



Research Article

Why Self-Care Is Not Enough: The Nature of True Well-Being

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Abstract

The notion of self-care—like its precursor, self-help—has emerged due to a spiritual vacuum in the contemporary world. The burgeoning mental health crisis that is prevalent today appears inseparable from the broader existential predicament facing humanity. Mainstream psychology and its therapies have not been able to address these challenges, in response to which we have seen the inevitable rise of self-care remedies. Across humanity's diverse spiritual cultures, these have always been available, yet they were invariably grounded in a religious tradition and its sacred psychology. The more we are marginalized from such roots, the more self-care is required—our current obsession with which is the unacknowledged search for wholeness due to modern people having lost their sense of the sacred.

Keywords:

Self-Care • Self-Help • Psychology • Mental health • Religion

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Introduction

Talk of “self-care” is heard everywhere today. It has become a buzzword that has entered every facet of mainstream society, becoming a secular mantra of the “therapeutic” ethos that has been absorbed into today’s dominant culture, where we are continually called to *practice self-care*. We are usually not told exactly what this entails but are simply urged to undertake whatever works for us. Indeed, we are told that we can never do this enough.

Self-care is a nebulous term, and rarely is it asked: What is the self that we are trying to look after? Self-care is no longer limited to mindfulness, walks in nature, meditative apps, yoga, or even journaling for that matter; now anything is pretty much considered self-care: healthy or self-indulgent eating, being alone or socializing, exercising or resting (“me-time”), shopping or simplifying—everything finds a place under this all-encompassing rubric.

It is not difficult to identify certain resemblances between earlier forms of the New Age movement and *self-help*. The current obsession with *self-care*, appears to be a crafty rebranding of the older term which seemed to indicate a deficiency. “Self-care,” by contrast, gives the impression that everything is already fine just the way it is. This stance is evidenced by an inordinate focus on the self, and a complete reliance on its capacity to help realize our human potential, as though this was the true meaning of our existence. Yet, to rely fully on the self is to forget that such potential is “on loan,” so to speak, in that it belongs not to us but to the Divine. An essential distinction thus needs to be made between true self-care and its spurious modern replacements.

In the absence of a sacred orientation in people’s lives, self-care has become a secular substitute for traditional forms of spiritual practice. Instead of practicing traditional virtues that help us conform to Divine reality, we are taught techniques—both arbitrary and individualistic—to manage our responses to the increasingly chaotic conditions of modern life. This inversion of traditional norms has contributed to the rise of “therapeutic” culture and to human beings in modernity being defined exclusively in “psychological” terms—these are signs, in themselves, of the decline that has brought on the current spiritual crisis in our midst.

No one will dispute that caring for ourselves is essential, but this cannot be done properly unless we focus on the whole self—comprising Spirit, soul, and body—and reconnect with our spiritual dimension. Any attempt to improve ourselves will fall short if we neglect our transcendent needs. Some distinctions have to be made between true self-care and self-indulgence, the former being that which supports our well-being, in contrast to simply surrendering to one’s desires without regard to consequences. Central to this exploration is the need to recognize how selfhood is understood across the world’s religions. While the Abrahamic monotheisms of

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam embrace a very different notion from what we find in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, metaphysical reflection can help us to discern a unity that pervades them nevertheless.

True Self-Care

In light of the escalating mental health crisis today, we see the reduction of human reality to psychological phenomena alone, and an excessive pathologizing that views symptoms as signs of disorder. Not every dilemma needs to be diagnosed as a psychological disorder, and not all issues require mental health interventions. With the growing focus on personal strengths as opposed to pathology-driven ones, we can see that self-care options are a way of safeguarding ourselves from the trappings of a world that is preoccupied with illness and has lost its equilibrium.

Without spiritual discernment, we become readily prone to confusion and incapable of making proper distinctions. Secular approaches to self-care (akin to secular psychotherapy) can certainly have benefits such as setting boundaries in interpersonal relationships, being aware of our emotional life, engaging in meaningful activities, and regular exercise, for example. There is nothing wrong with addressing such matters in themselves, yet without knowing what it truly means to be human, everything that is intended for our good on the surface can be spiritually harmful and, therefore, serve to undermine our self-care in the end.

