form.

With equality consciousness, you see the spiritual power that exists equally in everything even as you relate appropriately to all the necessary perceptions, judgments, actions, and decisions of life.

- Equality consciousness helps you let go of binding desires and enter a place of inner freedom.
- Equality consciousness brings peacefulness of mind.
- Equality consciousness allows you to make better long-term decisions based on a bigger picture view of universal spirit.
- Equality consciousness inspires you to be excellent even when nobody is watching.

Having equality consciousness is like being a jeweler who is purchasing gold. To the jeweler, gold is gold, regardless of its outer form. He weighs whatever pieces people bring to sell and pays them according to the weight of gold. The gold may be in the form of beautiful jewelry, a religious statue, or a lumpy brick, but none of those external details matters to the jeweler. His only interest is in the carats and weight of gold.

Seeing with equal vision is like being a jeweler of spirit. What matters most are not the details of outer forms, but the divine nature that exists within those forms. Equality consciousness helps you see people's worth beyond the usual determining factors, such as how much money or worldly stature they've achieved. Instead, your vision shifts from worldly matters to the great spiritual value that exists within each human heart.

With equality consciousness, you know that the servant is as valuable as the king, and the secretary is as valuable as the CEO. In fact, one thing I learned while working for various television and film studios in Hollywood is the immense power of a benevolent secretary to help get you that desired meeting, or the power of a friendly cleaning crew member to let you into the studio when you've lost your key.

With equality consciousness, you break free from the common materialistic focus and find as much appreciation for inner peace, a child's laugh, or a beautiful sunset as some would experience from getting a promotion, getting married, or winning an award.

Just think: If you could feel as much joy from taking a breath of fresh air in the morning as you would experience from achieving a worldly goal that has taken years of effort, then you get to experience happiness, joy, and contentment much more often than if you withhold and save your happiness and appreciation for only major outer events. Equality consciousness helps you see beyond appearances into the spiritual value of everything. With equality consciousness, you know that in spirit everyone is equally important – not just in terms of what they can do for you, but inherently so.

With equality consciousness, you still see all the different qualities of people and forms. You can distinguish their features, and even feel preferences for certain qualities over others. Yet, you also know that – just as all objects are made up of the same protons, neutrons, and electrons – everything is also made up of one Supreme Spirit. Each contributor to this dance of universal creation has a role to play and a melody to add, whether they're kind or not, beautiful or not, and accomplished or not.

Be Careful

Equality consciousness doesn't mean that you don't see the difference between a hundred-dollar bill and a pile of doggie doo. Rather, even as you pick up the hundred-dollar bill and step around the doggie doo, deep inside, you don't respond with extreme greed or disdain for either.

With equality consciousness, even as you feel that some people are special to you – whether they are family members or friends – you simultaneously know that every living being on this planet is also your brother, sister, and friend.

Some people think that having detachment and renunciation means that they won't get to have fun, be successful, or achieve great wealth. Perhaps this belief exists because many who detach from the common sources of pleasure are able to see more objectively how short-lived these pleasures are and choose to live simpler lives.

Is it possible to live surrounded with worldly pleasures and still stay detached and focused on spirit? Yes, although not very many people can easily achieve this balance. Therefore, some seekers who are firmly committed to spiritual growth above all else may choose to spend more of their time and efforts on what they feel to be more substantial spiritual goals – such as awakening to divine inner wisdom and soaring with sweet freedom in the eternal flow of universal bliss. This bliss is even better than eating chocolate cake, although chocolate cake together with universal bliss can also be a great combination!

From Work to Divine Service

Spiritual Wisdom

What is Divine Service that is done with joy and goodness of heart? This is song.

– Talmud

Divine service is striving to do what the universe guides you to do, with good intentions and freedom from attachment to the results. Divine service is a magical willingness that helps you receive guidance on how you may be helpful to a person, a place, an event, or humanity. Divine service is doing what needs to be done because the need has come before you and you're in a position to do it.

You may serve by establishing or supporting charities that serve various societal needs. Or you may serve by giving smiles and kind words as you walk through your day. Sometimes you may receive pay for your service, and other times you may not receive anything beyond the inner satisfaction of having given freely of your time, energy, and skills to bring more goodness and light to the world.

Once you become more spiritually aware, service is simply what makes sense. Service becomes not so much an effort or burden, but an inner stance in relationship to the world around you. You look for ways to bring greater healing and light to the world. Wherever you are, you can walk into any situation with a gentle willingness to serve.

