

Right Action in the Way of Undoing

The Way of Undoing teaches that anyone can lead an ego-transcending, God-surrendered life WITHIN the context of (otherwise) ordinary activities. We don't need to leave our current home, our current job, our current circle of relationships, to live the Life Divine! Our everyday activities are not just distractions or obstacles that we must overcome in order to live spiritually. When properly understood and rightly used, they offer us ideal vehicles for the Undoing of ego.

This article explains why the spiritual discipline of RIGHT ACTION is a powerfully effective way to participate in our own Undoing. It describes the fundamental principles of spiritually right action that relate to ALL areas of life.

The path less followed—and less described

The spiritual path of right action in daily life is the road less traveled. Indeed, this road has rarely even been *described*.

Generally, simple lists of recommended and prohibited activities are all religion has to say to humanity on the subject of action. Religion primarily warns us what *not* to do; sometimes it may tell us *what* to do; but virtually never does it provide any detail about *how*.

Furthermore, many spiritual teachings seem to imply that *many* if not *most* human activities—such as pragmatic survival, childrearing, ordinary pleasures, and creative pursuits—are *anti*-spiritual. Following this train of thought, many seekers subscribe to the limiting notion that “right livelihood” can only be found in a job that has something to do with feeding the poor, saving the environment, and the like. If we accept such logic, we may think that “right action” includes only a small set of activities. We may even think it isn't possible to live a well-rounded spiritual life! That, friends, is a *tragic* misunderstanding.

Misunderstanding is created and perpetuated by the over-simplistic treatment of right behavior in traditional spiritual teachings. No matter how well meaning and specific they may be, all behavioral prescriptions are *so* inadequate as to be spiritually misleading. What makes any action really good? A flower given lovingly is uplifting; the same flower delivered dutifully can be *less* than useless. The effect of an action comes more from *why* and *how* than from *what*. And yet, usually religion focuses mostly on *what*.

Why and *how* determine the *spirit* of action; *what* only describes its *physical* form. Truly right action is a *spiritual* phenomenon, not merely a physical event. Because that's the case, we should admit that appropriate action can't *possibly* be defined by a set of behavioral rules—or limited to a list of sanctified activities. If we are to be spiritually appropriate, the *spirit* of any action—including the intention behind it, its tone, and its context-sensitivity—*must* get the lion's share of our care and consideration. Rather than asking, "Should I *do* this action?" a better question would be, "What is the right *spirit* for this action?"

In the entire universe of possible actions, *no* action can be truly right if done in the wrong spirit. Furthermore—and this is tremendously *liberating*—a tremendous range of possible actions *would* be right if done in a good spirit. It would be hard to think of an action that would really be wrong if done in the right spirit. What deed can be wrong that is right at heart?

Obviously, in order to act rightly, we *must* get a grip on the *spirit* in which we act. If true spiritual rightness is desired, we're wasting our effort if we do "good works" in a selfish or bad spirit. Good works can be *truly* good *only* to the extent that they are performed in a good *spirit*.

*To read more about tuning the spirit of our actions,
see "The Essence of Spirituality: the Spirit in Which We Live"
which may be found on the SoulProgress.com website.*

The challenge of defining right spirit

We can now understand why, throughout the ages, right action has rarely if ever been sensibly defined for sincere spiritual seekers. The challenge is threefold:

1. For the would-be explainers of right action, the *description* of "right spirit" is more complex than a mere list of do's and don'ts.
2. For the would-be performers of right action, the *discernment* required to determine right spirit on a case-by-case basis may be lacking—at least at first. Mixed motives, in particular, muddy the waters.
3. It's much *easier* to adjust outward behavior than to adjust inner spiritual alignment. Even if the true way were clearly communicated and readily discerned, it's challenging to *live* in a manner that is spiritually right.

But, all those challenges *can* be surmounted. Why, then, have the many spiritual traditions on earth failed to overcome them? The reason is simple: It's hell on ego to live a heavenly life! So there hasn't been a great demand for clear instructions. Ego constantly fights, and often overpowers, people's spiritual

sensibilities and desires. When ego wants us to weasel *out* of right living, it's convenient to be confused: "I'm not sure what to do! It's hard to say what would be right!" And when ego wants us to *stay* off the hook, we may wiggle off with the idea that we're not able: "I just *can't* be good—I tried!"

