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# Spirituality Is Living on the Road

Chris Spark

THE FUNDAMENTAL INSIGHT of spiritual wisdom is that you are not your thoughts, feelings, body, role, or situation in life.<sup>1</sup> You are not your opinion about politics, your hard work, your generosity, or your logic; you are not your anger or sadness, or your arms, legs, eyes, or ears; you're not your accomplishments or your failures; you're not a dentist, a truck-driver, a writer, a bum, a senator, a divorcee, a Puerto-Rican, a German, a Christian, a schizophrenic, a man, a woman, a trans, a mother, father, son, or daughter. You are not anything anyone has told you you are, nor anything you think you are. You are not, in other words, your conditions.<sup>2</sup>

How then can spirituality have anything to do with the road?

The road is adventure. And adventure is an engagement with conditions. The rain is pouring. I'm walking through a forest. I smell a bear. I'm looking for shelter. Doesn't a spiritual person just not care about all that?

That's kind of right. But also totally wrong.

## DETACHMENT OR DENIAL

That little spiritual step away from our conditions is often called detachment. In its everyday usage, that word suggests a lack of emotion, which we

<sup>1</sup> This essay is about spirituality as opposed to religion. Spirituality expresses fundamental truths about existence. Religions express fundamental truths but tend to dress up, simplify, and distort those truths.

<sup>2</sup> Who you are is a much bigger question—as big as the universe—and more challenging to discuss.



also call denial. But true spiritual detachment is not denial. We could even say they are opposites. Denial condemns; detachment accepts. Denial resists; detachment allows. Denial closes our eyes; detachment opens them.

Denial is pretending conditions aren't there or insisting they shouldn't be there. Denial is the way of the world—the currency we trade in personally, socially, and politically. Denial says, “I don't like this. It's wrong. It shouldn't be here.” Sound familiar?

There's a way in which every time we open our mouths or set pen to paper, we practice denial. Denial is baked into our favorite form of communication—language. I'll go further. There's a way in which every time we even think a thought, we're in denial. For it's also baked into our favorite way of encountering the world—by thinking about it.

No Western philosopher was a painter. But why couldn't one be? Don't paintings convey information and meaning? What's so special about words? Ask a Zen master for the truth and he is more likely to point at a flower

or chop a kitten's head off than give you a lecture about it.

But to the intellectual Westerner, this all sounds like nonsense. For us, language and thought are how we answer our questions about reality.<sup>3</sup> The paradox is that we accord thought special status, but we haven't thought much about that special status. It is an unquestioned article of faith that the most important, brass-tacks information about the universe can and must be conveyed by thoughts expressed as language. If it is conveyed in another form, it might be interesting, amusing, or thought-provoking, but it isn't really real.<sup>4</sup>

Language and thought are helpful. But they are also based on separation and exclusion: red is not orange, right is not wrong, the US is not Mexico, straight is not gay, and so on. The building blocks of language and thought themselves are separate from each other. Every word I'm writing here is separate from every other word. Language and thought, by their nature, divide reality into abstract elements that exclude each other. This is a helpful way of modeling certain aspects of reality for our convenience.



But it's far from reality itself. Just a little thought, in fact, leads to the realization that there are no divisions whatsoever in reality.<sup>5</sup>

Once language and thought divide reality into abstract elements, they lay out these abstract elements in lines. One thing follows another along the straight line of a sentence. One thought follows another too. Both are inherently linear. In a painting, you can dab a little red and then a little yellow on top of it

to get some shade of orange. But when things are laid out in the lines of language or logic, they can't be in two places at once. One location on the line denies another location. Things aren't allowed to blend, curve, fold, overlap, or branch.<sup>6</sup>

This is not how we directly experience reality. In each moment, reality presents itself to us all at once. Nothing is denied. Our experience is all here now.<sup>7</sup>

Detachment is harder to write

<sup>3</sup> Most people don't realize how different various ways of human thinking can be from our own—in tribal societies, for example. Such different styles of thinking are equally legitimate even if they emphasize different aspects of reality. Not every human culture, for example, is as fascinated by technology as is ours. I explore this more in my book *Of Geometry & Jesus*, particularly in the essays “Country Bumpkins” and “You Are Your Philosophy.”