For example, you sit at a café to enjoy a pastry and notice a single mother next to you who is looking stressed while struggling with her unruly child. You can give a compassionate smile or even have a chat with this new friend to see whether you can say something that would help alleviate her burdens. This is how I tend to walk through the world, and I've found that my inner willingness often brings about meetings and situations where I'm able to give some friendly suggestion or supportive help to a fellow traveler of life.

You can also get to a point where everything you do is done in the spirit of service – including brushing your teeth, feeding yourself with healthier foods than I just ate for lunch (ahem . . .), or walking in nature with a feeling of wanting to enjoy and serve the energy of the environment through your respectful appreciations, peaceful energy, and positive thoughts.

Service also includes efforts you make to sit quietly in prayer or meditation and taking care of your body, mind, and spirit so that you can be a good vehicle for serving in large or small ways from wherever you are in any moment.

Serving without personal motives

One way to shift from work to divine service is to remember and realize the temporary nature of life. The truth is that no matter how much you accomplish, you'll be gone from this world one day.

Here is a penetrating question to contemplate: Would you devote your life to serving God and humanity, knowing the credit for the beneficial results would never be yours and could ultimately go to someone else?

In a sense, all good world leaders make this sacrifice – preparing the way for future abundance they may never receive credit for, at least during their lifetime. Yet they strive to build new benefits for future generations anyway.

The shift from work to divine service comes, in part, from realizing and remembering the temporary nature of life. One sweet day, you'll leave this world. Nobody will remember what you did or who you were, unless you've managed to leave a large enough dent in the world to be remembered for a while. Will you even know or care what people in this world say about you after you're gone? Perhaps so, but probably not.

Mother Teresa was one of the great servants of humanity in the 20th century. She and the sisters of her order cared for the poorest, most forgotten people with love and respect. On her wall, Mother Teresa kept the following advice:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Love them anyway. If you do good, people may accuse you of selfish motives. Do good anyway. If you are successful, you may win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway. People who really want help may attack you if you help them. Help them anyway. Give the world the best you have and you may get hurt. Give the world your best anyway.

Seeing how service and success work together

Working without requiring material benefits in return may sound strange in this society, where people are used to working very specifically to receive pay, while sometimes filling out time sheets to the nearest 15-minute increment. However, acting with freedom from personal desire can still be compatible with achieving success.

In fact, freeing yourself from expectations of personal rewards can open your mind and spirit into more creativity and inspiration and allow you to make initially unpaid efforts that may pay off handsomely in the future.

Here is one of those strange spiritual laws: sometimes you get more when you're less attached. Just think of times in your own life when you may have wanted something very badly, and what you wanted came to you only after you gave up your intense desire and moved into a receptive state of allowing.

Spiritual Wisdom

When an archer is shooting for nothing, he has all his skill. If he shoots for a brass buckle, he is already nervous. If he shoots for a prize of gold, he goes blind or sees two targets — He is out of his mind. His skill has not changed. But the prize divides him. He cares. He thinks more of winning than of shooting — And the need to win drains him of power.

—Chuang Tzu

If you don't have detachment from the fruits of your actions, you won't even be able to meet the very common tests and obstacles along the road to success. For example, you may have to pay your dues somewhere along the line by doing some apprentice or internship work for free to learn certain skills.

Be Careful

Turning your work into divine service doesn't mean that you have to live like a pauper (a lesson I haven't always learned so well!) Even if you're getting paid very well for the work you do, you can still perform your actions as service.

Even if you work in a non-spiritual corporate environment, you can bring a service approach by looking for ways to be helpful to your work environment. You can serve the people around you by bringing a positive attitude, showing a good example, or offering a cheerful greeting. You can make sure that someone who is being forgotten gets the recognition that he or she deserves. You can strive to inspire corporate decisions that are based on integrity and a win-win-win approach where the world also benefits from the company's work.

