

Spirituality Today

A SHORT COURSE IN CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

The Search

Spiritual life is a quest, a search, which begins the moment we have determined to set out in earnest. The great sacred traditions of the world invite us to begin a path that they say will lead us into a realm of transcendence, and deep into an understanding of what it means to be a human being.

They also affirm what we already intuitively know and deeply feel—that we are somehow “made for more” than we presently are. But what that “more” is, perhaps we cannot say, nor will we know it until we find and experience it for ourselves.

The question then is, of course, what are we searching for? Again, the sacred traditions of the world give us intriguing answers. One answer is that we are searching for some higher Power (to use conventional religious language, God). In the sacred language of the ancient Hebrew people, they say we are asked to seek the “face of God.” Another answer is that we are searching for our true or “higher” selves and what it really means to be a complete (and mature) human being. A more contemporary answer is that we are searching for the purpose of our lives here on earth. Each of these answers is in some sense correct, and perhaps a blend of them is the complete answer.

In this search we want to know many things. We want to know whether or not we are alone in the universe, and if we are creatures made by something or someone else, other than fate, chance or the physical laws of cause and effect. If so, then who made us and for what purpose? Who has claim on our “patent” so-to-speak? Is this “Maker” still interested in us, and did “he-she-it” create us for some other purpose than to spend time on the planet earth?

What is our Creator like? It seems obvious that our own complexity and the intricacies of the



The spiritual life is a quest for meaning.

world around us point toward a Creator of some vast intelligence. Why is it that we don’t seem to have specific information readily at hand about this “Cause-of-All,” and why is it that we don’t come with built-in “instructions” about our purpose—much like bees and birds seem to know by instinct what they are supposed to be doing here?

If there are instructions, we want to know about them from our Maker. Is it too much to ask? Would a search to find and know the Creator be useful, or even possible? The answer from the spiritual traditions is that search is indeed useful, meaningful, and necessary if we are to complete our purpose on earth. We were created to search, especially for something greater than our own personal comfort. This is said to be one of the reasons why we have come into existence.

The most important question in this search may be, if there is a God, how can we come to know it, but not just get information about God—how can we really get to know God? How can we have a relationship that is truly our own and not someone else’s? We are on a search to find something more intimate than that.

A Wisdom Curriculum

Lesson One

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Special points of interest:

- In the search to find the Maker of humankind we must pass beyond ourselves.
- Within the heart of every creature is a Cry to move beyond the limits of their being.
- The Divine Reality towards which we move is both hidden and revealed in plain sight.



Lesson One

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The meaning of our lives becomes clear...against the backdrop of some larger meaning for the universe.

The religious spirit is in us. It preceded religions and their tasks. It slumbers at the bottom of our souls awaiting the event that will awaken it from sleep.



To know ourselves we must pass beyond ourselves.

A crucial aspect of our search is to find ourselves. We want a deeper understanding of just who we are and what it means to be alive as a human being on the planet. After all, what makes humans ask these sorts of questions anyhow? We seem to be different that way. We want some definitive understanding of why it is that we human beings are searchers and questioners. Are we just “made-up” creatures for no good reason anonymously, or is there something important about being human that we do not yet fully understand?

Finally, we also want to understand why we are here in the universe in the first place and what the reason for living actually is. We

don't simply want a general understanding that is good only for the sum total of human beings as a collective. We want to know precisely why it is that we exist personally. We ask this question, “What is my life for, specifically?”

Questions like these reveal the fact that we are aware that our lives are not meaningful unless they are put into some larger context or frame of reference. Just like the meaning of a word is only fully known within the context of an entire sentence (or even a whole conversation), so too the meaning of our lives becomes clearer when we see ourselves against the backdrop of some larger purpose for all existence.

Passing Beyond Ourselves

In every religious tradition, in all the arts and philosophy, and in all of human life—we see it everywhere—in the desire to know ourselves we must pass beyond ourselves. This is called “the longing for transcendence” and it appears to be universal.

This longing, this desire, however, is something almost hidden. It is expressed in a myriad ways, but the essence remains hidden. What we truly want, what we long for, is a form of fulfillment that is not simply “material.” The persistent desire through the centuries of human history is to bring to actuality the capacities and capabilities that we secretly know lie at the roots of our human nature, but which lie dormant.