<sup>4</sup> Contrast this with preliterate cultures in which the deepest wisdom was conveyed by spoken myths. The people in such cultures were also pragmatic. They used logic in making tools, tracking animals, and so on. They just didn't imagine that logic and pragmatic language was sufficient for expressing deeper truths about reality.

<sup>5</sup> I do some of this thinking in the essay “Division Vision” in my book *Of Geometry & Jesus*.

<sup>6</sup> Poets try to overcome this limitation of language by using words in unconventional ways and laying them out visually in ways that break up the usual linear arrangement of prose sentences.

<sup>7</sup> Evidence shows that learning to read changes the brain. Literate people have a reduced capacity for facial recognition and for recognizing overall patterns and gestalt wholes. (See the prelude in *The Weirdest People in the World*.)



about than denial. This is because when we detach, we enter a dimension that the tools of language and thought weren't made for. Language and thought have helped us immensely. (They have also hurt us immensely.) But they are also just another part of the conditional realm that detachment steps away from. Language and thought do not contain detachment.

Detachment contains language and thought.<sup>8</sup>

This means that detachment can't be fully understood using only language and logic. Trying to do this is like trying to squeeze three dimensions into two. We'll always encounter paradoxical statements.<sup>9</sup>

This often tempts intellectuals to dismiss spirituality. But there's

really nothing strange about the situation.<sup>10</sup> Language and thought are simply not reality itself. Rather, they are elements within reality. The contemplation of a line in a drawing wouldn't allow us to appreciate the whole drawing.<sup>11</sup> Using only language and thought guarantees we are not describing reality as a whole.

This doesn't mean that spirituality is esoteric either—some rarefied realm that only the properly robed or properly emaciated may enter. Spirituality is neither anti-intellectual nor abstruse, neither below us nor above us.<sup>12</sup> The simple truth is that it just can't be fully appreciated through discussion. No discussion can stand outside of detachment to offer comment on it. No words, logic, or concepts can capture it. This doesn't mean it's silly or superhuman. It just means it's not an abstraction. It's an experience. Spirituality is a participatory sport.

Kind of like your life.

## THOUGHTS

Most people are not living their lives. They're living their thoughts about their lives. They're walking down a city street, but they're not feeling the swing of their legs, not looking into the eye of that pigeon, not drinking in the skyscrapers that rise like gods around them. Nope. They're planning. They're worrying. They're hurrying. They're wishing. They're bemoaning. The last place they are is that city street with all its depth and mystery.

It gets worse. We not only stay in our thoughts, we stay in the same ones over and over. If you tend to worry about your health, you don't wake up one day and start feeling great about it. People who tend to find fault with you don't suddenly start noticing your wonderful qualities. And political debates rarely end with the words, "Thank you for helping me see this issue differently." Almost everyone has habitual thoughts or habitual tones of thoughts, whether irritated, pessimistic, happy, and so on.

8 Kurt Gödel and other thinkers have used logic to demonstrate the limits of logic, thus pointing to a greater reality that contains rational thought. In the East, the yin-yang symbol of Taoism is an attempt to depict that larger reality: black and white—logically thought of as opposites—interpenetrate and harmonize in a greater circular wholeness.

9 One of the founders of quantum physics, Neils Bohr, once said that the opposite of a superficial truth is a falsehood. But the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth.

10 In fact, paradox is at the heart of modern physics: both light and all matter sometimes act as if they are waves, and sometimes as if they are particles. Or, that's how we humans see them. What they ultimately are, then, must be something that appears paradoxical. Physicists accept this about their discipline but are sometimes reluctant to accept the same principle in a larger arena.

11 This is similar to mathematician Kurt Gödel's proof that "broke math." Gödel proved that no logical system can prove all the truths that that system implies. In other words, in any mathematical system, there will always be true statements that are impossible to prove from within the system.

