

A Doctor's Reflection on A Spiritual Life

By Dr. Ong Tien Kwan

Most people think that a spiritual life is a religious life. Spirituality, to them, equals religions. That is not how I see it.

To me, a spiritual life is a life that is based on the understanding of natural laws and applying this understanding in our daily life in order to achieve complete liberation from the bondage of our ego. Living a spiritual life is both a science and an art – the science and art of living. The science is an ancient knowledge. The work of art is our lives.

In this sense, our living motto should be:

*“Be such a person and live such a life that if every person is such as you
and every life a life like yours, this world would be a paradise.”*

Thus, to truly live a spiritual life, one must understand the natural laws of the universe. Only then can one apply them in daily living to attain complete liberation.

Creation and the Natural Laws

This section on Creation and Natural Laws is based on my own understanding and beliefs, formulated after years of studying the various major religious teachings, observing nature and human nature, as well as through personal contemplations and reflections.

It is definitely not the final words on this controversial topic. I am the first to admit that I am no authority on this subject. I merely present it here so that you may understand my thoughts and where they are coming from. Everyone has his or her own ideas about Creation but there are some common grounds with regards to the natural laws that govern the universe we live in.

If there is any error, it is entirely my own. I humbly submit them for your scrutiny and welcome any feedback you might like to offer.

Sometimes, we may be discussing about the same thing but using different names or terms for it, thus confusing the issue. So to avoid any misunderstanding, we must first clarify some commonly used terms by defining them.

Absolute or Ultimate Reality

There is an eternal, unchanging state beyond our own state of relativity. This state is believed to be the source of all things.

Some called it simply the Source. Others called it Tao. For the Buddhists, this state is equivalent to the state of Nibbana – the unchanged. The Abrahamic religions would recognize this as God, the Creator of all things. The name is not important but we need to be clear with the definition or its quality.

This state is what is called the Absolute Reality.

It is unchanging, all pervasive and all embracing. It is also sometimes referred to as Emptiness. Emptiness, however, must not be equated with nothingness. In this case, Emptiness is not without value or without existence. Emptiness IS the value, for in Emptiness all things are possible. From Emptiness all things exist.

In “The Holographic Universe”, Michael Talbot mentioned that one of our most eminent physicists, Bohm, actually suggested that there is an implicate order and an explicate order. The implicate order is one out of which all things arise from, forming the explicate order or our holographic universe.

I believe that we would eventually learned that this implicate order refers to the Absolute Reality and the explicate order our Relative Reality.

Relative Reality

Our Relative Reality universe is a conscious universe. It is created out of a Primary Consciousness. This Primary Consciousness is often referred to as the Creator. Out of this Primary consciousness,

a desire to create and to experience arises. It is from this desire that all things are born – first one, then two, then three, then one thousand things under heaven, in the words of the Tao De Ching. In this Relative Reality, time and space are born. Time and Space can only exist in a relative universe.

A relative universe is necessary in order to experience. After all, how can we know joy if there is no pain? How can joy be known if joy is all there is? Similarly, time exists in our relative universe only because we can recognize past from the present, and can further compare the present to the future. Likewise for space, we recognize it only because we can compare distance from one point to another.

Our memory can only work in this relative universe because it is dependent on time. Without time, as in Absolute Reality, there is no memory – only knowing, here and now.

Thus the Absolute is timeless. Therefore it is eternal. It is without space, thus it is all encompassing. It has no memory but is all knowing.

Ego and the End of Emptiness

From the Primary Consciousness arises all the myriads secondary consciousness. This separation from the Primary Consciousness gives rise to individualization of each secondary consciousness, resulting in individual identity or ego.

Thus it is true to say that we are all One, or part of the Whole. That is also how we are interconnected. Only through this separation from the Primary Consciousness can we experience and appreciate the glory of Creation.

The ability to discern, perceive and evaluate that come with the individualized ego gives rise to judgments and values. Thus, all things which were previously empty of value is now perceived as having value. From this come good and bad, likes and dislikes, love and fear, compassion and anger, and all the duality of nature.

Life experience is therefore just a perception of reality by the ego. Lose the ego and you'll discover Emptiness and Absolute Reality.

However, losing the ego is the ultimate challenge.

As Above So Below, As Within So Without

Many ancient mystics have mentioned that the natural laws that govern the spiritual realm govern also the physical realm, thus the phrase “As Above, So Below”.