No! Heed not that old ego-propaganda! As children of God, we are already innately sensitive to right and wrong. That's the way God made us. In our hearts and souls, we *know* much more about rightness than our egos will let us confess—*especially* to ourselves. Not only are we knowing, we are quite capable of doing *real* good—far more capable than our egos ever care to admit. Ninety-nine percent of the things that we *should* do are things that we *could* do but, under the influence of ego, we may refuse to do anyway.

Unwillingness is a *far* bigger problem for humanity than either cluelessness *or* inability. It's true! And that brings us to the greatest challenge of right action: *resistance*. As ego-influenced creatures, we're more inclined to forget the Truth than to remember it. And we're more inclined to avoid right action than to engage in it. No *wonder* religion stays so silent on the issue of right action—precious few of the faithful want to hear about it. So, we look to our spiritual leaders to give us simpler, easier answers than the ones we already *know* are right.

How ego avoids right action

Left to its own devices, ego avoids right action in one of two ways: egotistical *idleness*, or egotistical *activity*. Ego often recommends retreat in cases where engagement would be more appropriate. And when ego recommends engagement, the forms of action it recommends are mostly self-centered, and therefore done in a poor spirit. Ego doesn't care *which* choice we take – either inaction or poor-spirited action. Either choice aborts our true spiritual mission on earth: true, Divinely inspired loving and generous-hearted giving. *Truly* good action.

Poor-spirited action. One form of poor-spirited action is to act selfishly and insensitively. You see this everywhere: Under the influence of ego, workers tend to become greedy and competitive. Couples suffer from seemingly endless conflicts and power struggles. People who are entrusted with responsibility tend to become righteous and tyrannical. The list goes on and on. No wonder so many aspects of ordinary life seem unspiritual!

Ego makes people act and react in ways that are certainly problematic. That seems to support the traditional recommendation for serious spiritual seekers to withdraw from the activities of "worldly" life. But withdrawal doesn't necessarily

solve the ego problem: Even so-called “spiritual” actions become anti-spiritual when too much ego is involved. What about the person who uses meditation to avoid facing life’s challenges? What about the person who goes to church to enjoy a feeling of righteousness and superiority? As you know, ego-driven spiritual seekers are no holier than greedy workers, selfish spouses, and dictatorial bosses!

Rote action. Another form of spiritually poor action is *rote* action—action done with more emphasis on physical form than on spiritual-emotional content. Rote action is a common and dangerous pitfall of rule-based spiritual teachings.

Granted, it’s a wonderful thing when you have a clear path to follow. We can easily get bogged down with complexity, dilemma, and uncertainty, and thus lose valuable opportunities for discipline and practice. And it’s a wonderful thing to make good choices in the spirit of obedience and surrender. But egoic mentality can easily misuse any potentially good thing. Unfortunately, rote action lends itself *easily* to spiritual “sabotage.”

Rote action suits the ego for two simple reasons:

1. **Rote action sidesteps the discernment required to bring the right spirit into action.** Insofar as rote action reduces “rightness” to a behavioral formula, we can pass as spiritually virtuous when we are quite the *opposite* in our hearts. For example, in rote performance of the “good deed” known as charity, we can be vain and self-righteous in our generosity. We can be outwardly giving, while at the same time being selfishly concerned, inwardly, about what we’ll get in return. We can even use rituals and behavioral formulas in the attempt to acquire selfish rewards of all kinds. “Lord, if you help me pass my exam I’ll go to church every Sunday from now on.”
2. **Rote action fails to recognize—much less eliminate—the presence of spiritual wrongness in action.** When a spiritual organization or authority says, “Just do this, and everything will be fine,” ego rejoices. Behavior prescription is a *carte blanche* for ulterior motives, hidden agendas, and selfish intentions of all kinds. Ego *loves* the fact that rote behavior provides a respectable facade behind which our egotistical motives can escape recognition.

