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Cooperating with the Universe

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Every individual's approach to spirituality (that slippery word!) is bound to be different, shaped by our own biographies including exposure to particular religious traditions and practices, life experiences with all their apparently random appearances. But it does sometimes help to listen to one another's own paths: sometimes we find similarities, sometimes fresh perspectives that may never have occurred to us as possibilities. The following reflections were inspired by a request to share with a group who meet regularly, if virtually, to discuss Buddhism. Sometimes we take a break to share on other or related themes. There is nothing very systematic about them, but they are offered in the hope that they may stimulate some interest and perhaps encourage others to also explore the basis of their own spirituality.

One day at a meeting in Chennai, someone asked me, "out of the blue" for my definition of spirituality. My spontaneous response was "To put yourself in tune with the universe". This may sound like a tall order (the universe is rather large!), but as I reflected on it, it occurred to me that this is not a bad definition. It implies, of course, that the universe in some sense "knows what it is doing" and that aligning oneself with the forces that drive it is indeed the way to be "in tune" with much larger processes that, even with all our scientific knowledge, we can barely grasp even the outline of. This requires a sense of humility: we know so little and are very tiny beings in the context of vast dimensions of space and time, and yet, do have the ability to, at the very least, grasp that there are patterns, and that in some mysterious way, we fit into those patterns. If you want to put this more philosophically, it is the grasping of the idea of non-dualism: everything is related, everything inter-penetrates, and we are part of that whole. In practice of course this needs to be reflected in more concrete ways in which we can relate to this whole. In more formal religious observances this takes the form of belief and of adherence to the behavioral codes of that particular religion, a religious path so often being the way in which we can constantly relate to the larger dimensions of life. But in virtually every religion or spiritual path we see the underlying idea of our integration into a larger unity. Any reader of the incomparable poetry of Rumi sees at once how the sense of oneness pervades the Sufi approach to reality; in Hinduism that identity of Atman and Brahman, in Buddhism dependent arising or the notion of inter-being, and in Judaism the central prayer of any formal service is the "Shema" – "Hear O Israel, the Lord Your God is One", signifying a monotheism that is actually another name for non-dualism.

In practice I have found number of routes that help me to relate to this "Oneness". Among the most important has been the recognition of our embeddedness as humans with nature. Far from being set apart from nature, or worse still conceived as above it, the knowledge that we are part of an incredibly intricate, beautiful, emergent and life-filled environment, far from diminishing us, is profoundly satisfying. Most of us recognize how much we need animals, forests, fresh air, the exciting sight of the ocean: we are part of that larger whole and dependent on it in every way. This perception alone should help us see that deeper inter-dependence that is fundamental to the structure of the universe. It may also help us with the fear of death: we are not only a part of a dynamic natural whole in which arriving and departing, life and death, are integral parts, but we see that nature is the great recycler: nothing in nature is wasted, so why should we imagine that we will be? Being in close touch with nature is also a way of re-enchanting our worlds: simply watching a sunset, a kitten at play, or the cherry blossom blooming should be enough to propel us back into a state of awe and joy. For the same reasons I have found that the arts are a parallel route: there is much bad art that does not touch the spirit at all, but good art of whatever genre is precisely that art which moves us, opens the doors of perception, inspires us. With nature and art, who needs drugs?!

There are other paths too, and finding the balance between them is an exciting task: humour and justice for example. One creates joy, the other the recognition not only that there are huge wrongs to be righted, but that from a perspective of non-dualism, we are all related, so what happens to someone else is in some sense also happening to me. We are in fact all complicit in each other's fates, and it is true that every action has effects, that may ramify in large and unexpected directions. My thoughtlessly unextinguished camp fire or casually tossed away cigarette butt may smolder and ignite the underbrush that sets off the forest fire that burns your house and kills many animals and plants; my not wearing a mask during the pandemic may inadvertently lead to me infecting you, and you others, a chain of suffering and death resulting from my small but selfish action or inaction. I have never been able to locate it, but a saying is attributed to the Buddha that I very much like: "Enter with joy into the suffering of the world". Humour can be cruel if used with the wrong motives, but it can be liberating, joyful and is actually healthy as many medical studies have shown: it is great for the immune system!

I write this sitting in my room in Kyoto, Japan. In many western spiritual traditions (and in some forms of Buddhism and eastern religions too) there is a denigration of the body, and as we know from some forms of western philosophy, a separation of mind and body. Despite the fact that this distinction is challenged by psycho-somatic medicine, it persists. But the body is part of creation, and the means by which we relate to the world, in fact have our very being in the world. In Japanese there is a term that unifies the two – the words that can be translated as "heart-mind", signifying a profound respect for the body and its right-usage, and as the organ for the creation and perception of beauty. We are not disembodied spirits, and no form of authentic spirituality can exist that denigrates the body. In yoga and again in the traditional arts in Japan and even in sports such as Sumo, it is recognized that they are spiritual activities. In the Zen Buddhist tradition, both the art of calligraphy and the art of archery are seen as ways to unify the body and the mind; in the west perhaps dance is the art form that comes closest to this ideal, and the sense of a loss of ego is something that many of us may have experienced when engaged in such a practice.

But for me, one practice that perhaps surpasses all others is simply the art of listening – both to one another when engaged in human interaction, and to nature, which speaks constantly when we stop to allow it to speak. Silence is not something we find cultivated much in the contemporary world, except perhaps in a monastery or meditation centre. But I do believe that it is something should be cultivated constantly in everyday life, not only out of courtesy to others, but to allow that much larger reality to reveal itself. We all live busy practical lives, but making space for silence does just that: it creates spaces, spaces in which the myriad mysteries and beauties of the universe can manifest to us. This means of course the transformation of everyday life: as we know from monastic practice in both Buddhism and Christianity, just washing the floor can be a spiritual practice if we actually look at it, feel the water and cloth we are using, reflect on where they came from and the chain of events that finally put them in our hands. Oddly, the universe is very large, but it reveals itself most frequently in the smallest things. In a world in which half of our waking attention is taken up with our electronic devices, even when walking or when we could be conversing with others, the recovery of true awareness is the path to literally re-seeing the world around us. From that small beginning transformation of that world can start as we work to restore its integrity and beauty. Or as the great scholar and activist for the preservation and promotion of the Japanese traditional crafts Soetsu Yanagi well put it "Bring all walks of life into alignment with the universal order". I can't think of a better definition of spirituality. For as the eccentric German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche rightly said "Isn't life a hundred times too short to be bored?"