

## Walking the Mystical Path With Practical Feet

by Angeles Arrien

*Thirty years ago, I began doing workshops that I titled “Walking the Mystical Path With Practical Feet”, as a way to address the illusion many of us have, that the internal and external worlds can only be lived or experienced separately. It was my hope, as it is now years later, that we can dissolve the artificial splits or separations that we have created between work and family; personal and professional; mind and heart; body and spirit; internal and external, just to name a few of the primary dualities. Ken Wilbur reminds us in his work, “The Holographic Paradigm and other Paradoxes” that “The transcendental essence of the great religions had as its core the notion of **advaita** or **advaya**, non-duality.” This article attempts to address the universal processes or life experiences which drive us toward wholeness of being (our natural state); and offers us ways we can hold paradoxes, rather than move into isolation, polarity, or separation, when we face changes or transitions in our lives.*



*“Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived.”*

—Gabriel Marcel

The one consistent exercise that each human being faces worldwide is **change**. We know all the ways we resist or attempt to control change, but how can we instead embrace change or partner with it? The Inuit people have a wonderful saying, “There are two plans to be honored every day: my plan and the Mystery’s plan.” How can we equally value, hold, and make space for both plans to co-exist everyday? How can we become *change masters*, a term originated by Rosabeth Moss Kanter? A change master approaches change as an adventurer, explorer, or discoverer. Research indicates that most of us will finally change under two exaggerated conditions: either we cannot stand or tolerate the situation, issue or circumstance any longer, so we will change; or we want to experience something that has such a passion for us that we will go for it, no matter what

it takes. Both of these are extreme motivational processes. Change masters instead face and understand change as a natural daily process that creates constant openings for growth, learning, and psycho-spiritual development.

Human beings are deeply imprinted to change and evolve. Every culture in the world recognizes this deep imprinting in that it ritualizes four major life changes, *birth*, *initiation*, *marriage* and/or relationship commitments, and *death*. Change masters honor, track and stay vigilant to these changes every day. They recognize and look for what is *new* or *emerging* in all situations (birth); they capture the learning of each day (initiation); they notice where things come together or fall into place to create a greater whole (marriage/integration/mergence); and they register what was completed, released, or ended (death). All four processes occur daily as the “Mystery’s plan” to help us develop both internally and externally. Change masters align their plan to the Mystery’s plan; and they also recognize that each of these four processes are daily taking place internally—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually as well. Consider the multiple mental, emotional and spiritual births, initiations, marriages/mergence/integrations, and deaths that are taking place daily, monthly, and yearly within us that often trigger or mirror external changes and transitions. We are constantly changing, evolving creatures. It is one of life’s great mysteries. Our challenge is to befriend our evolutionary nature, and become a change master, as we partner with change on a daily basis. This is essential as we face economic, environmental, political, racial and religious issues worldwide.

At this time in history, humanity is undergoing not only a death rebirth process, but also a global initiation. Collectively, at some level, all of us know that we are being

initiated into a new world. The Dalai Lama reminds us of the motivation we must carry as we go through the initiation:

“We must have a pure, honest, and warm-hearted motivation, and on top of that, determination, optimism, hope, and the ability not to be discouraged. The whole of humanity depends on this motivation.”

The two great paths in which we must hold this motivation and determination externally, is in work and relationships; and the two paths internally, are in those that cultivate love and wisdom. Integrating both the external and internal paths is “walking the mystical path with practical feet”.

Human beings are essentially here for two purpose—to learn about and express love, and to create. The Persian poet Rumi captures both in this line, “Let the beauty of what you love, be what you do.” We learn about love in *all* our relationships. We are not only constantly creating mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and socially; but in all that we manifest in our work, creativity, service, and communities. Kahlil Gibran reminds us that, “Work is love made visible.” In our relationships and work, we constantly have the opportunity to align with and express the inherent goodness and creativity that resides in every human being. It is always just a choice away. Gandhi modeled and taught an important leadership principle that fostered goodness. He states that, “[power, privilege, and position are great resources. Use them well. Do not become attached to them, for when we do, we begin to lose our moral fiber.” Gandhi’s statement can serve us well in staying liberated and fully expressive in a meaningful way in all sectors of our life; as we cultivate love and wisdom in our work and relationships.

Since we are so familiar and responsive to the external experiences that our work and relationships ignite, it is important to address what Gandhi calls our *moral fiber*. Our values, basic character, wisdom nature, quality of heart, dreams, and interior development contributes to our moral fiber. In order to develop our interiority to the degree we attend to our external experience, we must simultaneously integrate two internal journeys. One is the archetypal vertical journey of the descent and ascent in which we reclaim the authentic self and release the false self. The other journey is horizontal, twining the two threads of our internal and external experiences. The two journeys—descending and ascending, and integrating the internal and external — are essential tasks for interior development. We must undertake them if we are to develop character, acquire wisdom, express love more fully, and cultivate spiritual maturity.

