CHANGE: A KEY TO SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

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Change is a hallmark of being human. Human beings go through different stages of development, which are best represented as physical, psychological, and or spiritual. In normal physical development an infant develops the ability to crawl, walk, and speak. The ability to control bodily function, to the delight of most parents, is a significant developmental milestone. The child soon becomes more aware of his or her identity as an individual and begins to make sense of the complex world around him or her. As he or she enters adolescence, rapid physical changes occur that can give the individual the appearance of an adult; the physical changes will continue well into adulthood. Further development in late adulthood may mirror the infancy stage due to physical and psychological deterioration.

The physical development process shares some characteristics with psychological development; those two types of development usually occur simultaneously in fairly predictable ways. In normal development, psychologically age related behavior changes accompany the respective physical stages. Changes occur progressively in the areas of motor function, language acquisition, problem solving, moral development, and identity formation. Absence of any one of these stages may be indicative of either a physical or psychological abnormality.

What about spiritual development? Is there a similar process? Change is the expected norm in both physical and psychological developments. Should change be a normative aspect of spiritual development? Spiritual changes may introduce new, yet more effective skills to cope in an ever-changing world. The idea of spiritual change may seem strange given that religious beliefs are often perceived as fixed precepts to which we must conform, despite the opportunity to grow deeper in faith.

Much of our acquired beliefs from childhood have been influenced by dogma. Some individuals have revised their belief systems and have developed a deeper faith and spirituality. For example, Galileo insisted that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the universe. This observation seems obvious today, but then it was a threat to established religious beliefs. Galileo had to be willing to alter his view of the dogma he acquired.

For many of us our religious upbringing at times inadvertently convey a message that religious beliefs are unchangeable, but to the contrary, our very survival as human beings has always depended on our ability to change. Those who attempt to hold fast to religious beliefs as though they never change may risk a level of cognitive dissonance between their changing life experiences and static religious dogma. I think many of us believe that we must always adjust to our beliefs. Is it possible that sometimes our beliefs may need to be adjusted to our present life experiences?

To be congruent with our current stage of development, it may be necessary to reevaluate or renegotiate our long held beliefs. This, I believe, will bring our belief system and our spirituality in line with our current level of development. Individuals who do not appreciate such a growth process may perceive it as sacrilegious and may experience feelings of guilt. It is important to encourage such a person to explore those feelings because a successful resolution will lead to renewed or

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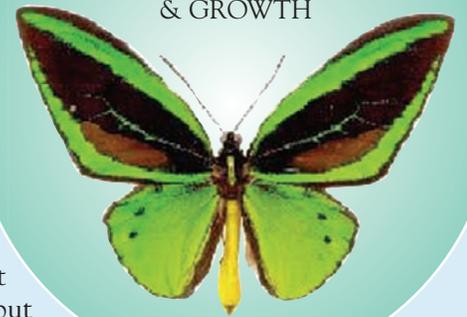
even genuine understanding one's spirituality. When one's beliefs are undergoing modification, it is important not to linger in fear but to actively explore the relevant factors.

Much like the physical and psycholoical changes we experience, our beliefs must also undergo periodic changes. Religious beliefs are indeed valuable but not immutable. Our ability to survive, and thrive, as human beings for millions of years is due to a large extent to our ability to change. Thus, if you are experiencing spiritual or emotional distress the solution may be as simple as embracing the change ■