Spiritual Wisdom

Wise words about service

Many great spiritual servants have passed through this world. Some are still passing through today. Here are some of their inspired words about divine, selfless service:

- “God can do great things through the man who doesn’t care who gets the credit.”
—Robert Schuller
- “Joy can be real only if people look upon their life as a service, and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.”
—Leo Tolstoy
- “Only that which is done not for fame nor name, nor for appreciation or thanks of those for whom it is done, is life’s service.”
—Hazrat Inayat Khan
- “The test of real service of God is that it leaves behind it the feeling of humility.”
—Baal Shem Tov
- “Do your work and perform your duties with all your heart. Try to work selflessly with love. Pour yourself into whatever you do. Then you will feel and experience beauty and love in every field of work.”
—Mata Amritanandamayi
- “All service of God must be performed with gladness and zest, otherwise it is not perfect.”
—the Zohar
- “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.”
—Rabindranath Tagore

From Forgiveness to Gratitude

Spiritual Wisdom

I have learned silence from the talkative, tolerance from the intolerant and kindness from the unkind.

—Kahlil Gibran

Somewhere along your journey through life, people will betray your trust in them. Someone will break his word or even break your heart, and you may end up feeling resentment for the pain caused by their harmful actions.

The problem with feeling resentment is, well, that you're feeling resentment. Who wants to walk around feeling resentment all the time? Or any of the time?

Plus, after you awaken to a more expanded, more spiritual view of life, you come to realize that there is no good reason to be angry or resentful toward anyone, at least not on a long-term basis, because you know that

- Everybody does the best they can with whatever they have to work with. You may think that someone could or should be doing better than they are, but each soul is going through an array of seen and unseen life lessons that can create bad habits, wrong understandings, and materialistic obsessions. These negative qualities can distort a person's ability to make good decisions.
- Everyone is an expression of universal spirit; therefore whatever they do is somehow part of the perfect universal plan — even if its plan is to tick you off! Just entertaining this point of view will help to make your spiritual journey happier and smoother. When someone is being really irritating, you can chuckle to yourself or even shake your finger at God saying, “You divine trickster. What a strange form you took to ruffle my feathers this time.”
- Resentment dampens the light of your own happiness. Resentment and anger also cause a lot of other potential problems, such as drawing to yourself more opportunities to feel more resentment and anger. As Chapter 15 explains, your thoughts are very powerful in drawing to you more of whatever you focus on.

Be Careful

Making efforts to forgive is a great spiritual practice, but pretending that you've forgiven when you haven't really done so can keep you from processing your thoughts and feelings properly so that you can eventually grow into true spiritual forgiveness. As with other challenging experiences, your angers or resentments must be acknowledged so that they can be brought forth from the shadows of hidden thoughts and into the light of divine spiritual awareness.

Forgiving someone's bad actions also doesn't mean that you should ignore or hide what they've done. Even with a forgiving heart, you can still take steps to keep yourself and others from being harmed by the person's actions in the future. The key is to respond without burning in the flames of anger, resentment, and hatred.

Spiritual Wisdom

Words from forgiving folks

“In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

—Anne Frank

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.”

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.”

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

“You must forgive those who transgress against you before you can look to forgiveness from God.”

—Talmud

“Love in the making sees faults, but forgives them. Love in its grand fulfillment never sees any faults; hence it has nothing to forgive.”

—Papa Ramdas

“To err is human; to forgive, divine.”

—Alexander Pope

Moving beyond forgiveness

Many therapists, books, and tapes are available to help you forgive your parents, siblings, friends, enemies, boss, spouse, children, and, of course, yourself. However, spirituality ratchets the forgiveness paradigm up a notch or two.

I call this section “Moving beyond forgiveness” because forgiving another person means that you’re still judging him or her, and possibly harboring some hidden resentment inside yourself. Also, judging another person can leave yourself open for judgment in return. The Lord’s Prayer teaches the importance of forgiving by asking God to “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*,” a statement that is also in harmony with theories about karma (see Chapter 15). As you forgive, so you are forgiven.

True forgiveness is to rise into a bigger view of universal oneness, and to have faith that whatever happens in your life is a part of the big-picture experience of joys and sorrows that you’re meant to experience as a human being living on planet Earth at this time.

True forgiveness is so powerful that one Indian scripture declares that someone who is truly forgiving cannot be burned by fire or drowned by water, and that even wild beasts become docile before a truly forgiving person!

Maintaining an attitude of gratitude

Spiritual Wisdom

When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive — to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love. —Marcus Aurelius

You have a choice, no matter who you are or what your life is like. You can either be grateful for whatever you have, or you can be ungrateful. I suggest that making an effort to be more consciously grateful for whatever large or small blessings have come into your life is a good idea. Gratitude is the magic formula, not only for forgiveness, but also for happiness and peacefulness, along with worldly and spiritual success.

