

The Power of Simplicity

By Coen Vonk

Beside the profound questions of life which deal with our complex being and its roots in the deepest depths of the universe, there is room for the quiet power of simplicity. This friendly, intangible power encourages us in our quiet moments, telling us to live in the present and to look inwards to the source of our being.

One dictionary defines simplicity as "straightforwardness, naturalness." What do these mean? Not pretending to be what we are not? But who are we? We have several sides to our nature, and also that which brings everything together into a single individual. We are all searching for ourselves as we go through infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, discovering more and more about ourselves and the world we live in. These stages are often accompanied by physical and mental challenges which enable something deeper in us to be born, and each time this happens we see the world with fresh eyes. The art, it seems to me, is to retain or reawaken the pure, open-minded, natural heart of the child, so that we remain flexible and can continue to learn and grow, for we are never too old to learn.

Thus we are continually dying -- our childhood is left behind, our old cells are left behind, each time replaced with something new. There is no life without death, and no death without life -- we see this everywhere. Spiritual growth is not something vague or peculiar, frightening or mysterious; it is part of the normal, natural development of a human being -- the lifting of veil after veil, going ever deeper into ourselves. Likewise, reincarnation is not something illogical, for are we not reborn every day?

The greatest obstacle impeding the natural development of this current of life from our inmost self is the fixed ideas and dogmas we impose on ourselves. We can blame others for them, but ultimately it is we who allow certain ideas into our life, accepting and nourishing them. One widespread dogma is that our self is stable and unchanging, that we know exactly who we are and that no one should disturb our view. If we look at all the stages a human being passes through, we can see that there is no basis for such an assumption, for we are constantly changing -- we are actually a stream of life.

Another fixed idea causing pain and suffering in the world is separateness, the view that we are fundamentally different from others instead of united by universal principles. All the great teachers have pointed to the Golden Rule, based on the fundamental unity of life, but how difficult it has proven to live according to it. We cannot do it dogmatically; however, once we discover the reality underlying this Golden Rule, our heart will open with more and more understanding for our fellowmen and for life. Following this rule consistently leads us to the core of our being, and there, in all its simplicity, the jewel is to be found.

The ordinary process of growth is not free from obstacles and problems, and this applies particularly to the spiritual life. Expansion of consciousness entails new dangers and responsibilities, and here, too, safe and effective progress involves using the touchstone

within us which vibrates in sympathy with a growing understanding of our fellowmen. The Bible, for example, speaks of "spiritual wickedness in high places." This indicates that we must be on our guard, that we must not fall into the same old errors in the spiritual part of our being, which has far greater powers and more far-reaching consequences than the physical and psychological.

According to an old saying, "Simplicity is the hallmark of truth." As we unfold from within outwards, we reveal more and more of the inner truth. The various circumstances and changes in our daily lives constantly urge us to progress, but it is not always easy to use these opportunities, especially since changes often seem unpleasant and we resist them. What we need is good will, confidence, and good humor, which we can acquire by thinking more objectively about reality and ourselves.

What is the nature of reality and ourselves? One fundamental feature is constant movement. Nature is called our mother who cares for her children as best she can so that they can develop ever more fully. In our inmost we *are* nature, so that, viewed from our higher self, we and nature are one, not two. Slowly we learn to *really* know this through experience, and sometimes through suffering. For example, we come to see that the mental, emotional, and physical problems others experience from time to time are not unique to them. Often we truly understand this only after we encounter those ourselves. Then, if a friend comes to us with similar problems, we are able to feel at one with him or her because now we understand and really listen.

Perhaps no book explains the simplicity of life more clearly than the *Tao teh Ching*. The great sage Lao-tzu says:

Heaven lasts long, and Earth abides.
What is the secret of their durability?
Is it not because they do not live for themselves
That they can live so long?
Therefore, the sage remains behind,
But stands at the head of others;
Reckons himself out,
But finds himself safe and secure.
Is it not because he is selfless
That his Self is realized?

Because Lao-tzu always speaks from the center, from the simplicity in which dualities are united, some statements seem contradictory. But the great lesson we can learn is that there are always at least two good answers or points of view regarding the solution of a question. If we can see both sides of a problem, we finally discover that there is no essential difference between them. We can then get to the heart of the matter.

When we talk about simplicity or oneness, we cannot really evade anything: it includes our weaknesses, our less noble longings, ideas, and feelings. What should we do with them? Do we really want to include them in our idea of oneness and growth? We all have moments

when we cannot resist doing or saying things we do not want to do or say. How can we deal with this reasonably? I think that simplicity means that these parts of us do have a role. Consider desire: we should treat this aspect of our being in the same way as every other part -- that is, with friendliness and understanding love, though without necessarily approving everything, so that we can then refine and develop it and allow it to mature. But, as is the case with a child who screams for attention for the umpteenth time, when our earlier efforts seem to have had little effect, it may be necessary to act firmly and speak bluntly, or even turn our backs to show that enough is enough. This approach differs from the usual view that we *are* these desires, that it really does not matter if we obey them. We should not identify with them, but should take responsibility for supervising this aspect of ourselves.

Life is not easy; we do not get something for nothing, without struggle or effort. We may float for a while on magnificent philosophical clouds, but then there is a friend, a beggar in the street, the old man who lives round the corner, a colleague at work, or our wife and children, for whom we have to do something right away because that is where our duty lies. Our fundamental ideas about our existence and purpose have a wholesome influence and shine through our ordinary, simple acts. As a result we become more one-pointed, in the sense that all sorts of byways can be abandoned and we learn the meaning of concentration. Concentration is simplicity, one-pointedness. For instance, when we talk to someone, at the moment that person is everything -- no thought about the rain outside, or the film on the TV that we wanted to see, or anything else.

It is said that simplicity elevates us, and that "he who does not honor the small is not worthy of the great." Currently there is an abundance of material concerning self-development on the market. Like all that humanity goes through, this seems to have two sides. In order to deal with the possibilities of today sensibly, we need to tread carefully and with discrimination, never losing sight of the simplicity of things, for does not the "real we" always stand in the center? Let us choose to develop those worthy powers that are so difficult to acquire -- brotherliness, compassion, genuine love for life and everything that is part of it. Simplicity says to us: do not worry too much about what you do and how you do it; have confidence and do your best, take one step at a time, and the rest will follow naturally of its own accord on this wonderful journey in eternity.

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