

IFS Spirituality and Self

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Abstract

In this article spiritual teachings on the nature of the heart are offered as a source of insight into the nature of IFS Self. Spiritual practices that can awaken the energy of Self in our everyday life will be introduced as means to promote Self leadership. Insights from IFS will offer ways to bring balance into spiritual life.

One of the beauties of IFS is that it provides a simple yet elegant bridge between spiritual teachings and western psychological frameworks (Cohen and Johanson, 2003). The wisdom and understanding from spiritual traditions has historically been difficult to integrate with psychological frameworks. The systemic perspective of IFS offers a framework of understanding and experience which can deepen the dialogue between traditional psychological models and spiritual teachings. This article will explore spiritual teachings on the nature of the heart as a source of insights into the nature of Self. Spiritual practices which can awaken the energy of Self in our everyday life will also be introduced as an additional way to promote leadership of Self. In addition, insights from IFS will be explored as ways of deepening and bringing balance into our spiritual life.

The word “heart” is often used to describe the core of human experience, the center of our place of being. The nature of the human heart is a central focus of many spiritual teachings and tends to be an area of understanding where universal commonalities between different religious traditions can be found. Qualities often attributed to the heart usually include compassion, love, patience, kindness, understanding, acceptance, connection, peacefulness as well as the capacity to soothe and heal, the place from which life has meaning, joy, fulfillment, and beauty.

The Self, as described in the IFS Model, offers a special perspective and insights into the nature of the core of human experience, into the nature of the human heart.

According to the IFS Model, Self is a meta-level of the inner system. Above the personality level where all of our various parts reside, is a core Self. The Self is characterized by a type of awareness that is both a passive witness and a source of centered action. The qualities of this state of mind are “calmness, compassion, curiosity, clarity, confidence, creativity, courage and connectedness (Schwartz, 2003).” The proposition in this article is that these qualities of Self are parallel to the spiritual qualities of heart, indeed that they are describing the same inner experience.

In order to focus the discussion of the qualities of Self and heart I will cluster them into three categories; mindful awareness, compassionate connectedness, and calm confident clarity.

Mindful Awareness and Self

There is a special kind of awareness associated with a person being in Self. In this state they are able to recognize that while a certain part of themselves may be active, they can relate to the part without the part taking over their consciousness. When in self a person is able see themselves and others with great clarity and non-reactive, non-judgmental ways. In this state they are able to be present with their own inner states or present with the others they are encountering. From this state they can be either a passive witness or an active doer, whichever is called for and in this state people seem to know clearly what is they are to do.

This state is very similar to the state of mindfulness as described in the Buddhist traditions. The relationship between mindfulness and IFS is explored more fully in Ginter (2003). In the practice of mindfulness a person brings full awareness to their internal or external experience. In the process of doing this they find that they become calm, centered, and more at peace. Practice in many religious traditions can help active this state, but the Buddhist tradition has given these practices the most detailed attention. There are a variety of mindfulness exercises which help create the conditions for Self to arise.

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Practices for Mindful Awareness

The most basic of the mindfulness practices is the exercise of closely following the sensations of one's natural breathing. Most often the instruction given is to be aware of the sensation of the breath moving in through the nostrils on the inhalation and out through the nostrils on the exhalation. By doing this one invites Self into the foreground of consciousness. Even if this occurs for only a few breaths, the pattern has now been nourished, and each time it is invited into consciousness it will arise more easily.

This practice can also take the form of a mindfulness bell practice. With this practice someone rings a bell and those hearing it stop what they are doing and return their attention to their breath for three breaths, then go on doing with what they were doing. This can be done at the beginning of a meditation session or throughout the day as a gentle way to water the seeds of awareness. At the beginning of our staff meetings in the Holistic Health Program at the University where I was the director for a number of years, I would ring the bell and invite people to simply be aware of their breath for three to five minutes. This would help us all to start the meeting with more Self energy present in all of us. This acted as a kind of firewall against the tension of the manager parts we often brought into the meeting, the parts that had been engaged in managing all of the tasks associated with University work. Without this breath awareness exercise supporting Self, the manager mentality would likely continue full steam ahead into the meeting.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1987), one of the foremost Buddhist teachers of mindfulness practices, uses a variation of this practice to help the monks at Plum Village, his central monastic community, to stay centered and aware while interfacing with the business of the everyday world. When they were deciding if a phone would be connected into the community, they devised the practice that when the phone would ring (and the ring was loud enough to be heard throughout the central area), everyone in the community would stop for three mindful breaths, and then either go to answer the phone or continue with what they were doing. This had the beneficial effect of slowing everyone down more as the phone rang more, thus making a natural braking action as more input came in.