A rote good deed doesn’t reduce the ego particularly, nor does it raise action to the point of spiritual merit or sanctity. That’s why, throughout the ages, saints

and sages of true spiritual discernment have railed against dogma, ritual, formulaic action, and behavioral prescriptions of all kinds.

To read more about the pitfalls of rules-based religion and how to overcome them, see “Meeting God After Church” which may be found on the SoulProgress.com website.

Inaction. The bad results we get from egotistical action give ego plenty of justification to recommend inaction. As part of its passivity sales pitch, ego reminds us how easily we can hurt ourselves and others whenever we take action. (And it hopes we don’t remember that *egotism* in action is what *causes* the pain.)

Ordinarily, and as a matter of human tendency, the quality of people’s participation in ordinary life is strongly influenced by ego. And inevitably, ego-influenced action creates wrongdoing and guilt, aversions and attachments. Given those patterns, we may reasonably wonder if it’s *possible* to live an ordinary life without bringing ourselves and others down. And *of course*, we don’t want to endlessly repeat mistakes! So we may conclude that we—and everyone around us—will be better off if we simply avoid certain activities and situations.

There may be something laudable—even wise—about the decision not to act to avoid making a mess. Surely, the Spirit applauds inaction when we are abstaining from self-indulgence, by refusing a known temptation we have not been able to transcend. The Spirit hopes we will be circumspect, sensitive, and perhaps even self-sacrificing in refraining from compulsively pursuing selfish purposes.

At the same time, contrary to traditional spiritual thought, refraining from action is not necessarily “purer” or “safer” than engaging in the fray of life. Though we may have some good and noble reasons for inaction, in many cases our motives are not so pure. Ego-based inaction reflects egoic qualities such as cowardice, laziness, selfish withholding, and lack of mental discipline.

We may refrain from acting for self-protective reasons—hoping to avoid getting hurt, taking risks, or failing—and not caring if our non-participation impacts others negatively. But inaction actually *does* hurt us: It promotes practical dysfunction and undermines self-confidence, by allowing functional abilities to atrophy from disuse. It also deprives us of valuable spiritual exercise and lessons needed to strengthen our intentions for right living and right giving. Finally,

inaction denies us the deep soul-satisfactions of *living, loving, and giving* that all God's children need and want. It deprives us of our sense of spiritual purpose.

Right action for Undoing egotism (within action *and* inaction)

Fortunately, as children of God, we need not be resigned to the twin downsides of egotistical action/inaction. Here's the *real* solution:

CORRECT our orientation to action, and PARTICIPATE in all areas of life—in a self-transcending and liberating way.

How do we correct our orientation? By dedicating ourselves to *right action*, in the *right spirit*.

How to act in the right spirit

Obviously, in order to get and stay in the right spirit, we must constantly let go of the relatively poor spirit in which we as ego-identified beings *tend* to do (or avoid doing) things. But paradoxically, although the Way of Undoing is about getting rid of ego in our actions, we can't remove our ego obstructions by self-consciously focusing on them—or even by focusing on our effort to remove them. Excessive self-focus in *any* form only tends to reinforce ego identification.

Luckily, the path of right action gives us a safer, surer way up the mountain! If we accept right action as our star, we have a practical and truly effective way to defy the ego consistently. When we focus on doing something good—like loving or serving in a *truly* good spirit—we *naturally* encounter our ego obstructions, as an illuminating “side-effect” of our good-spirited efforts. Especially at first, nearly every attempt to engage rightly in action requires us to transcend our selfish habits and overcome our egoic resistance. And that gives us plenty of chances to release it *without* reinforcing it. So it's *crucial*, spiritually, that we embrace the challenge of right action. It is *essential* that we try to act as rightly and unselfishly as possible, bringing real consciousness and care to the spirit in which we act. What a blessing!

As we purify our *doing*, it becomes better doing. As we purify our *not-doing*, it either becomes more appropriate not-doing—that is, it becomes inaction chosen for spiritually right reasons—or it yields to appropriate doing. By replacing both egoic action and egoic inaction with spiritually *right* action, the Way of Undoing breaks into all the places where the ego stakes its claim in life and maintains its hold over us. It cuts away the fabric of ego's entire way of living.