“Self-care” is often described as the cultivation of compassion for oneself. However, we can only become truly compassionate when we cleave to the Divine through our adherence to one of the world’s great religions, for the true source of love and compassion is the highest reality itself. The secular world tries to convince us that we alone are able to provide for our own self-care; however, without grace nothing is possible, and it is through divine working that grace becomes active. Otherwise, we are apt to confuse immanence with transcendence. We are first called to see that “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36) before we are able to acknowledge “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21), “I am the Self ... seated in the heart of all beings” (Bhagavad Gītā 10:20), or “We are nearer to him than the jugular vein” (Qur’ān 50:16).

A regard for all sentient beings, including ourselves and all the created order, is central to every spiritual tradition. In the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, it is envisaged as *benevolence* or *loving-kindness* (Pāli: *mettā*; Sanskrit: *maitrī*) and, within Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is simply called *compassion* (Sanskrit: *karuṇā*). In the Christian tradition, it is said that “God is love” (1 John 4:16) and, in Islam, Love (Arabic: *‘ishq*) is an attribute of the Divine, as Rūmī (1207–1273) points out: “Love’s creed is separate from all religions: The creed and denomination of lovers is God” (Chittick, 1983, p. 213). Although self-care rightly affirms the need for compassion

towards ourselves, its genesis lies solely in the Divine. We often hear today of the need to love ourselves, yet what we really need is to love not our egoic self, but the Divine within us and all beings, which is the true source of abiding felicity during our brief human sojourn, and beyond.

The growth of a global marketplace of self-care for mass consumption suggests that it is not for the betterment of the human condition, but rather a means of capitalizing on our distress instead of improving our well-being. To be sure, self-care is a big business, comprising a billion-dollar industry that has become a hallmark of corporate wellness programs around the globe. This problematic phenomenon is, perhaps, better known today by what Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa (1939–1987) has termed *spiritual materialism*. He writes: “The problem is that ego can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality” (2002, p. 13).

This is not to say, of course, that all mental health problems can be reduced to spiritual problems. The American clinical psychologist John Welwood (1943–2019) coined the term *spiritual bypassing* to describe a common tendency to adopt spiritual ideas and practices so as to avoid dealing with the “unfinished business” of our lives. He admits that it is “tempting to use spirituality as a way of trying to rise above this shaky ground. In this way, spirituality becomes just another way of rejecting one’s experience” (2000, p. 207). It goes without saying that true spirituality has nothing to do with bypassing mental health issues, but is rather about encountering oneself fully in one’s depths with a view to purifying the human psyche.

The Global Mental Health Crisis and its Ravages

Due to the burgeoning mental health epidemic and the inability of its practitioners to manage this crisis effectively, self-care has been proposed as a possible solution, especially as a way for mental health professionals to avoid burnout and compassion fatigue. Given the unprecedented number of suffering individuals, many have been encouraged to take responsibility for themselves, having fallen under the spell of self-care therapies as some kind of panacea. To get to the root of this phenomenon requires dispelling the myths and confusion that plague modern psychology.

Although the self-care movement urges us to engage in healthy socialization, and acknowledges the importance of human connection, it does so on purely individualistic terms, paradoxically leaving us to manage our inner lives in isolation from others, which runs counter to the advice we find among the spiritual traditions of the world. Today, the truth that “No man is an island” (Donne, 1923, p. 98), and that all of existence is interconnected, is often ignored. However, the human psyche is an integral part of the web of life and its underlying cosmic order. Given the heightened levels of alienation that we experience today, it is difficult to discern any apparent

wholeness. Isolated and disconnected, the human psyche remains fractured, unable to find psychological health and well-being.

Human beings are not altogether self-governing, despite the views of prominent thinkers like Michel Foucault (1926–1984), who defined man as being “destined to care for himself” (1986, p. 47). Yet, no amount of self-care or prescribed “me-time” will bring us to the realization of who we truly are and what we ultimately need, as these concerns cannot be addressed outside of a sacred context. Otherwise, the person that needs help is none other than the one who is expected to provide this very same care, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle. The transpersonal Self is not in need of care, for it alone can fulfill all our deeper needs. We are thus called to surrender and take refuge exclusively in the Divine, for this is the ultimate source of our well-being and wholeness. As we read in the Bhagavad Gītā: “Abandoning all dharmas, come to Me alone for shelter” (18:66).