A little mindfulness exercise each day gradually strengthens the pattern of compassionate awareness, of Self in our inner system. This is like doing sit ups each day to strengthen our abdominal muscles. A little effort each day gradually results in a significant strengthening

of these muscle sets, and of course as there are many variations of physical exercises for different muscle groups, there are many methods of meditation to develop of various states of consciousness.

Compassion and Self

One of the main interventions of IFS is to bring the Self into the foreground of consciousness through a process of becoming aware of parts states of consciousness and then getting enough distance from the parts so that the person is no longer blended with the feelings and perspective of the parts. At some point in this process of differentiation the person has a compassionate curious response to the parts of themselves. It is the cue for the therapist to know that the person is now in the Self. What is unique about this experience is that the therapist is not telling the person to be more compassionate or understanding of their parts, they are simply supporting differentiation from the parts and what arises spontaneously is this compassionate perspective of the Self. The therapeutic process is a powerful technique for awakening compassion in a person, which can greatly support a person's spiritual development. There are, however, also practices and understandings that come from spiritual traditions which were designed to develop compassion, and which simultaneously support Self.

Compassion is a key concept in the Jewish, Christian, Islamic religions and all share roots in the ancient Hebrew scriptures. The core concept of compassion in Hebrew is *Racham* pronounced raw-kham¹. This is the quality of compassion or mercy and comes from the root meaning of womb that cherishes, nourishes and gives birth. Mystics would say that racham refers to the womb of God, as the all-pervading love that cherishes creation. In Islam the concepts of *rachman* and *rahim*, mercy and compassion are so central that the beginning of most religious and many none religious meetings begin by invoking the divine mercy and compassion with "*Bismillah-er-Rachman er-Rahim*".

Compassion love is also one of the central teachings in Christianity. Jesus altered the teachings on the Ten Commandments by placing love as the most important commandments, (Mark 12, 29-31). In Corinthians I, 13 it is made very clear that nothing in Christian teaching is more important than love. Here the word used for love is the Greek work *agape*, which is perhaps best translated as compassionate love. In fact here we find one of the clearest articulations of what is meant by compassionate love in Christianity. Those familiar with IFS will notice the these qualities describe how one is when one is in one Self. "Love is patient, Love is kind and envies no

one.....never selfish, nor quick to take offence... delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face, there is no limit to its faith, its hope and its endurance.ⁱⁱ

Though this passage describes qualities which can arise when we are in Self, as defined by IFS, it also illustrates a major problem with many traditional religious teachings. They set up idealized spiritual states that are beyond the ability of ordinary humans to sustain. Thus, they set off internal parts struggles between the idealizing spiritually ambitious parts and other “less ideal” parts unwilling to be pushed aside by this striving. Whenever we start along the path of “spiritual development” we risk becoming ensnared by our idealizing perfectionistic parts that may want to shut out our more human parts. This struggle can divert us from understanding the true nature of Self as a source of compassion.

One of the great gifts of IFS is that it provides a model for helping compassionate love to arise naturally. Too often in religious traditions one is left with the feeling that one “should” feel certain ways to be a good person, but people are not given methods of awakening these qualities of the heart. Instead people try to will themselves to have these qualities, activating striving perfectionist parts. This leaves little space for the experience of IFS Self which would allow the natural expression of these qualities, while at the same time to be accepting of one’s humanness and acceptance of all of our parts, not just the “holy ones”.

In his description of qualities a person has when the Self is leading Schwartz (2003) states “Such a person doesn’t need to be forced by moral or legal rules to do the right thing. He or she is naturally compassionate and motivated to improve the human condition in some way because of the awareness that we are all connected.” This state of compassion is not something which we *will* ourselves to have, or that we feel out of a sense of guilt. It is something that spontaneously arises when we are in the Self state of consciousness. When this state of mind is not present it is because some part of our ego self has taken over the center of consciousness and is keeping the natural centered state of the Self from coming into the foreground. When these parts of our ego self are moved out of the center of our consciousness compassion naturally arises. This non-forced nature of compassion is important to remember, because when we move into the area of spiritual teachings, we find that the perfectionistic parts of ourselves will try to force us to feel these “holy” feelings so that we will be a “better person”. Feeling “compassion” from this psychological place is not the spiritual compassion of the Self or of the heart; it is a

part of our ego and will end in our feeling righteous, then exhausted and then guilty. *Trying* to feel these feelings sets off an internal polarization that represses “non-compassionate” parts and brings imbalance to the inner system.

When the compassion comes from Self, it arise naturally. From this place the person does not “need” to be helpful, but they feel a spontaneous wish to understand and comfort. From this place of Self there is not a righteous feeling, nor is their judgment, fear or anger. There is a simple wish to understand and to ease the tension experienced by the part of ourselves or another person that is in distress. This type of experience is expressed beautifully by Walt Whitman in his *Song of Myself*:

*Apart from the pulling and hauling (of everyday life) stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.*

This “complacent, compassionating” captures the essence of these qualities of the Self as experienced in the IFS model.