When you're grateful, you're likely to be in a better mood, and when you're in a better mood, you're likely to be kinder and friendlier with people, generating more friendliness in return. Being in a good mood automatically makes your life better and helps you work, play, and love better.

Having a bigger-picture spiritual view of life gives you many more opportunities to feel gratitude. Everything is a gift from God and divine spirit, and the more grateful you are, the more opportunities you'll likely have to experience even more gratitude. The world inherently draws to you people and experiences that reflect your thoughts and feelings; therefore, having gratitude can reflect back to you in wonderful ways.

Eventually you may achieve a state of mind that maintains a base level feeling of gratitude at all times and in all circumstances. True gratitude is ultimately independent of the specific details of your life. A true attitude of gratitude is an unconditional appreciation for everything, all at once.

Spirituality in Action

Thank you, God!

Here's a contemplation that can help you feel more gratitude for everything in your life:

- 1. Take a few moments to contemplate something you're especially grateful for in your life.** Allow your feelings of gratitude to come forth, while remembering all the details about whomever or whatever you're feeling grateful for.
- 2. Now, remove the outer circumstances from your mind and focus your attention on just on the feeling of gratitude that remains.**
- 3. Allow that essence of gratitude to expand throughout everything in your life.**

Be grateful for life itself, without limiting your gratitude to anything in particular.

From Greed to Divine Abundance

Spiritual Wisdom

Who is rich? The one who appreciates what he has.

—Talmud

I've enjoyed the comforts and pleasures of life as much as anyone else — well, maybe not quite as much as some, having spent ten years living a monastic life in an Indian-based ashram. But then I had a chance to try out the other side, when I moved from the ashram to Hollywood. Within a few years, I went from living a very simple life to generating a six-figure income and hanging out with actors, directors, and other folks “in the biz.”

A few years later, another shift came when I was recovering from some health issues, beginning a new career as author, and focusing on spiritual and charitable works, while once again living a simple and austere life.

One thing I've learned from these materialistic ups and downs is that the amount of happiness experienced from acquiring things is relative to what you have at the time. On one particular day in the ashram, I remember experiencing great happiness from buying a new toothbrush. I returned from the store and happily showed my acquisition to a visiting acquaintance, who said, “Now I know this yoga really works if you can be so happy about a toothbrush!”

In fact, it has become clear to me that contrary to what all those commercials say, the relationship between external accoutrements and inner happiness is sketchy at best. I know many who have gone to great lengths to satiate all their desires, yet who seem less deeply fulfilled than those who have less.

Isn't it true that gourmet food on a full stomach doesn't taste nearly as good as even the simplest fare when you're exceptionally hungry? The understanding that no quality can exist without its opposite helps to bring a sense of comfort to even the most troublesome times. Without darkness, there is no light; without sorrow, no joy; without hunger, no satiation.

Can you really have it all?

One common saying today is that “You can have it all!” Well, the harmonious combination of spiritual abundance and material abundance is not quite as simple as it sounds. Is it good to enjoy life? Yes! However, what does it really mean to enjoy life? Can you really have material abundance along with spiritual abundance? Are most materially rich people equally wealthy in love, joy, happiness, and spiritual wisdom? Why did so many saints and sages choose to live simple lives when they could have just used the secret law of attraction to live in luxury?

These questions are especially important to consider in today's world, with so many enticing things to enjoy, and where money, relationships, and career aren't considered so much as options, but goals and requirements in their own right. Here are two contrasting takes on this topic, both from a spiritual point of view:

- **No, you can't have it all.** For centuries, monastics of every tradition have concluded that keeping themselves away from the temptations of worldly pleasures was necessary to keep their attention focused on their spiritual or religious efforts. I personally spent a decade in a monastic-style ashram and very much enjoyed the experience of leaving the media-laden, commercial world in favor of a spiritually focused, simple (but nevertheless exciting and challenging) life. I didn't read newspapers, rarely watched television, and went to only one or two movies during these ten monastic years. I wasn't interested in money, relationships, or climbing up a corporate ladder.

Yet, although I didn't have a chance to enjoy what many would call the good things in life, inside I was receiving precious spiritual treasures. My inner being was empowered and uplifted by my focus on scriptures, prayers, devotion, and enthusiastic service.