In the midst all of this, a “culture of narcissism” is starting to emerge, as the prominent American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch (1932–1994) observed:

Plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness, the “psychological man” of the twentieth century seeks neither individual self-aggrandizement nor spiritual transcendence but peace of mind, under conditions that increasingly militate against it.... [I]n the struggle for composure; he [has] ... hope[s] of achieving the modern equivalent of salvation, “mental health”.... (1978, p. 13)

There is no escaping the fact that, as a civilization, we have lost a sense of the sacred and that dehumanization is rampant in the modern world. Our preoccupation with self-care would not prevail in a society that is rooted in the sacred and, thus, spiritually healthy. It needs to be asked: how is self-care possible in a desacralized ambiance? Each day passes with increasing speed, placing greater responsibilities and burdens on people, leaving very little time to do much of anything, let alone contemplate the deeper truths of existence. To do so appears to many as a luxury—something that only the affluent can afford—but this is not the case. In fact, all spiritual traditions offer teachings and practices that can be adopted wherever we may find ourselves and in whatever circumstances.

Spiritually Informed Approaches

Prayer allows for a direct relationship to the Divine. When surveying the world’s diverse religions, and their mystical dimensions, it becomes apparent that prayer defines the centrality of the human condition and holds an eschatological relevance. This is because human beings cannot go beyond themselves by personal effort alone; they need the support of that which transcends the empirical ego.

The prescription for all our earthly malaise has, traditionally, been the medicine of Divine Remembrance; in other words, prayer is the means by which we may become integrated into our transpersonal essence (see Laude, 2006). Within the Christian tradition, we find the Jesus Prayer that is supported by the injunction “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This remembrance of God (*dhikr Allāh*) in the Islamic tradition is considered therapeutic: “Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest” (Qur’ān 13:28). In the Hindu tradition, the repetition (*japa*) of the Divine Names is a spiritual method available to all regardless of social status or spiritual aptitude. According to the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi (1894–1994), this remembrance is always available: “He may think of god even on the bus or the train as he goes to his office or any other place” (2008, p. 5). Within the Buddhist tradition, there is the practice of *nembutsu* or invoking the name of Amida Buddha. This practice is also to be found within the religion of the First Peoples as indicated by the Lakota *wicasa wakan* or holy man Black Elk (1863–1950): “[W]e Indians know the One true God, and ... we pray to Him continually” (1989, p. xx).

There is never a moment when the Divine is absent; rather, it is we who are absent—this is our greatest obstacle. The obsession with self-care is, in fact, linked to the spiritual crisis facing humanity. When properly understood, true self-care becomes impossible for one who accepts the modern worldview regarding who we are. An excessive focus on the profane self *is* the problem, because, relying on its own resources, it cannot support psychological well-being or the quest for our true Self.

The assumption behind obsessive self-care is that we are able to fully care for ourselves, but the notion that we have ultimate agency over our lives is illusory. While personal effort and perseverance are certainly necessary, taking refuge in the Divine ought to be our primary focus. We are told that true respite from the difficulties of daily life may only be found in spiritual refuge:

Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28–30)

Likewise, the antidote to anxiety is faith and trust in the highest reality:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7)

It becomes apparent that before we can even discuss self-care, it is critical to establish what is meant by the very self whose care is being urged.

Paths Beyond Ego

Modern psychology for the most part is confined to a horizontal understanding of human identity, and is unable to recognize the vertical dimension that pertains to our primordial nature. The founder of the “talking cure,” Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), writes: “The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense” (1989b, p. 19) and, likewise, “there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self, of our own ego” (1989a, p. 12). At the same time, even he expresses its shortcomings: “the Ego is not master in its own house” (1955, p. 143).

To equate the self with the ego is a betrayal of the Spirit, which it seeks to replace. Therefore, whatever thwarts our remembrance of the Divine needs to be resisted. Many traditions assert the existence of both a lower self and one that is “transpersonal”—that is, grounded in a universal reality. Accordingly, it is a mistake to identify the lower self as the source of all our potential. Yet, it must be said that the lower self does determine our actions when the ego is enclosed in itself. The need to make effort on the human plane does not preclude the influence of divine reality in determining our will when we allow it to do so.