12 Spirituality doesn't belong in any hierarchy. There is a kind of innocence in the spiritual impulse—an attraction to an attitude like those of our brothers and sisters in the natural world who don't care who's wearing what uniform or who has what degree or what amount of money.

Living like this may offer us a certain kind of adventure, I suppose. But I'd rather call it drama. Drama is the unconscious boarding of a train that always goes down the same track. An angry thought leads us right on schedule to harsh or accusatory words. The train then keeps clickety-clacking to the next stop on the line—making us or others feel bad and stoking the fires of defensiveness or retribution. Similarly, the thought, “I’m unlovable,” is automatically accepted as true and so carries us off to depression and after that to the downing of a pint of Chunky Monkey.<sup>13</sup> Most of our tracks are circular. The last stop leads to the first. After eating the ice cream, we feel even more inadequate and we’re off again.

Most people’s thoughts, words, and actions are of this automatic circular kind.<sup>14</sup> Most of what we call our actions are really our reactions.<sup>15</sup> Our normal way of being keeps us going in circles. Hardly an adventure.

A spiritual practice allows us to step outside of any thought, feeling,

or urge and allow it to exist without the need to react to it. The key to this allowing is that fundamental insight of spiritual wisdom: *not identifying who you are with your thoughts, feelings, and urges*. In this allowing, we don’t take anything that arises in our inner world as a substantial truth. No thought or feeling has to imply or mean anything. No thought or feeling must lead to some other thought, or feeling, or action. It can just be there. It isn’t who you are.

Detachment is only difficult because we are conditioned to identify with our thoughts, feelings, opinions, and ideas. But it is in fact quite natural.<sup>16</sup> When a squirrel runs across your lawn, you probably don’t get upset. You probably don’t take the squirrel’s actions as a comment about you. You probably don’t feel compelled to react to the squirrel in any way, except perhaps with curiosity or delight. Now, most would say a squirrel is more real than a thought. It’s certainly more substantial. And yet, we usually allow our thoughts to drag us around as if they were wild horses.

Detachment lets the horses gallop by. The horses are allowed to be horses, and you are allowed to be whatever the hell you are.<sup>17</sup> There are, literally, no problems. Heroic effort isn’t needed. Nor is discipline in the way we usually think of that word. The discipline needed for spiritual practice is not trying to rein in our wild horses; it’s the relentless slicing of the rope to let the horses run by.

## THE OVERFLOWING NOTHINGNESS

Then what? What’s left when you don’t take anything you’re thinking and feeling seriously? What’s left when you don’t invest in anything?

It may seem like the answer would be nothing, or a sort of cold, inhuman blankness. You may be encouraged in this idea if you’ve heard spirituality described as “dying to the world” or Buddhists refer to ultimate reality as “the void” or “emptiness.” Luckily, the idea of spirituality as a boring nothingness is wrong. As the title of one of [Charles Simic’s](#) poetry collections tells us, “The World Doesn’t End.” Something always happens. Thoughts and feelings keep arising. Life keeps unfolding. But with a spiritual practice, the way

life unfolds and the quality of those thoughts and feelings shifts in ways that are simultaneously subtle and profound.

When we don’t let the same thoughts, feelings, and actions keep us in the tiny room of our habitual lives, we can be called to something grander—even mythic. But to ask how exactly my life changes if I embrace spirituality is to entirely miss the point. This is where the idea of the void becomes helpful. And where masters go silent. They can’t say. No one can say.

If we could say, our prediction would be coming from our current limitations. Any ideas we have about our unfolding must arise from our current habitual thinking. And that current habitual thinking is exactly the problem. More than that, our ideas must arise from thinking, and thinking itself is a tiny aspect of reality. Our sense of adventure—our calling—demands connection to something larger than that.

We are called to stop being experts. To stop thinking we already know. We are called to the wonder and sense of possibility we all felt as children, until we got talked out of all that when we became adults.