They also pointed out that the outer world we experienced in our life is a reflection of our inner world of mind and thoughts. Understanding this point is crucial to our own salvation. Another way of looking at it is that the quality of our outer life is a reflection of the quality of our inner mind. Thus, the phrase – As Within, So Without – holds the key to our liberation from all bondage.

This natural law is also known in various other names. Some called it the Universal Law of Attraction. Others called it the Universal Law of Sympathetic Resonance. Yet others simply called it the Universal Law of Abundance.

In simple terms, what the law means is that like attracts like. If our mind focuses predominantly on abundance, we will attract abundance into our life. If we focus on scarcity, we attract scarcity into our life. If we believe the world is a hostile place, we will attract circumstances that validate our belief. Likewise, if we believe the world is filled with love, we will attract loving people and situations into our life.

In other words, our mind creates our life. We are the Creator of our own life. Therefore, we are also fully responsible for our own life.

Many people find this phrase “responsible for our own life” frightening. This means that they can no longer blame their failures on others or circumstances. As long as you feel that way, you will never be able to rise above your circumstances. Instead, you will continue to blame others for your personal shortcomings.

If you have this attitude, I strongly suggest that you discard it right now. It is extremely harmful to your own well-being and happiness.

The Purpose of Life

Based on all these understandings, I have concluded that my life cannot and should not be focused on material achievements and acquisitions.

The primary focus should be spiritual growth. That is the real purpose of life.

I believe that by focusing on my spiritual growth, everything else will fall into place. The universe will take care of my needs. This is a bold statement and requires some amount of faith as I am at present not in a position to know but I have faith in this truth. This is not something I've discovered myself. The ancient masters have said as much. I merely place my faith in their wisdom.

In order to grow spiritually, I must therefore master my mind. In fact, a spiritual life is all about mind management. I believe the degree of control we have over our life is a reflection of the degree of control we have over our mind. It has been said that our mind is a wonderful servant but a terrible master. We must therefore not be subservient to it. Instead we should master it so that it can serve our purpose.

The Way We Are

As it is right now, we live a life that is subservient to our mind and desires. It runs our life, not the other way round as it should be. It is able to run our life because we allow it to. We let it run free. When we do that, we relinquish our power over our own life.

Our mind becomes lazy. We lose control over it. Instead, it now controls us.

Our lazy mind takes short cuts. It does not try to understand anything but accept everything, even garbage. In computer terms, they said, "Garbage in, garbage out". You get exactly what you put in. One common short cut our lazy mind takes is a strategy called conditioned behaviour. We conditioned our mind to react under specific stimuli, regardless of the circumstances and whether the reaction is beneficial or harmful.

Conditioned behaviours run a large part of our life. Therefore, we need to take a closer look at conditioned behaviours and how they affect our life, but we will do that later.

For now, let us look at how we can transform our ordinary mundane materialistic life into an extraordinary purposeful spiritual life.

Re-Inventing a New Life

With this conviction, I set about re-inventing my own life.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not unhappy with my life right now. Happily married to a wonderful woman and having three beautiful kids with her, I am also a successful general practitioner. I enjoy my work and have good rapport with most of my patients. I derive great satisfaction at being able to help alleviate sufferings.

But after working as a doctor for more than 16 years, I've realized that there are many more illnesses that a doctor cannot cure, and most of these are emotional and mental in nature. I've further observed that people who have the most emotional and mental problems are those with little or no faith in their own spirituality. In fact, they are not in touch with their spirituality at all. The further removed you are from your spirituality, the more vulnerable you are to emotional and mental breakdowns. Our spiritual well-being is essential for our overall well-beings – not just emotionally and mentally, but also physically. It is, after all, the source of our being.

As I see more and more evidence of such links between spirituality and well-being amongst my patients, I can no longer ignore its importance in our lives. The evidence is there if only we care to look.

So I set out with a new goal and life purpose for myself – to rediscover my own spirituality and share it with others.

It is not that I have not been exposed to spirituality at all. In fact, I have had the good fortune to encounter various spiritual experiences and spiritually-inclined people throughout my life. I've already mentioned some of my "out-of-body" experiences earlier.