Buddhism also offers a wealth of teachings on compassionate love. A central concept in Buddhist teachings is *metta* in Pali or *maitri* in Sanskrit. This concept is often translated as lovingkindness. This word has in its root meaning the ideas of gentleness and friendship. When the Dali Lama says “my religion is kindness” he is referring to this concept. This is parallel to the quality of agape as defined in the 1st Corinthians 13 discussed earlier. It is the wish for someone you care about to be well, to be happy, to be free from suffering; the type of feeling you might have for your best friend. As with compassionate love in the Christian teachings, this concept can throw us into striving towards an idealized way of being. Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Pema Chodron, realizing this tendency in the West, emphasize the importance of starting the practice of lovingkindness towards yourself. Thich Nhat Hanh uses the analogy of the oxygen mask in airplanes: passengers are told to put it on yourself, before trying to assist others. Pema Chodron talks about the first step towards developing true compassion in yourself is to become your own best friend, to be accepting and loving towards all the different parts of yourself. Those familiar with IFS work will notice that this is indeed the stance of the Self. There are Buddhist practices to support this process: one is the lovingkindness meditation.

Practices for Compassionate Love

The lovingkindness meditation is a simple structure for offering the wish for happiness, for freedom from suffering, for a deep joy, and peace. One can add other similar wishes such as feeling safe, free from worry etc. The practice is to offer this to yourself and to other beings in your life and as far out into the realm of beings as you wish. Many Buddhist meditations end with “may all beings be well, may all beings be happy.” The practice is usually structured such that one begins directing loving kindness towards a person for whom you spontaneously feel lovingkindness. This might be a child, a close friend or family member or spiritual teacher. It is useful to find someone around whom you are not conflicted in your feelings, someone for whom you naturally feel love easily and wish them peace, joy and happiness etc. Sometimes the practice is started with ones self. I do not recommend this since many of us, especially in the helping professions, don’t find that the easiest place to feel the spontaneous state of lovingkindness. It is usually good, however, after a few minutes of sending loving wishes to the first person for whom we easily feel warmth, to follow this image with lovingkindness towards ourselves. I find it good to start with sending these loving wishes to some part of ourselves that we would like to comfort at this time, it could be a vulnerable child part of ourselves, or a wounded healer part. The whole meditation could just focus on our parts if that feels right, ending with a loving wishes for all of our parts and for ourselves as a whole.

The traditional Buddhist practice moves from directing loving kindness to another person easy to feeling loving kindness towards, to ourselves, then to a loved one, then to a more neutral person, then to someone with whom you have some tension, then to someone you have difficulty with, then out to an ever increasing circle of beings until one reaches all beings. This can be altered in whatever way fits your needs or time frame, but the sequencing seems important to hold on to. It is important to not try and send lovingkindness to someone who activates a part of you, often a protector part, which may feel that sending lovingkindness to this person would put you somehow at risk. In the IFS model the important thing to do is to listen to this part and its concerns rather than trying to override it by having a part of yourself take over that thinks you “should” be able to send lovingkindness to everyone. This is again an instance where the IFS model can help us avoid our idealizing tendencies that can arise with spiritual practice. As with any of the practices of spiritual development, it is important to be aware of the tendency

for perfectionistic parts to take over, undermining our capacity to be in Self and to truly nourish this source of compassionate love.

Equanimity and Self

The second quality of the Self is the calm, confident, clear, and courageous aspect of the Self that in spirituality refers to qualities of patience, peace and equanimity. Most of us do not think of calm, peace and equanimity to be qualities of love, yet in spiritual teachings these are essential qualities of the nature of true love. The Zen Teacher Thich Nhat Hanh offers as a central practice meditation on the phrase “calm, ease, smile, release.” The gentle half-smile of the Buddha symbolizes the capacity to release oneself from the tensions that grip so much of our daily lives, release into Self. In Judaism the practice of the Sabbath is a calming practice. It has much to do with giving room for the “being” qualities of the Self after the all of the “doing” qualities of our parts have had so much space in our everyday lives. A phrase used to welcome the Sabbath is “*Shabbat Shalom*”, the Sabbath peace. The quality of peace of Shalom is a central quality of the heart in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Christianity Christ is often referred to as the Prince of Peace and in Islam the daily greeting is as-salaam aleikhum - may peace be with you. In Hebrew the same greeting is shalom-aleichem.