That “adult” way of thinking is so powerful and automatic that we apply

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<sup>13</sup> Many people believe feelings cause thoughts. This is because by the time we are swept up in a feeling, we have forgotten or lost sight of the ideas that caused them to begin with. Feeling hurt, angry, or aggrieved because of the words of someone else, for example, arises from ideas about our inherent worth, the power others have over us, and so on. We don’t feel hurt if we don’t take another’s words seriously. If I say, “You’re a red penguin,” you wouldn’t be upset. Rather, you’d think I might be crazy.

<sup>14</sup> It’s the normal human condition now and has been throughout the well-documented portions of human history. We don’t know how humans operated in various tribal cultures in the huge stretch of human existence between about 70,000 and 10,000 years ago.

<sup>15</sup> An underlying cause, I think, of the cultural fascination with zombies.

<sup>16</sup> There’s a big difference in our culture between natural and normal.

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<sup>17</sup> Which is a question no one has ever answered. We know we ARE, we just don’t know what. And that’s OK. Spirituality says it’s enough to know what you are not and the rest will take care of itself.





it to anything we are introduced to—including spirituality.<sup>18</sup> If, for example, we are told that spirituality will lead us to love, we will immediately think we know what love is. We may imagine love involves sacrifice, or is tainted by sex, or must conform to any number of associations we have with the word based on what our parents, partners, or Jordan Peterson told us. Spirituality cultivates what the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki called “beginner’s mind.” It invites us to stop automatically telling our same old stories about reality.

Western culture offers us many stories about reality that are accepted as true by large numbers of people. We call these stories “ideas” or sometimes “explanations.” They are offered to us by various persuasive sources such as scientists, religious authorities, economists, politicians, or influencers. The sources of many of our most widespread ideas are harder to pinpoint. The idea that there’s something noble about struggle, for example, just seems to be floating in the cultural atmosphere.<sup>19</sup>

If we modern Westerners look to

our culture for guidance on how to live our lives, we must sort through a huge tangle of these various ideas. This is difficult not only because there are so many, but because so many of them contradict each other. Most people don’t consciously register that they are doing this difficult work of sorting through swarms of often clashing ideas. But this sorting is nonetheless exhausting and nerve-wracking.

We are told, for example, to be nice but also urged to get ahead and be successful. Sex, we are by turns led to believe, is healthy, fun, immoral, or political. We get the impression that making money is what it’s all about, but also that being rich makes you shallow. Our scientists tell us reality is ultimately uncaring, but that for some reason we should still care.<sup>20</sup> Western culture talks at us a lot, but it doesn’t talk coherently. If it were an orchestra, its music would be dissonant. This dissonant music is like the soundtrack of our lives. It rattles our souls.

Even if you could come up with a list of consistent, guiding ideas from our culture, those ideas would be abstract. They couldn’t speak to

your particular mind, heart, and circumstances. No nice idea, piece of advice, system of thought, book, science, religion, or philosophy knows about the unique person you are in the unique moment you’re in. And yet a unique person meeting a unique moment is the only thing our lives are made of. You, [Insert Your Name], are always meeting a moment. It’s all you ever do.

Spiritual wisdom keeps this truth front and center. Unlike Western culture, spirituality doesn’t offer you a list of abstract, contradictory ideas, no matter how nice some of those ideas sound. Instead, spirituality offers you a way to meet your moments. Far from being radically divorced from our lives, then, spirituality is more down-to-earth and immediate than anything else we’ve learned. Spirituality is right there with you. It’s Western culture that leaves us with a void where it really matters. Spirituality fills a void.

But how? And with what? Spirituality is the adventure of finding out.<sup>21</sup> Spirituality invites us out of our little room and down the road. That road we all sense is waiting for us. \*

<sup>18</sup> Children are a different story. Every child is born a Zen master.

<sup>19</sup> No other species appears to agree with us humans about this idea.

<sup>20</sup> Physicists tell us the universe is a mechanical collection of mathematical laws, and our biologists tell us life is a ruthless struggle for survival.

<sup>21</sup> There are many powerful ways to complete the sentence, “Spirituality is . . .” We can choose one of them for a day or a lifetime.