The means of fulfilling this desire has been sought in all the fields of human endeavor. We have searched everywhere—religion, psychology, art, literature, philosophy, technology—so that the remains of our longing can be seen all about us. The question is, of course, have any of these explorations led to that true discovery?

At its core there has been an awareness that humans could live out a dynamic life process whose orientation was toward transcendence—beyond the smaller self (the

ego itself) which would give life a deeper sense of meaning and purpose, and the taste of a reality that was not simply located in space and time, but perhaps in eternity.

We feel this longing as an inexpressible desire to which we cannot put words, but which we know is true as soon as it is expressed. We know too that we are somehow “more than we seem,” but what manifests itself is so mundane and so ordinary. What are we to make of this discontinuity?

The great sages around the world have said that this longing is the beginning of the search, and to act consciously to take a step in the direction of the unknown marks the beginning of a path that will lead us toward our longing.

An ancient Buddhist saying is relevant at this juncture: “O you who are surrounded by darkness, do you not seek a light?” If the answer is “yes,” then we must heed this warning: “Never to have seen the truth is better than to have seen it and not to have acted upon it.” And so we must begin a search to “pass beyond ourselves.”

A Great Cry

Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic breath—a great Cry—which we call God. Plant life wished to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters, but the Cry leaped up within it and violently shook its roots: “Away, let go of the earth, walk!”

Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried, “I don’t want to. What are you urging me to do! You are demanding the impossible!” But the Cry, without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, “Away, let go of the earth, walk!”

It shouted in this way for thousands of eons; and lo! As a result of desire and struggle, life escaped the motionless tree and was liberated.

Animals appeared—worms—making themselves home in water and mud. “We’re just fine here,” they said. “We have peace and security; we’re not budging!”

Surging Purpose

We all know that there are regions of the human spirit untrammelled by the world of physics. In the mystic sense of the creation around us, in the expression of art, in a yearning towards God, the soul grows upward and finds fulfillment of something implanted in its nature.

The sanction for this development is within us, a striving born of our consciousness or an inner light proceeding from a greater power than ours. Science can scarcely question this sanction, for the pursuit of science springs from a striving which the mind is impelled to follow, a questioning that will not be suppressed.

But the Cry hammered itself pitilessly into their loins. “Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your betters!”

“We don’t want to! We can’t!”

“You can’t, but I can. Stand up!”

And lo! After thousands of eons, man emerged, trembling on his still unsolid legs.

The human being is a centaur; his equine hoofs are planted in the ground, but his body from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless Cry. He has been fighting, again, for thousands of eons, to draw himself like a sword, out of his animalistic scabbard. He is also fighting—this is his new struggle—to draw himself out of his human scabbard. Man calls in despair, “Where can I go? I have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss.” And the Cry answers, “I am beyond. Stand up!” All things are centaurs. If this were not the case, the world would rot into inertness and sterility.

—Nikos Kazantzakis, **Report to Greco**

Whether in the intellectual pursuits of science or in the mystical pursuits of the spirit, the light beckons ahead and the purpose surging in our natures responds.

—Sir Aurthur Eddington,
The Nature of the Physical World

Know that, by nature every creature seeks to become like God. Nature’s intent is neither food, nor drink, nor clothing, nor comfort, nor anything else in which God is left out. Whether you like it or not, whether you know it or not, secretly nature seeks, hunts, tries to ferret out the track on which God may be found.

—Meister Eckhart



We hear at our center a great Cry to go beyond what we know or can even imagine.

We do not understand, but somehow we are part of a creative destiny, reaching backward and forward to infinity—a destiny that reveals itself ... in our striving, in our love, our thought, our appreciation.



We are carried forward on a surging wave of spiritual evolution.

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for



**The Oriental Orthodox
Order in the West**



*The king who was
master of creating illusions.*

Search and the Future

Andre Malraux, the French writer, art critic, and political activist has said that if the twenty-first century is to be at all, it will have to be religious. In addition to the word “religious,” perhaps we should add “spiritual” or “numinous.” If he is right, we must be aware that as we approach the next millennium the solutions to our many difficulties may not come primarily from external, societal, and technological sources. Instead, they may emerge from the spiritual search we are invited to make into the depths of divine transcendence and immanence. This journey forward is the essence of spirituality. Its completion will be crucial not only for ourselves but for the whole of the cosmos as well. It may mean the salvation of the world.