- **Yes, you can have it all.** Some modern-day preachers attract huge masses of followers by giving the enticing message that God — yes, God Himself — wants *you* to be rich! Even some ancient scriptures suggest that you can have material and spiritual abundance at the same time. One of the philosophies Swami Muktananda introduced to the spiritual mix of the late 20th century was a spiritual philosophical tradition called Kashmir Shaivism, which I cover in more detail in Chapter 14. This ancient and fairly obscure philosophy is one of the most complete, wide, and all-encompassing views of the nature of reality that I've come across.

One of the main teachings of Kashmir Shaivism philosophy is that this entire world and everything in it is made of divine consciousness. According to this view, anything can be a porthole for experiencing the divine, if you have the right kind of awareness.

Many philosophical schools and spiritual teachers from India set divisions between worldly life and spiritual life; however, Muktananda traveled the world, telling everyone to “attain God” right in the midst of their lives. While giving spiritual teachings and practices such as meditation and chanting, Muktananda explained that you don't have to leave your families, your jobs, or your homes to attain spiritual realization, because this entire universe and everything in it is a play of divine consciousness. He would tell us to enjoy and witness the play of our lives. He'd encourage us to be filled with joy and ecstasy, and through spiritual disciplines and blessings, to see the supreme consciousness that exists in and as everything. He'd tell us not to despise or run away from this world, and explained that with a shift of spiritual awareness, you can attain God right where you are. Muktananda said, “Change your understanding. Change the prescription of your glasses. Know that you are a part of God.”

Clearly, this teaching suggests that you really can have it all. However, the key is to elevate your vision and understanding to a level from which you're free from the traps of this world while still enjoying the world.

Finding true generosity

One afternoon, a wealthy man was riding in the back of his limousine when he saw a small group of poor people who were so hungry that they were eating grass from the roadside. The wealthy man ordered his driver to stop and stepped out to find out more about their situation. He asked one of the men, "Why are you eating grass?"

"We don't have money for food," the poor man replied.

"Well, you can come with me to my house," replied the wealthy man.

"But sir, I've got a wife and three kids here, and my brother's family also."

"Bring them along!" insisted the wealthy man.

They all excitedly climbed into the limousine, and while being driven to the wealthy man's house, the poor fellow gratefully said, "Sir, you are too kind. Thank you for taking all of us with you."

The wealthy man replied, "Glad to do it. You'll love my place. The grass is almost two feet tall."

This humorous analogy demonstrates the way some people behave when they think they're giving. Just as a child may give only the Halloween candy that she doesn't want to her little brother, so some people who seem to be giving are in fact giving what they want to get rid of, or giving with strings attached, or to make an outer show of generosity, or to create a situation that will ultimately benefit themselves. Not everyone understands the spiritual practice of true generosity, where you strive to give the right thing to the right person at the right time, and in the right way.

Living in pursuit of lasting fulfillment

Spiritual Wisdom

Anyone who thinks money will make them happy, doesn't have money.

—David Geffen

This world would look very different if we were able to simply remove the entire element and effects of greed from its fabric. Just imagine the effects of a greedless society:

- Everyone would have enough.
- People would be healthier, because food manufacturers would make products with more nutritious and better-quality ingredients.
- Nobody would spend millions of dollars to try and get you addicted to harmful substances.
- Politicians and world leaders would make decisions only with the purest intentions to make life better for all.

Consider

Dealing with the fluctuations of material life

Here is a simple recipe for staying content and steady during the financial ups and downs of life:

- If you have less money, lower your wants.
- If you have more money, use what you have to benefit yourself and others.

From Relationships to Divine Love

Spiritual Wisdom

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. —1 Corinthians 13-1-2

All you need is love

The topic of love pervades most music, books, and television and movie scripts. Love is the essence of your spirit; therefore, finding ways to release and reveal your love can also help you to experience and express your spirit. Here are some wise words about love:

- One word frees us from all the weight and pain of the world; that word is Love.
—Sophocles
- Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.
—Rainer Maria Rilke
- In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two.
—Erich Fromm
- Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself. Love possesses not, nor would it be possessed; for love is sufficient unto love.
—Kahlil Gibran
- Love takes up where knowledge leaves off. —Saint Thomas Aquinas
- At the touch of love everyone becomes a poet. —Plato

Along with the inherent blessings of experiencing love, good relationships can bring great opportunities for spiritual, mental, and emotional growth. Human beings are naturally drawn to relate with other people. It is through relationships with others that we grow and discover more about the world and ourselves. Jesus has said that he is present whenever two or more are gathered in his name, indicating the importance and power inherent in joining with other souls during your journey through life.