Born into a Buddhist family who practices a mixture of Buddhism and Taoism, I was exposed to various local religious rituals at an early age. To a large extent, this early exposure is also due to the fact that we live in a multi-racial and multi-religious country like Malaysia where the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians freely practice their chosen religions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Bahai and Sikhism. My knowledge about my own religion at that stage was very superficial.

It was not until I spent a year as a cultural exchange student in Virginia, USA, at the age of 18 that my curiosity about my own religion was triggered. Being a foreign exchange student, people were curious about my lifestyle and that included my religion. So I had to read up about what Buddhism is and what it meant to me as a Buddhist. It was also in that year that I met an American Buddhist. Through his own calm and gentle personality, I was convinced that the fruit of Buddhism, or any religions, should be such – a picture of serenity and contentment with life.

When I was in the university, I had further exposure to Buddhism through the various talks organized by the Buddhist Association in the campus. My association and my understanding on Buddhism have been steadily growing ever since.

Personally, I do not see Buddhism as a religion.

To me, Buddhism is a way of life – a spiritual life that, when properly practiced, leads one to liberation from the bondage of birth, sickness, old age and death. Buddhism stresses a lot on mental cultivation, and that is where my own interest lies.

Mental Cultivation

The ultimate goal of a spiritual life is the return to Absolute Reality. This is achieved through the eradication of the ego. (The word eradication here does not mean kill the ego. It simply means going beyond it.) The ego is the main stumbling block that separates us from the experience of Absolute Reality. This goal is achievable through mental cultivation.

There are immense benefits from mental cultivation even if we do not achieve the ultimate goal. The fruits of this mind management can be experienced even in early stages of practice. The longer you practice it, the better the rewards.

I first designed a Self Development Program in 1993 that covers areas like Self Awareness, Self Confidence, Mental Barriers, Projection Principles, Relationships and Communication, Humor and Meditation. This program covers areas which I have identified as crucial for my own personal development and I have implemented them in my own life since.

Most of the modules for this program were derived from various self-help programs and self-help books available then. However, as I learned more about mental cultivation, I find that spiritual mental cultivation alone is sufficient to achieve all the various areas mentioned. By spiritual mental

cultivation, I mean mental cultivation with the eradication of the ego as its ultimate goal. In fact, it is superior to all.

This is further evidence that living a spiritual life is the only way to lasting happiness and health. I have since refined my own mental cultivation program. I must add that I have personally benefited from this program. I am writing down my program here and sharing it with you, hoping that you may in turn benefit from it as well.

My Personal Motto

The quote below from Emperor Marcus Aurelius of Rome is what I used as my guiding principle in life:

“A man’s true greatness lies in the consciousness of an honest purpose in life, founded on a just estimate of himself and everything else, on frequent self examinations and a steady obedience to the rules which he knows to be right, without troubling himself with what others may think or say or do, or whether they do or do not do that which he thinks and says and does.”

A Few Words for Those Who Want to Change

To change your life is not an impossible task.

In fact, if you are unhappy with your present situation, you SHOULD seek change. Remember the famous phrase: “If you do the same thing day in day out, you’ll just get the same thing day in day out.” And if you choose not to change, then quit complaining!

We should not be afraid of change.

Change is the only certain thing in this relative world we live in. Nothing stays the same, not even your self. Our thoughts change every moment. Our emotions change as well. Even the cells in our body change from moment to moment. We are in a constant state of flux.

There are two important things you need in order to change successfully:

1. A commitment to change
2. Be aware of the Roadblocks to change

A Commitment to Change

People who do not make a sincere and forceful commitment to change cannot expect to transform themselves successfully. Real transformation requires a personal commitment to change. You must see the need for change and you must have that strong desire for change.

One of the best ways to commit yourself to change is to declare your commitment publicly. Write it down on paper. Tell it to your spouse or partner. Declare it to your friends and colleagues. Once you've done that, you're truly committing yourself to change. You've burnt the bridge. There's no turning back.

Roadblocks to Change

Another important factor required for a successful transformation is the awareness of your own stumbling blocks. Change is not impossible but it is not easy, especially in the initial stages.

We are like a stationary boulder. To move it initially requires a lot of effort but once it starts to move, the effort needed is lesser. In physics, this initial resistance is called inertia and the continuous movement thereafter is its momentum.