According to the Hindu tradition, it is the confused or deluded person who asserts “I am the doer” (Bhagavad Gītā 3:27), as in most cases it is the Divine alone who is the doer. Our identification with the “doer” is the problem, as Swami Ramdas (1884–1963) observed: “The ego is the cause of soul’s bondage and misery” (as cited in Weeraperuma, 2005, p. 1). In the Taoist tradition, there is the notion of “non-action” (Chinese: *wu wei*), but this does not signify inertia, but rather stems from the very source of all action in the *Tao*, which is not the product of individual initiative. Shin Buddhism makes the distinction between “Other-Power” (*tariki*) and “self-power” (*jiiriki*), which is to say the distinction between reliance on the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha, as opposed to our own efforts, to attain Nirvana. The Christian tradition teaches us to turn away from our self-preoccupation in an act of self-naughting; we must deny ourselves (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) so as to make room in our hearts for something other than the human ego. This common theme among spiritual traditions shows that an exaggerated notion of our own agency can only lead to inadequate self-care.

If we ask ourselves who is the doer that practices self-care, we will get closer to resolving this question; however; this will not make sense in the absence of an appropriate metaphysical framework. This is made evident when St. Augustine (354–430) affirms: “For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee” (1959, p. 3). All attempts to seek wholeness in anything other than the Divine are bound to fail. As Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1416) rightly discerned: “Our soul may never have rest in anything which is beneath itself” (1978, p. 313). Mainstream

psychology and the field of mental health only know of a self that is separate—not one that transcends the psycho-physical order. The lower levels of our being are unable to grasp that which is higher, seeing as the latter transcend (yet include) the former. Through abiding in the Divine, we may gain access to our core identity.

A significant burden on people living in a desacralized world is that they are engaged in work that is not in conformity with their true vocation. They are simply compelled to do so by the need to secure an income, which undoubtedly contributes to widespread discontent in our era. Therefore, there is a need today for clear boundaries between one's professional and personal life, where we often find a divide between what we do for a living and what nourishes our spirit.

Now that misconceived notions of self-care have been addressed, we will consider the correct understanding of how traditional cosmology and psychology view the human body as a reflection of the cosmos. Throughout the sacred scriptures, we are reminded that our “bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19) and, in the Qur'ān's account of the creation of man, God says “I blew into him of My spirit” (Qur'ān 15:29, 38:72). This is why we are instructed to care for the human body, but we must not do so according to our own individualistic notions, for we are given clear guidance by humanity's sapiential traditions.

Human beings are not limited to their corporeal reality; rather, we consist of a tripartite nature—Spirit, soul, and body. It is the transpersonal dimension that animates both soul and body, thus rendering them whole; without the soul, the body cannot come alive; without the body, the soul would be bereft of a suitable dwelling; and, without the Spirit, neither would exist. Therefore, any discussion of self-care must be mindful of both the science of nature, as well as that of the human soul.

Discerning the True Self

The more we seek the source of self-care in our lower selves, the more fleeting it becomes. The act of self-care requires doing something in order to stay well or keep going, which implies constant maintenance. Again, it is never asked who the “doer” is; only that its activity continues. Any fixation can take us in the opposite direction to what we originally intended. In the often-cited words of Dōgen (1200–1253): “To learn the Buddha Way is to learn one's self. To learn one's self is to forget one's self” (1972, p. 134). This is reminiscent of the spiritual advice of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the Spanish Catholic theologian: “For each one must realize that he will make progress in all spiritual matters in proportion to his flight from self-love, self-will, and self-interest” (1964, p. 87). Neither happiness nor fulfillment can be procured outside of the sacred. To be fully human is to recognize our fundamental relationship with the Absolute, which is to say that our true identity in the Divine

is the primordial nature (*fiṭrah*), the “image of God” (*imago Dei*), Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*), or the Self (*Ātmā*).

The Old Testament upholds the belief that human beings are a composite of Spirit, soul, and body. We see this, for example, in Genesis: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (2:7). While this triadic division of the self is found within Judaism and Christianity, it also exists in the Islamic tradition (as *Rūh*/*‘Aql*, *nafs*, and *jism*). The Arabic term *‘aql* is used to denote both reason and intellect, although the relationship between them (the first being horizontal and the second vertical) is always recognized. *Rūh* and *‘Aql* are found to be synonymous with spirit and Intellect. The *nafs* (soul, self, or ego) is often conflated with *Rūh* or Spirit, as is evidenced by these terms being used interchangeably; however, they represent two markedly different ways of viewing the self ontologically.