Mutual affection soothes the heart, while intelligent conversations spark new vistas of thought. The support you feel and receive from loved ones gives you the strength to move forward courageously in whatever you're inspired to do. Even when some aspects of your relationships may be rubbing you the wrong way, a spiritual focus can help you to see the blessings beneath the irritations, and the lush growth budding beneath the outer storms.

Love, relationships, and potential potholes

My wife and I were happy for 20 years. Then we met.

—Rodney Dangerfield

Okay, seriously folks: Any corporation with a failure rate as high as today's divorce rate — right around 50 percent in the United States — would have to reexamine its internal structures and would probably go out of business. This high percentage of marital breakups is an indicator that things may be changing and evolving in human-relationship land.

Most people want to find a soul mate who will love, understand, relate, respect, and live with them happily ever after. However, few people are fortunate enough to find a true soul mate in this life. Even so, many still want to have some companionship along their paths, and so they settle for relationships that seem to be compatible and loving in the moment, but which may change into being not so compatible or loving in the future.

Due to cultural traditions, a couple may feel obliged to sign on the dotted line of vows that don't necessarily carry the full depth of their souls' conviction, such as promising to stay together "in sickness and in health, until death do us part," when these vows may not reflect their true feelings and intentions. Even if both parties are fortunate enough to stay alive and healthy, today's focus on individual growth may bring some to seek their future growth in different directions from their partners. Therefore, honesty, respect, and communication are paramount in any relationship. Don't just repeat vows you don't really mean. Either rewrite your vows or contemplate deeply to make a true commitment to keep them.

Even with all the shifts and changes that are inevitable with two intertwined lives, you can keep your relationship vibrant, strong, and ever-deepening. With mutual respect and flexibility, you and your partner can allow and support each other in following your dreams and aspirations while maintaining your connection of love and commitment. The key to keeping your vows without selling out your greater dreams is to understand and appreciate the preciousness of life and of each soul's journey in this world. Without respect for each other's growing and changing interests and inspirations, a previously promising relationship can end up crumbling into resentment, dishonesty, and anger.

Maintain good communications with your loved one about what you really commit to and how you plan to keep growing individually and together. Everyone has different beliefs and expectations when it comes to the “rules of relationships.” Discuss yours with your partner so that you can both make real vows that you can honor and keep while you are together, and also if the time ever comes that you move and grow into separate directions.

A not too far-fetched scenario

A husband and wife are having dinner at a very fine restaurant, when a gorgeous young woman comes over to their table, gives the husband a big kiss on the lips, says she'll see him later, and walks away.

The wife glares at her husband and asks, "Who was that?"

"Oh," replies the husband, "she's my mistress."

"Well, that's the last straw," says the wife. "I've had enough! I want a divorce."

"I can understand that," replies her husband, "but remember, if we get a divorce it will mean no more shopping trips to Paris, no more wintering in Barbados, no more summers in Tuscany, no more Lexus in the garage, and no more yacht club. But the decision is yours."

Just then, a mutual friend enters the restaurant with a beautiful young woman on his arm.

"Who's that woman with Jim?" asks the wife.

"That's his mistress," says her husband.

"Ours is prettier," she replies.

Although this scenario is meant to be a humorous commentary on why some relationships stay together, every person can look at their own lives and situations to find ways that they may be selling out what is really important — in the case of this story, true love — for lesser comforts and materialistic benefits.

Be Careful

I would like to give a disclaimer here and say that having lived with a monastic focus during most of my life, I haven't had a lot of opportunities to personally explore too many relationships, although I have experienced my share of spiritual devotional love. So while I do my best to present helpful information about the topics of marriage and romantic relationships from a spiritual point of view, if you look very closely, you may find just a teeny-tiny bit of bias on my behalf toward opting for the single life.

Marriage is a great institution, but I'm not ready for an institution.

—Mae West

Avoiding mediocre relationships

Sometimes people want to have a relationship so badly that they'll settle for a mediocre one. My parents did this and went through many years of unhappiness with one another before finally going their separate ways (and for you Freuds out there, yes, seeing and hearing their plentiful arguments probably did help inspire me to go for a monastic-style relationship with the divine).