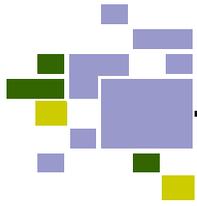
The Parable of the King

There was once a king who was a master at creating illusions. And while he wanted very much to be close to his people, he wanted even more for his people to want to be close to him.

So he devised a plan. He built around himself a great castle-illusion. There were illusory walls and illusory doorways and illusory towers. And then there were chambers and courtyards and passageways—all illusions. In front of each one, the king placed illusory treasures of every kind. Bags of money, trips to Florida, and having a beautiful body.

Then he proclaimed throughout the land that he wished to be found, and all the people came to the illusory castle but one by one they gave up searching for the king and settled instead for some illusory treasure. Until, at last, one of the king's sons came. He saw that it was all an illusion and that his father was there in plain view, sitting on a folding chair in the middle of a great, open field.

—Baal Shem Tov



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STUDY GUIDE: Lesson One

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you experienced the feeling that you are “more than you seem?” Do you have any proof that it is true?
2. Our search takes us in three different directions: toward God, toward our authentic selves, and toward a discovery of our personal meaning. Would you add anything else to this list that is critical or important for your search?
3. In our search for God, what is the difference between knowing God personally and knowing about God as a fact?
4. If someone were to ask you how it is that you have come to know God, what would you say to them?
5. What is it like to “pass beyond yourself?” Why is it important?
6. How have you ever experienced the “Cry” described by Kazantzakis? Do you think it is universal for all human beings?
7. Do you agree with the famous mystic, Meister Eckhart, that by nature every creature seeks to become like God?
8. Do you think the Parable of the King describes anything close to the reality of the world you have experienced? If this story does describe reality, then why would God set the world up in this way? What would be the purpose?
9. In your view, what role does spirituality play for the future of the planet?
10. In your opinion, what is the relationship between spirituality and technology? Is there one? If not, then what difference would spirituality make for human society, or is it just a waste of time and effort?

Readings for Insight

The quest for the meaning of life, the search for our true essence, or ... for God, is part of the basic principle of evolution. Actually it isn't a search at all. Rather the Divine is unfolding in us and through us. The Divine comes to consciousness in us. We think that as human beings we are on a quest for God. But we're not the ones searching for the Ultimate Reality. Rather it is the Ultimate Reality that causes the dissatisfied yearning and the search in us. God is the seeker. God awakens in us. We ourselves can't do anything; we can only let go so the Divine can unfold itself. We can only “get out of God's way,” as (Meister) Eckhart says. The essential nature reveals itself if only we don't prevent it. And if there is a redemption, then we are redeemed from being possessed by our ego so that our real selves can spread their wings.

—Willigis Jäger, *Search for the Meaning of Life* (13)

Daily Practice

- A. As the above quote suggests, there are several ways of looking at spiritual search. Either we are searching for God, and “finding,” or “not finding,” or God is searching for us, and we are either ready to be found or not. You might want to meditate upon this conundrum, or these very opposite points of view. Spend a day imagining that **you** are searching for God, and see what the signs are that this might be the case. On another day, look at it from the completely opposite point of view, that **God** is searching for you. Are there any signs or clues that either of these may, or may not be true? Journal your findings and insights.
- B. Here is a famous prayer from the fourth century theologian, St. Augustine. If you can, pray this prayer each day for a week: ✞ *Late have I loved you, O beauty so ancient and so new. Too late have I loved you! You were within me while I had gone outside to seek you. Unlovely myself, I fell heedlessly upon all those lovely things you had made. And always you were with me, but I was not with you. And all these beauties that held me far from you would not have existed at all unless they had their beginning in you. You called, you cried, you broke open my deafness. You blazed, you gleamed, you drove away my blindness. You sent your fragrance, I drew in my breath, and now I pant for you. I tasted, and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me, and now I burn with longing for your presence.*