Similarly, Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of the self, while divergent on one level, can be reconciled to form a unity in a broader metaphysical context. The highly influential *Abhidharmakośa* by Vasubandhu (fourth to fifth century) states: “It is a mistake ... to consider as a self that which is not the self; but [nowhere does the Buddha say that] it is a mistake to consider as a self that which is the self” (as cited in Conze, 1983, p. 129). The Buddha does not take issue with the Hindu understanding of the Self (*Ātman*) as *neti, neti* (“not this, not this”) which, by means of a double negation, conveys an apophatic understanding that eliminates all determinate conceptions, leaving in its place only the consciousness of that which is, the Self alone; all that is not this is non-Self (*anattā*). This position is summarized in the Buddha’s words, “What is not self, that is not my self.” (as cited in Horner, 1973, p. 32).

Our true Self cannot be understood through the myopic lens of modern science, which has proven incapable of delivering itself from its erroneous theoretical foundations. The same applies to the radically limited scope of modern psychology, and its mental health treatments, which are devoid of a transpersonal dimension. As René Guénon (1886–1951) explains:

As for modern Western psychology, it deals only with a quite restricted portion of the human individuality, where the mental faculty is in direct relationship with the corporeal modality, and, given the methods it employs, it is incapable of going any further. In any case, the very objective which it sets before itself and which is exclusively the study of mental phenomena [the empirical ego], limits it strictly to the realm of the individuality, so that the state which we are now discussing [the Self (*Ātmā*)] necessarily eludes its investigations. (2004, p. 96)

In a sense, all true spiritual practices sanctioned by revealed traditions aid us in returning to ourselves. Even within the realm of mental health, there is often the self-care prescription of breathing slowly and deeply in order to be mindful of our breath.

It is worth recalling that the term Spirit derives from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning “spirit” or “breath,” which stems from the verb *spirare*, “to breathe.” It appears to be so simple to breathe, yet, in our fast-paced digital age, we forget to be aware of even this vital process. It is thus evident that human beings are inherently connected to the sacred and made for the Absolute.

When the separate self is given prominence and its maintenance is supported above all else, it becomes an obstacle to the unfolding of the true Self. Many mistaken ideas are prevalent in the current *zeitgeist*, one of them being that this existence owes us something, or that we are free to pursue whatever we desire. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are entitled to nothing and are only given the blessing of this life—with all of its trials and tribulations—for the sole purpose of encountering the Divine in ourselves, in others, and in the world around us. The universal and timeless wisdom found throughout the diverse cultures of the world teaches an essential truth: “Your natural state is one of happiness” (Ramana, 1996, p. 284).

Conclusion

Prioritizing our personal welfare, though understandable in light of our biological needs, often leads to a host of problems. A complete human being is selfless rather than selfish, and we can attenuate the demands of our egoic self when purged of all that does not truly belong to us, which means to overcome ourselves. Self-care, in the truest sense, is to rest, at all times, in an awareness of the Absolute—the more we surrender to it, the less importance we place on ourselves. To remember the “one thing needful” (Luke 10:42) is to cease being a spiritual “doer” so that we can awaken to our true Self. It cannot be forgotten that no matter how much so-called self-care we practice, we are unknowingly always searching to transcend ourselves because we can never find satisfaction within the confines of our limited lives, lived “horizontally” in a world that is similarly constricted.

Paradoxical as it may appear at first, it could be said that self-care has inadvertently become infused with the true meaning of *religion*. We recall that the etymological root of the English word “religion” is the Latin *religare*, meaning to “to re-bind” or “to bind back,” by implication to the Divine or a transcendent reality. Recovering our primordial nature, a task thwarted by our desacralized world, is the path toward true self-care.

The entirety of our existence may be described as a journey from the wilderness of our fragmented self to the true home that is our transpersonal Self. It goes without saying that were it not for the chaotic conditions of modern life—and for humanity having lost its moorings in the venerable spiritual paths of humanity—there would be no need to discuss self-care. It is only when self-care practices are restored to what they were understood to have been across religious traditions over millennia, that

they will be able to provide the lasting efficacy that we seek from them. We would do well to recall the words of the great Bard: “This above all: to thine own self be true” (Shakespeare, 1899, p. 33).

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