Making insincere long-term commitments to a mediocre relationship just to please others or fulfill an expectation or desire can possibly hold you back on your greater spiritual journey, because:

- Mediocre relationships can keep you from growing past the level where you and your companion meet intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. As Henry David Thoreau said, "The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready." If you and your partner have a deep soul level connection, then you'll be able to give each other the space to grow individually as you also continue to grow together.
- Your companion may not support your spiritual efforts. Some spouses may even feel jealous if you start paying more attention to God or spirit than to them.
- Relationships can consume a lot of precious time and energy. A good relationship or marriage can give greater value to your time and efforts, but a mediocre one may leave you in the end feeling the burden of unfulfilled dreams and wasted years of useless activities and meaningless arguments and banter.
- You can't really be too spontaneous and carefree when someone else is depending on you to always be exactly who and how you have always been. While steadiness is a great quality to develop, at some point you may be spiritually guided to make some dramatic changes in how you approach and relate to life.

Don't Forget

You need to be your own guide as to whether having a close relationship or marriage is best for you.

Adding spirituality to your relationships with devotional love

Devotional love is like a magical elixir that soothes and sweetens your heart and soul. Devotional love brings many good qualities, including contentment, gratitude, enthusiasm, service, humility, sacrifice, and a willingness to grow. Devotional love keeps you focused more on divine and great qualities than on limited circumstances. Devotional love brings touches of spirituality into all of your relationships, as it helps you to see the best in yourself and your loved ones. Here are three equations to consider regarding the importance of devotional and worldly love:

- Devotional love plus worldly love = great.
- Devotional love without worldly love = still great.
- Worldly love without devotional love = not so great.

Spiritual tips for making romance work

Consider

If you want to spiritualize your romantic relationship, approach your relationship with spiritual awareness. See God in your companion, as you love and worship each other in your hearts and souls. Give each other space to grow, and be supportive of each other's greatest dreams and aspirations.

People today are much more individualized and self-focused than their forefathers were. Carbon-copy, cookie-cutter families of the 20th century are no longer the norm. The media explosion and a lot of cultural shifts in recent decades have created some very self-focused generations who are not necessarily prepared for the sacrifices necessary to maintain a long-term monogamous marriage.

As conscious spiritually focused beings, you and your partner need to communicate enough to know what your true feelings, hopes, and commitments are. Regardless of whether you have a legal piece of paper or not, you need to explore and create a powerful, supportive relationship that works for both partners and has room for expansion and a commitment to continued positive communications and mutual respect regardless of where life's twists and turns may lead.

Contemplation and self-inquiry can help you stop replaying the same scenarios over and over again in the ongoing situations of your life. Have you noticed how certain relationship patterns can keep arising with different people until you figure out what inside yourself is creating or allowing those events to arise? For example, you may be very generous with others and feel betrayed when they don't reciprocate as you think they should. The spiritual guidance from this kind of situation may be to stop giving more than you're comfortable giving or to keep giving enthusiastically but without having so many expectations about what should be given in return. This lesson can help you to give more freely and experience less disappointment in the future.

By staying centered in your soul connection through spiritual practice and awareness, you and your partner can help one another step-by-step, healing old wounds and exploring new realizations as you move alone and together toward the eternal, absolute oneness of pure spirit. Anchored in higher understanding and purity of feeling, you grow together with love, care, and the highest mutual respect.

Understanding the power of company

Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you too can become great.

—Mark Twain

Are there people in your life — whether family, friends, coworkers, or other groups of associates — where you come into their company feeling great but walk away feeling disempowered, upset, or angry? These emotions may be signs that either these associates aren't beneficial to you, or that they're triggering personal issues you need to clear up, or both.

Be Careful

Paying attention to the power of company is not intended to make you avoid all uncomfortable or challenging situations. Sometimes the people who challenge you are the ones who help you grow.

Here are some questions you can ask to contemplate the beneficial or harmful nature of the company you choose to keep:

- **Ask yourself whether the people around you are the right people for you to spend a lot of time with.**

Do they respect and support you and your positive ambitions?

Would they be happy or jealous to see you achieve your dreams?

Are these the kind of people you want to be like?

Are you hanging out with an uplifting crowd, or are their lowered expectations for themselves keeping you down?

- **When you're with people that upset you, examine the tension or anxiety that is coming up inside. Ask yourself:**

What emotional buttons are being pushed?