It is the same thing with our habits. We must be aware of our own initial resistance to change. It is good to remember this:

“Whatever we resist persists”

We resist because of our fear of change and the unknown. We feel safe in our comfort zones. This is one of our many mental barriers. Some people called this our own self-sabotage strategy. Whatever you call it, the effect is the same – it impedes our growth.

Resistance comes in many forms – self doubt, fear, laziness and many other disguised negative emotions.

You have to learn to ignore them or to overcome them.

They are weeds in your mental garden. Pull them out one at a time. When you do this consistently, you'll soon acquire a new mental habit that is positive and healthy. Your mental garden will also be more beautiful, filled with healthy positive thoughts. What is even more amazing is that you'll soon see the transformation that comes with this change.

Spiritual Mental Cultivation

With mental cultivation, you can achieve anything you want in life. That is my sincere belief. There is only one catch. Whatever you want in life has to be good not just for you but for everyone else too. It cannot be harmful to others.

After all, mental cultivation is all about purifying your mind. How can you purify your mind if you have negative intention towards others? They are both mutually exclusive.

Mental cultivation comes in many names and forms. Some called it mind management. Others called it spiritual cultivation. They are all the same thing. The difference is in the form and in the ultimate goal.

You can use mental cultivation for personal financial success. Many have done that. You can also cultivate your mind for physical health. Miraculous things have happened to those who aim for this. Similarly, mental cultivation works for those who want to improve their relationship skills and have a better quality of relationships with others.

In my opinion, the highest goal for mental cultivation is a spiritual one. Aim to eradicate your ego and to be in oneness with the Absolute. That is the goal of all mystics. That is the teachings of all messiahs. That is what we should aim for too.

The choice, however, is entirely yours.

First Set of ABC's: Committing to Change

Your commitment to change is a prerequisite to a successful personal transformation. We have mentioned this before but here's an easy way to remind yourself over and over again.

Attitude: Examine your attitude towards change

Belief: Believe firmly in your own goal and in your own abilities and judgments

Courage: Have the courage to change

Declaration: Make a public declaration about your commitment to change

Your resistance will rise from time to time to discourage you from your new commitment but you must strive on. Disregard the self doubt, fear and laziness that will surely try to creep into your mind, making you feel uncomfortable with the change. You must break out of your comfort zones.

Second Set of ABC's: Guarding the Garden

These are the keywords in your mental cultivation practice:

Awareness

Beware of Old Habits

Consistency in Practice

Awareness is the key to self-knowledge. You cannot learn anything new about yourself without self-awareness.

What is self-awareness?

It is the constant mindfulness of your own thoughts, feelings and actions. Through this constant self-awareness, you'll be amazed by the new knowledge you will gain about yourself. As you practice self-awareness in your daily life, you'll learn that:

- Our mind is a wonderful servant but a terrible master**
- We create our own world**
- Our truth is what we perceived it to be**
- We are responsible for our choices**
- We do indeed have free will**
- Our life is not fated. We are the master of our own destiny**
- To master our destiny, we must master our mind**
- The degree of control we have over our life is proportionate to the degree of control we have over our mind**

•The outer circumstances of our life is a reflection of the inner state of our mind, or the quality of our life is a reflection of the quality of our mind

As your level of self-awareness increases, you'll find that you have much more control over your thoughts, feelings and actions than before. You'll realize that how you respond to a certain situation is your choice and responsibility. Self-awareness gives us greater power over our own life, and like they say, "With great power comes great responsibility".

You'll begin to make wise choices. When in doubt, make a choice that is selfless and love-based. This is in contrast to our often subconscious habit of making choices based on selfishness and fear. Do not succumb to old habits of thinking and choosing. Treat your mind like a precious garden. Guard it against the weeds. Be diligent in weeding out these unwholesome habits. Plant the new wholesome habits of selflessness and love.

This is the training!

As you claim more and more control over your mind, you'll claim more and more control over your life. You'll eventually realize that the purpose of life is a life of purpose, and this purpose is a spiritual one, not materialistic.