This nature of the peaceful love is clearly expressed in the Buddhist teaching on the brahma vihara, which describes the condition of equanimity, which in Sanskrit is upeksha. *Upe*, refers to over and *ksh* to look. So the word refers to the capacity to see things from a perspective and to understand that given the nature of all of the conditions which lead up to this moment that there is no way they could be different. There is acceptance, non-attachment non-judgment, letting go of expectations. It is interesting to note that this quality is one of the core conditions for successful therapeutic process and also for the capacity to be present with suffering without burning out. In this state of mind we don’t have to do something to make things different, in non-judgment we simply are with this person or condition as it is. And we also accept ourselves as we are with all of our limitations, our failings, and all of our unique qualities and beauty as well. This state is that of Self in the IFS system. This peacefulness can allow us to be deeply present with our experience of ourselves and others, to really savor “being” and “being with” rather than the common state of “doing,” and “getting done,” which is a realm in which our parts are often dominant.

These heart qualities are expressed the “complacent, compassionating” of Walt Whitman cited earlier and they can be seen in the image of the Buddhist bodhisatva of

compassion Kwan Yin perfectly. Her name means “to look down upon the suffering of the world from a place of deep peace.” A famous pose of hers found in many statues is of a woman looking down with Whitman’s “side-curved head” in what is termed the “royal ease,” a position of deep peacefulness while looking directly at the suffering of the world.

This compassion of Kwan Yin arises out of what the Buddhists call emptiness. This type of emptiness is referring to emptiness of ego or in IFS terms empty of the ego states of our parts. IFS gives a wonderful practical way to experience this type of emptiness in the therapeutic process of systematically separating from the parts which are in the foreground of our consciousness until what spontaneously arises is a compassionate curiosity about the parts of ourselves we were earlier struggling with. IFS therapists have seen this occur thousands of times as they work with clients and help them move through this process of returning to Self. Through the IFS work this type of peaceful compassion is not only a concept but a felt experience. At the same time there are a wide range of spiritual practices designed to awaken the same state of mind.

Practices for Equanimity

I like to begin my workshops on healing the healer with a meditative dance based on a Jewish “Shabbat Shalom”. In this instance I am taking the concept of the Sabbath as a practice, which is not limited to the weekly Sabbath. This practice is beautifully presented in Wayne Muller’s book “Sabbath”(1999). The practice is valuable to provide a rest from our achievement parts and to aid returning to Self. One way to create Sabbath is to place a frame around some time that will help us to have peaceful “being” qualities rather than “doing” qualities. This practice can be seen as creating conditions for Self to arise and be nourished. We can do this by giving opportunity for rest, for mindfulness or other spiritual practices. To have this kind of time is important for our own restoration. It is important to remember to also let go of the self improvement or perfectionistic saintly parts during this time. The goal is simply during these times to be present with ourselves and others from the place of the heart, of compassion, from the IFS Self.

Specifically, activities to create Sabbath conditions for supporting equanimity are as follows: 1) Give the intention of a space for non-doing using whatever guidelines you want for types of activities and inputs during this time. This might be for a day of Sabbath, an hour or a few minutes to recover your Self; 2) In IFS language, ask the parts of yourselves which need to “do”

to help plan this period of time to let the system restore; 3) Have a ritual to mark the boundary of this time. This can be lighting a candle, saying a sacred phrase or reading, etc.; 4) Create conditions which support rest and centering. You can use silence, music, scents, take walks in nature, images etc.; and 5) Mindfulness practices done during this time support the emergence of peaceful presence.

The peace of Sabbath is one practice to support equanimity. Other practices that can support equanimity are practices such as Tonglen, which invite us to be present with our discomfort and our pain and to learn how to transform that pain and discomfort. When we stop running from our pain, face it and allow it to be transformed through the compassionate heart, then we can find a deep ease in our being. This is similar to IFS therapeutic process, where we encounter the parts of ourselves that have been exiled because they carry pain. These parts are encountered from our center, our Self. From this Self interaction, the parts are able to transform into their natural forms and the system becomes depolarized and a sense of ease arises.

CONCLUSION

Spiritual practices can support Self and Self can support spiritual practice. The IFS framework and process can deepen and bring balance to spiritual life, guiding us toward a non-polarizing spiritual development. Spiritual concepts and practices can offer non- psychotherapeutic ways to support Self in our daily life, complementing the IFS process. This article offers a continuation of the exploration which was begun in the first edition of *The Journal of Self Leadership* and I look forward to the further unfolding of this dialogue in future publications.

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ⁱStrong's Lexicon "7356 racham rakh'-am from 7355; compassion (in the plural); by extension, the womb (as cherishing the fetus); by implication, a maiden:-- bowels, compassion, damsel, tender love, (great, tender) mercy, pity, womb."

ⁱⁱThe New English Bible- Oxford Press