

The Spiritual Wisdom of Simplicity by Duane Elgin

The wisdom of simplicity is a theme with deep roots. The great value and benefits of living simply are found in all the world's major wisdom traditions.

Christian Views

Jesus embodied a life of compassionate simplicity. He taught by word and example that we should not make the acquisition of material possessions our primary aim; instead, we should develop our capacity for loving participation in life. The Bible speaks frequently about the need to find a balance between the material and the spiritual side of life:

"Give me neither poverty nor wealth." (Proverbs 30:8)

"Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth ... Store up treasure in heaven ... For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

"If a man has enough to live on, and yet when he sees his brother in need shuts up his heart against him, how can it be said that the divine love dwells in him?" (John 3:17)

Eastern Views

Eastern spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism have also encouraged a life of material moderation and spiritual abundance. From the Taoist tradition we have this saying from Lao-tzu: "He who knows he has enough is rich."

From the Hindu tradition, Mahatma Gandhi, the spiritual and political leader who was instrumental in gaining India's independence, wrote: "Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment." Gandhi felt the moderation of our wants increases our capacity to be of service to others and, in being of loving service to others, true civilization emerges. Also found in the Hindu tradition is the idea of "non-possessiveness," or taking only what we need and finding satisfaction in balanced living.

Perhaps the most developed expression of a middle way between material excess and deprivation comes from the Buddhist tradition. While Buddhism recognizes that basic material needs must be met in order to realize our potentials, it does not consider our material welfare as an end in itself; rather, it is a means to the end of awakening to our deeper nature as spiritual beings. The middle way of Buddhism moves between mindless materialism on the one hand and needless poverty on the other. The result is a balanced approach to living that harmonizes both inner and outer development.

Greek Views

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle recognized the importance of the "golden mean," or a middle path through life characterized by neither excess nor deficit, but by sufficiency. They did not view the material world as primary but as instrumental -- as serving our learning about the more expansive world of thought and spirit. Aristotle favored a balanced life

that involved moderation on the material side and exertion on the intellectual side. He said that "temperance and courage" were destroyed by either excess or deficiency and could only be preserved by following the golden mean.

Puritan Views

Paradoxically, although the United States is the world's most notoriously consumerist nation, the simple life has strong roots in American history. The early Puritan settlers brought to America their "puritan ethic," which stressed hard work, temperate living, participation in the life of the community and a steadfast devotion to things spiritual. Puritans also stressed the golden mean by saying we should not desire more material things than we can use effectively. It is from the New England Puritans that we get the adage, "Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without."

Quaker Views

The Quakers also had a strong influence on the American character, particularly with their belief that material simplicity was an important aid in evolving toward spiritual perfection. Unlike the Puritans, their strong sense of equality among people fostered religious tolerance. Quakers emphasized the virtues of hard work at one's calling, sobriety and frugality. Although they thought it only natural for one to enjoy the fruits of their labors, they also recognized that our stay on Earth is brief and that people should place much of their love and attention on things eternal.

Transcendentalist Views

Transcendentalist thought flourished in the early to mid-1800s in America and are best exemplified by the lives and writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The Transcendentalists believed that a spiritual presence infuses the world, and that by living simply we can more easily encounter this vital life force. For Emerson, the Transcendental path began with self-discovery and then led to "an organic synthesis of that self with the natural world surrounding it."

The Transcendentalists had a reverential attitude toward nature and saw the natural world as the doorway to the divine. By communing with nature, Emerson felt that people could become "part and parcel with God," thereby realizing the ultimate simplicity of oneness with the divine. Thoreau also viewed simplicity as a means to a higher end. Although he said that a person "is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone," he was not particularly concerned with the specific manner in which someone lived a simpler life. Instead, he was more interested in the rich inner life that could be gained through undistracted contemplation. For both Emerson and Thoreau, simplicity had more to do with one's intentions than with one's particular possessions.

As these examples illustrate, the simple life is not a new social invention -- its value has long been recognized. What is new is the urgent need to respond to the radically changing material and ecological circumstances in which humanity finds itself in the modern world. By whatever name, "simplicity" can be reclaimed as a path to a thriving future. How has simplicity served your life path?