Methods to Increase Self-Awareness

1. Keeping a Journal

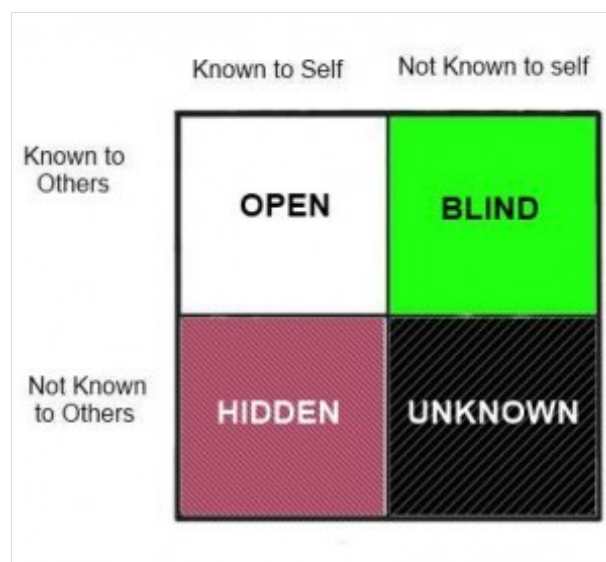
You can increase your self-awareness simply by keeping a daily journal of your thoughts, feelings and actions. At the end of each day, reflect on the predominant thoughts, feelings and actions for that day. Write down on paper honestly what your experience was like. The more honest you are, the more you'll learn about yourself.

2. Feedbacks from Others

You can know more about yourself whenever you get constructive feedbacks from another person. Have a non-judgmental attitude when people give you their feedbacks. You can always decide for yourself whether their feedbacks are accurate or not. If they are, make the choice to change for the better. If not, simply let them go.

According to The Johari Window, there are 4 aspects to our awareness.

1. There are things we know about ourselves which others know as well. This is the public aspect of us.
2. There are also things we know about ourselves that others do not know. This is our private aspect.
3. Sometimes others know things about us that we ourselves are not fully aware of. These are our blind spots. These are the ones we should encourage to give feedback on. They can be invaluable knowledge for our personal growth.
4. Finally, there are also things about us that both we ourselves and others do not know. These are completely hidden from our awareness.



3. **Meditation**

Of all the methods for self-awareness and spiritual growth, none can compare to meditation. Meditation, in my view, is the ultimate method to achieve complete self-knowledge. It is the highest of all mental cultivation.

Meditate daily and consistently and you will be able to control your thoughts from drifting to unwanted territories. You'll be able to rein in your thoughts like a skillful horseman reining in his horse.

As your concentration improves, your mental clarity and insights increase as well. At this stage, your mind is like a magnifying glass. It can focus on a single object without wavering. As your concentration gets even better and you can maintain your focused concentration over a longer

period, your mind becomes like a laser – more powerful and penetrating than the magnifying glass. You'll be able to cut through ignorance and false beliefs.

The higher level of sustained, focused concentration you have, the more powerful your mind is. The mystics achieved their transcendental knowledge through such absorbed concentration.

At the highest level of concentration, the mind is still.

The Sweetest Fruit: Stillness

When the mind is completely still and sustainable in this state for a long time, it is penetrative in nature. Like a laser, it easily cuts through the veil of deception created by our ego. You should develop this stage to a level in which you can, at will, enter stillness, stay in stillness, come out of stillness and review the experiences in stillness. This is the stage of transcendental experience. At this stage, you'll experience:

- Joy**
- Bliss**
- Peace**
- Insight**
- Transcendental knowledge**
- Psychic powers**
- Mastery over your mind**
- Oneness**
- Liberation from the eradication of ego**

From this stage onward, you will live a life of unconditional love, free from fear and doubt.

This is the sweetest fruit!

FINAL WORDS

There is a season for everything. This is the nature of life.

In a lifetime of a human being, there are also various seasons.

It is difficult to appreciate spirituality when you're a child. Childhood is a time of exploration and creativity. It is a time to learn about the self and the world. This creativity, discoveries and exploration continue into the teenage life.

In young adulthood, the discoveries continue but perhaps now the type of interests has changed. The exploration and discoveries are more in human relationships and pretty soon working life and family commitments become our predominant focus.

In midlife, where for some people midlife crisis occurs, the time to explore spirituality has arrived. Now is a good time to discover spirituality, be in touch with your own spirituality and place spirituality as your predominant focus in life.

While this is generally the trend for most people, some people become spiritual or have a strong inclination towards spirituality even at an early age.

Regardless of when you start to focus on spirituality, you'll discover that spirituality is ultimately the only worthwhile life purpose. Nothing surpasses it. Once you've tasted its sweetness, there's no turning back.

You will know this is the life for you.