Where do your anxious feelings come from? Can you remember feeling a similar reaction to the same or other people in your life? Don't forget to look all the way back to childhood, especially if it is your family that is pushing your buttons, as only family can.

How much of your distress is coming from the other person's behavior, and how much is from your projections on their behavior? Usually, experiences tend to be a mixture of the two.

What's really bothering you about the situation? Is it something you can just discuss openly and honestly with the person? Is the outer tension a reflection of an inner struggle you may be having with your own conflicting desires and beliefs?

Is the tension you're feeling a sign that you shouldn't be spending time with the person or group, or that you need to adjust some element in the relationship?

Consider

If your friends or family are judging some aspect of your life and their fault-finding is upsetting you, look to see whether some part of you may hold the same judgments about yourself. You may be feeling upset because someone is speaking an uncomfortable truth. Also, if you find certain problematic circumstances arising over and over again in your relationships, you can contemplate how these problems may be coming from something that you need to shift or resolve within yourself.

Because it may not always be possible to avoid difficult people – especially when dealing with family and work situations – you need to ultimately become clear and strong enough to withstand any outer situation that may arise.

As you continue on your spiritual journey, you may even begin to sense that some challenging people and events are appearing in your life for an important and potentially beneficial purpose. For example, these challenging people may be coming to strengthen your resolve and inspire you to contemplate and be moved to express, explain, and demonstrate your beliefs and convictions in an even more tangible form than you have before.

Spiritual Wisdom

The Indian sage Sri Ramakrishna explained the importance of company in different phases of your spiritual journey with this analogy:

“A young plant should be always protected by a fence from the mischief of goats and cows and little urchins. But when once it becomes a big tree, a flock of goats or a herd of cows may find shelter under its spreading boughs, and fill their stomachs with its leaves. So when you have but little faith within you, you should protect it from the evil influences of bad company and worldliness. But when once you grow strong in faith, no worldliness or evil inclination will dare approach your holy presence; and many who are wicked will become godly through your holy contact.”

Finding love inside yourself

Some people get upset when a relationship ends, leaving them alone and lonely. However, what is more important than finding someone else to fill your loneliness is to develop a genuine, loving relationship with yourself. Truly, the ache of loneliness is deepest for those who are lonely for a relationship with themselves.

Spiritual Wisdom

Wise words about solitude

Many great thinkers have found solitude to be the best company. Here are some of their well-expressed odes to the greatness of solitude:

“The more powerful and original a mind, the more it will incline towards the religion of solitude.”

—Aldous Huxley

“The greatest saints avoided the company of men as much as possible, and chose to live with God in secret.”

—Thomas à Kempis

“The happiest of all lives is a busy solitude.”

—Voltaire

“Many teachers praise love as the highest of virtues; I, however, place solitude higher than love.”

—Meister Eckhart

“The man who makes everything that leads to happiness depend upon himself, and not upon other men, has adopted the very best plan for living happily.”

—Plato

“A man can be himself only so long as he is alone, and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom, for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.”

—Arthur Schopenhauer

“Settle yourself in solitude, and you will come upon God in yourself.”

—Teresa of Avila

Spending time alone gives you the space to peel back mental concepts and ideas that cover your spiritual essence. Therefore, whether you're in or out of a relationship, you may want to consider spending some time alone to:

- **Get to know yourself.** Find out what you like to do. Pay attention to your thoughts. Look through your old memories and contemplate where you've been and why you're here. Contemplating these questions is not like coming up with the right answers for a test, but more of a continual process of growing into greater self-knowledge. Look within and remember who you really are.
- **Let go of misconceptions about yourself.** Solitude gives you the precious space to sort through what you really feel and believe, and to slough off old, outdated, and unproductive ideas about yourself. When you're alone, see whether any critical thoughts about yourself come up. If they do, take some time to contemplate where those words may have come from and whether they can be addressed or released. Consider that anything but pure love and respect for yourself is a veil that has been placed over your pure soul sometime during your journey.
- **Be your own best friend.** Enjoy doing things with yourself. You can have an intriguing, creative, and powerful relationship with yourself —hopefully without too much fighting, because this is one marriage you can't end by getting a divorce!

Consider

The ultimate goal is to become so strong in your solitude that you're able to pierce through and find your communion with the divine in each moment, no matter where you are or whom you're with.