Right spirit comes from aligning human will with God's will

The wholehearted attempt to act in the *right* spirit works marvelously well for the Undoing of ego. This is the True Way of *living* spirituality—the Way of Undoing, applied to action. Spirituality *in deed!* Now let's get specific about how to put this liberating understanding into practice.

As we said, the spirit of an action includes *why* and *how*. *Why* is the all-important *intention* that motivates the action. *How* is the specific way we choose to *manifest* that intention. Everyone knows from experience that human intentions and their manifestation run the entire gamut from low to high. So, how do we get our intentions and implementations truly right? *Only* by turning to God; only God's intentions and methods are *always* right.

This we can depend on:

- The highest, most perfect *intentions* are God's intentions—as in “Thy will, not mine, be done.”
- The most effective and infallible way to *manifest* the highest intentions is by following Divine direction in present time—in the spirit of obedience.

The *highest* spiritual value of any action is obtainable *only* through obedience to Divine direction, moment to moment. The *rightest* spirit for action is the highest, most Godly spirit! Therefore, the simplest definition of the right spirit for action is trying, wholeheartedly, to align our will with God's in everything we do. That's easy to say; now, how do we actually *do* it?

God's inner voice within each of us can supply the right intentions and the right methods to make any action Divine. But we can't expect to reliably depend on the inner voice until these two conditions are met:

- A. We are willing to *let go* of our personal agendas, lower motivations, and limiting beliefs. (Let go).
- B. We are sufficiently surrendered to *follow* God's lead—that is, to do what we are told. (Let God).

Surrender to Divine will comes in stages. Until we are able to know and follow God's will *directly*, moment to moment, we can only surrender *indirectly*—by embracing Godly intentions as we understand them to be, and by implementing them as purely as we can. In short, we should earnestly exert our own personal efforts to “do as God would have us do.”

Purifying our intentions

Here, then, is the first step in bringing the right spirit to our action: Choose the highest and most unselfish purposes you can, and protect those purposes from pollution by lower, egoic motivations.

Granted, it's *challenging* to maintain the purity of such high intentions. Ordinarily, we may well have various motivations for any given action. In fact, it is rare for our *stated* intentions to be our *only* intentions. And, all too often, our *best* intentions are *not* our strongest intentions.

A lower, *hidden* purpose lurking behind our higher, *stated* purpose is sometimes referred to as a hidden agenda, an ulterior motive. For example: "I will be nice to my supervisor to get a raise." Or: "I will love this person so that they will marry me and I can be financially secure." At times, though we may overlook or even deny its existence, our "secondary" lower motive may, in reality, be our primary one—the one that determines the main effect of our deeds. The result? Surprise and disappointment. The cause: confusion regarding our motives.

Especially in spiritual life, it's dangerous to assume that as long as we are working on something noble, we are necessarily noble in our motives. We can ill afford to use our involvement in an apparently unselfish project to justify going into denial about the parts of our motivation that are *selfish*.

Example: I could be working to save an endangered species, (which is, by definition, an unselfish project). But I could be doing it in a very selfish way—for reasons that are selfish. For example, I could be creating a save-the-whales organization because I read somewhere that working in a political action group is one of the best ways to meet members of the opposite sex.

Clearly, in this life, personal desire *is*. And there will always be personal desire. Similarly, there *is* self-motivation, and there may always be elements in our motivation that could be called *selfish*. Those are facts of life. But we have control over the *degree* of self-interest. And surely, we had better *minimize* it.

This matter of *degree* of selfish motivation is spiritually crucial. Therefore, the fact of life that says, "Yeah, of course there's self-interest; everyone has self-interest" should *not* be used as an excuse to give up, or to make only half-hearted efforts. Obviously, the *more* self-interest is present, the *less* our good intentions can produce results that could satisfy God or ourselves. So, the "fact" of self-interest should call us to be *more* vigilant, not *less*. We should ask ourselves, "Sure, *some* self-interest is present, but *how much?*"

If we are to act in the right spirit, we must pay careful attention to the balance among our intentions. As sincere seekers of rightness, we should not overlook hidden motivations that change the tone—and the effect—of our action. We certainly don't *want* our higher motivations to serve/camouflage lower motivations. To minimize that danger, we should frequently ask ourselves, "What is the motivation behind my motivation?" Then, in the name of rightness, we should let go of our attachment to any selfish motivations we find.