### **The Journey of Descent and Ascent**

The descent into darkness—the unknown and undeveloped aspects of our nature—and the ascent into greater awareness, authenticity, and faith lead us to a discovery of our essential self beyond ego and personal desires. In both directions, we encounter our shadows, the unclaimed, undesired, and unbefriended aspects of our nature. To become fully developed human beings, we must confront both our demons and our angels. If we can do this successfully, we free ourselves from the illusion of who we think we are. We are delivered into the mystery of our true, essential being and are able to generate a new domain of freedom that is anchored in wisdom, love and faith.

In his book *Transformation: Growth and Change in Adult Life*, Roger Gould explains that this freedom is hard won, especially in the experience of descent, which requires us to realistically and honestly look at our lives without denial, indulgence, or

embellishment. To achieve an adult sense of freedom, we must come to terms with unresolved anger, disappointment, despair, fear, and feelings of repugnance concerning death. We can no longer harbor our illusions, aversions, or attachments. Recognizing these feelings is only the first step. We have to act, to descend into our inner terrain and dispel all that is false and at odds with our essential being. The raw experience of descent prepares the way for increased self-knowledge and self-acceptance that are honest and true, anchored in a kind of self-confidence that is neither inflated nor deflated. The descent allows us to experience the ascent with genuine hopefulness, curiosity, and ennobled spirit. If we have done the rigorous work of descending to face our false self, we may then ascend to experience the joy of our essential self without pretense or judgment. Throughout our lives, we witness cycles within ourselves and others as we descend and ascend. This journey carries stories of descent into betrayal, temptation, depression and injustice: ruthless actions that derive from insecurity, pride, or desire for revenge. It also carries the heart of all the universal stories surrounding redemption, grace, generosity, and forgiveness—ascend. A contemporary example of the journey from descent into ascent can be found in the Delancy Street Program in San Francisco by Mimi Siebert, who has the best success rate of prisoner rehabilitation in the country. This program is committed to sustaining the personal success of former prisoners in re-entering life without becoming repeat offenders, without flirting with the journey of descent again. In our own lives we move from descent to ascent when we face our serious mistakes and learn from them.

This journey of descent and ascent is found within all major spiritual traditions. Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and other faiths have specific terms to describe the

journey and may refer to it as Hell (descent) or Heaven (ascent). For example in the Old Testament story of Jacob's ladder, Jacob encounters ascending and descending angels, one of which he wrestles with for hours. In Buddhism, the Buddha ascends to the realm of the gods, where he sees that his recently deceased mother has not achieved final liberation or *nirvana*. There he imparts the *Abhidharma* Teachings on the true nature of reality and liberates his mother and all the deities trapped in the realm of cyclic existence.

Many traditional and indigenous societies regard the Upper World as the place to receive guidance, blessings, and ecstatic experiences, and view the Lower World as the place to which one journeys to retrieve one's lost soul and bring it back for re-integration in the Middle World—this world. The process of descending and ascending is a universal human experience, where the heavens and hells in our nature are completely revealed. They must be integrated to aid character development and enhanced spiritual maturity. There will be times in our lives when we will descend into our own lower worlds to confront our inauthentic selves, unresolved feelings and attachments. Each descent prepares us for the ascent, the magnificent climb that integrates more of our essential being.

### **Integration of the External and Internal: Two Pathways of Meaning**

Just as we must be ready to face the challenge of exploring descent and ascent on our journey, we must also come to understand two distinct kinds of meaning. One is *quantitative* (external and seen); the other is *qualitative* (internal and sensed). Both meanings give our lives significance and substance if they are equally valued, integrated, and embodied.

Today we are most familiar and most comfortable with the *quantitative*, outer meaning of life and our outer experiences: meaningful memories, important historical events, significant opportunities, or important turning points. We may return to school, retire, get re-married or divorced, have children and grandchildren, lose friends and family to illness or death, survive accidents or trauma, excel in a field, travel, or move to a new location.

The *qualitative* life experience is often more subtle, less familiar, more internal, and representative of our soul urges—those numinous, mystical, and transpersonal experiences that occur synchronistically in spontaneous and unbidden ways. These subjective experiences often appear as inner stirrings or disturbances that provoke insight, dreams, precognitions, breakthroughs, and unexpected glimpses of the mysterious aspects of who we authentically are.

Quantitative and qualitative life experiences converge in our life to be meaningfully integrated. Our nature is then rewoven into a more expansive and textured fabric. Carl Jung tells us of the dangers of over-identifying with either the outer, quantitative or inner, qualitative world rather than integrating them.

“Mastery of the inner world, with a relative contempt for the outer, must inevitably lead to great catastrophe. Mastery of the outer world, to the exclusion of the inner, delivers us over to the demonic forces of the latter, and keeps us barbaric despite all outward forms of culture.”