Purifying our implementation

Being well-intentioned is essential, but not sufficient by itself. As you know, ego routinely *degrades* action. To the extent that ego is involved, some or all of the potential good benefit of any action is misappropriated and wasted in reinforcing the ego, and fulfilling *its* purposes. Therefore, the spiritual value of any action can be fully realized only insofar as we truly transcend our ego in performing the action.

Consequently, another part of acting in the right spirit is sincerely trying to implement our beautiful intentions as *beautifully*—unselfishly—as possible. We should act in the most Godly way we can—with or without God's direct help. Do your best, and let God do the rest.

Until we're consistently able to follow God's direction moment by moment, and move as the spirit moves, we shouldn't just sit on our hands. Since we're already acting in so many arenas of life, why not invest the maximum integrity and bring the maximum consciousness to our efforts? And why not make our efforts as productive and useful to the humanity as possible, (rather than just selfishly wasteful, or even destructive)? That way, we avoid creating excessive attachment, guilt, and shame. And, we accumulate the discipline and practice we need to someday be able to reliably hear, correctly interpret, and faithfully obey the still small voice.

Fortunately, our practice doesn't have to be perfect—only sincere. We simply make our own best efforts in everything we do, as humble as those efforts are. We try to be sensitive and flexible. And we try to gracefully handle our errors. Whenever we make a misstep, we should be willing to let go of whatever we did wrong, and take a better approach next time. We can't allow bad mental habits to interfere with the right spirit we seek, so we should let go of fear, inhibition, resistance, and negative tendencies whenever we encounter them in ourselves. We should also release negative or limiting beliefs about self, God, and others. By transcending the ego and surrendering to rightness in these ways, we gradually prepare ourselves to surrender truly to God.

The value of action-ideals for ego-transcendence

Although perfection in action is not to be expected, we all have the spiritual need to *seek* perfection—and our earnest attempts to match actions to ideals pay rich rewards. The *attempt* to act in a perfectly Godly spirit allows us to see, discipline, and release all the layers of ego-intention that stand in our way. Time after time, we can let go of ego in order to act ever *more* perfectly.

The progressive Undoing of ego is like cleaning a window. As our actions become less egoic, we become able to see and release increasingly subtle imperfections that were previously hidden under layers of superficial dirt. You can't fix it if you can't see it! *See* more dirt, *remove* more dirt. *See* more clearly, *be* more cleanly. That's how spiritual progress is made.

Inevitably, as we proceed on the spiritual path of right action, we notice that any amount of ego involvement will cause us to fall short of the ideal. No matter how far we've come along the trail of ego-overcoming, there seems to always be more to handle! But recognizing our persistent imperfection is every bit as valuable as trying to be perfect. It is *crucial* that we see our egoic limitations clearly and thoroughly. We *need* the awareness that as human individuals, we *can't* be perfect—and we can't act in a perfect fashion, utterly free of ego.

It is said, "You can't succeed if you don't try." To that we would add, "You can't *fail* if you don't try." That is, you can't recognize what you can and can't do unless you try your best. When we've tuned up our actions as well as we can and they're *still* not perfectly attuned, we realize we've gotten as good as *we* get (as ego-identified beings, that is). Any *better* is *beyond* us. *Good enough* is beyond us, even. That moment of ego failure is the stroke of enlightenment.

What? People fail all the time—rarely is anyone enlightened by it. True! Failure is useful for human evolution only to the extent that it is wisely interpreted. Otherwise, failure is just a way that ego justifies abandoning the pursuit of truer rightness—or engaging in that pursuit half-heartedly. Ego uses failure to crystallize negative notions of life, and to excuse all manner of withholding and dysfunction. Oftentimes when we fail, we choose to be resentful and depressive. We may stop making efforts and become a lazy "failed case." Or perhaps we become insecure and defensive; we grit our teeth, and we try "harder"—but in a way that's even more *selfed* than before. Negative reactions to failure can set us back just as far as a positive reaction to failure can advance us.