An extreme example of a delusionary “mastery of the inner world” combined with “contempt for the outer” is the mass suicide at Jonestown, in which hundreds of people followed their spiritual leader, Jim Jones, to their communal death. Over-identification

with outer-world mastery to the exclusion of the inner is found in contemporary examples of corporate crime where greedy, well-educated people are driven to misuse their talents in ruthless ways to get richer at the expense of their own ethics and integrity. In contrast, when both worlds are accessed and attended to equally, in non-extreme ways, the human spirit exemplifies unimagined courage and commitment to alleviate human suffering, restore justice, and uplift the quality of life for many. The Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, and Aung San Suu Kyi are all examples of individuals committed to both internal and external development. The integration of the quantitative and qualitative enables them to touch lives for the better.

Without balance in our lives, we become lopsided or incomplete. We must be vigilant in maintaining balance and access to both the inner and outer worlds. We can no longer flirt with the blind faith or lack of discernment that closes the door to outer mastery; nor can we indulge in the chronic cynicism or hopelessness that cuts us off from inner mastery. In our lives, rather than choosing one world over the other, we need to become adept at living in both.

### **Beyond Polarity and Duality: Embracing Paradox and the Mystery**

One thing that science and spirituality both explore in different ways is the mystery of life, and all that still remains a mystery. *Mystic*, *mysticism*, and *mystery* all come from the root *myst* (hidden) or *mystes* (one who has been initiated). According to philosopher Ken Wilbur, the scientists Pribram, Bohr, and Capra represent some of the most serious, and sophisticated attempts to interface “hard science” with spiritual realities. Other scientists who preceded them such as Heisenberg, Bohr, Jeans, Eddington, even Einstein himself held a mystical-spiritual view of the world.

Mysticism is a transcendental reality described by perennial philosophy and spiritual traditions. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all have ancient mystical roots. Mystics, whether from these traditions or others, consistently report transcendental experiences revealing a fundamental unity, total interconnectedness and interrelatedness, being filled with ecstatic or Divine love, and the non-presence of duality or boundaries. Mystical experiences open and expand the heart, clear and transcend the mind, and nourish the soul. Nature, contemplation, silence, music, and the arts, are often doorways to mystical experience.

A significant shift occurs after we integrate the internal and external worlds; we move beyond polarity and duality and learn to see both worlds at once. We contain this paradox in order to see the many options available to us. This more accepting and expansive way of thinking increases our tolerance for ambiguity, which is a function of wisdom. The ability to move beyond black or white, good or evil, helpful or harmful signals wisdom's presence; and opens the door to mystical experiences which increase love's expression and goodness into the world.

Our work in life demands that we neither be entrenched in the polarities of our daily experiences nor rigid, harsh, or unforgiving in our approach. We are stretched to shift our perspective and our actions from the dualism of either/or to holding the paradox of both/and. This allows something greater and more creative to emerge. It is an essential perspective for problem solving. Wisdom always looks for the most elegant solution, the one that will create a genuine win-win and serve the greater good of the majority of people.

Two extraordinary examples of what can happen when we hold the paradox of both/and to allow something greater to emerge are the restorative justice process of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in resolving apartheid issues, and the unprecedented creativity and collaboration that created the European Union. Because the people involved avoided remaining in fixed, entrenched positions, they generated outcomes that far exceeded initial expectations or imagined results.

If we can embrace the meanings and experiences in both our internal and external worlds, melding the sacred and profane, we will be rigorously challenged to transform opposition into paradox. The essential task is to allow all sides of an issue, or pairs of opposites, to exist in equal dignity until their hidden unity is revealed. This is currently our initiation, into the embodiment of wisdom, the entry point into authentic spiritual maturation and personal transformation.

When we shift our perspective to look beyond dualities, opposites, and polarities, we can simultaneously consider many diverse options and possibilities without applying solutions that may seem quick, easy, and expedient but are in fact premature. In cultivating love and wisdom in our lives, it becomes imperative to increase our capacity to hold creative tension, allowing far greater and more inclusive solutions and options to emerge. By befriending and strengthening our capacity to hold paradox, we can explore the realm of deep spiritual growth. As we actualize all aspects of ourselves and weave them into an inherent symmetry and whole, we become more skillful problem solvers, mediators, stewards of justice, and models of patience and mercy. We become an unshakably wise and loving presence that harnesses the good, true, and beautiful for the

greater good of all concerned. This is wisdom's way; and is the primary task in walking the mystical path with practical feet.

As we are collectively initiated together in creating a new and better world, may our determination as change masters be, in our own work and relationships, to carry wisdom and "a pure, honest, and warm hearted motivation". May we embrace and partner with change and impact this important evolutionary cycle, so the generations of the future will know that we retained our moral fiber, as we took solid action to create sustainability, protected all that was endangered, and galvanized together to restore our outer home—the Earth.

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