In the "failure" that becomes enlightenment, we are finally willing not to reassert egoic selfhood—either as a self-determined sovereign, or as a failed case.

Instead, we finally release our stubborn attachment to everything we selfishly wanted, and to the ways we tried to get it, and happily turn our life over to God.

Please note: Even though failure apparently leads to enlightenment, the Way of Undoing isn't about "try to fail!" It's about, "Do a *better* job; do the *best* job you can of everything you're trying to do." If we try to act well but we frequently fail because we're still too self-centered, somewhere in that process, we'll *naturally* come to the conclusion that the best job we can do isn't good enough—and is ultimately, in some crucial and irreducible respects, a failure. Eventually, based precisely on the inadequacy of our *best* efforts, we intuitively realize that there's only *one* way to eliminate the ego motivation: step aside *completely*, and let God act through us, recognizing that "We *can* do *with* God what we can't possibly do alone." Do your best, and let God do the rest.

*To read more about the failure that leads to enlightenment, see
"Enlightenment is a Failure" which may be found on the
SoulProgress.com website.*

God helps those who help God

There's only so much we *can* do. We can do, but only God can Undo. We can lighten, but only God can enlighten. The subtlest forms of ego-identification can only be Undone by the Grace of God. And yet, through it all, the big picture makes perfect sense: God helps those who help themselves. Finally, when we have done all we as mortals can to release the ego, God does the rest.

Ego Undoing is the *ultimate* psychic surgery—by God. God is The One Who Heals. God is the heart unbreaker, the unseparator of souls. God is the only One who can remove our deepest attachment to ego. And only we can allow Him to do it, in our own case. We don't just fall asleep and wake up changed! We submit to the Divine Physician in full consciousness.

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unbreaker, the unseparator of souls.*

We become sufficiently willing to allow the final cut *when* we are more committed to rightness than to ego. *When* we love and value the Goal *enough*, we are *happy* to literally trade egotism for it! The blessed Goal that finally brings us to the brink of enlightenment is the right life of actively living and loving—as God would have us do.

Let go and let God

The Way of Undoing is a path of spiritual liberation (letting go) and enlightened living (letting God).

The progressive practice of the Way of Undoing is, first of all, a process of *letting go* in which we participate in our own *Undoing*—a systematic unraveling of egoic tendencies and limitations. On this liberating stretch of the path, we *actively* shed the layers of habit, thinking, and self-identification that separate us from our true spiritual reality.

This brings us to the second aspect of the Way of Undoing, which could truly be described as *letting God*. Now begins the real practice of Divine obedience—becoming a conduit of God’s light, God’s grace, and God’s work. Here the idea of *Undoing* takes on a different meaning. When, in a spirit of surrender, we follow Divine inspiration; when we approach our activities with appropriate dispassion; when our motives for action are not too selfed and we are not so egotistically involved that we are more sovereign than surrendered and obedient; *then* our works are no longer our own. At last we can rightly say, “I am not the doer. I am not doing all this.”

The ego-I is no longer the doer when it is no longer dictating why, how, what, and when for us. And to the extent that our ego-I *isn’t* the doer, our doing is truly *Un-doing*. Thus, true surrender transforms personal doing into *Un-doing* (which is to say, God’s doing, through us).

As our actions begin to reflect more Divine initiative than personal initiative, more Divine intention than personal intention, more Divine direction than personal self-direction, the Way of Undoing blossoms into a truly enlightened way of living, loving, and giving. Thus begins the life of cooperation with God. That Divine Life will be described in further detail in the next chapter.

Following that, the final five articles on the Way of Undoing will explain *specifically* how to serve the Undoing of ego in *each* of the five major areas of human endeavor—relationship, study, service, practical responsibility, and worship. Remember: “You can’t climb a ladder with your hands in your pockets.” So we need to know how to rightly hold—and also when to appropriately let go of—the rungs by which we ascend.