

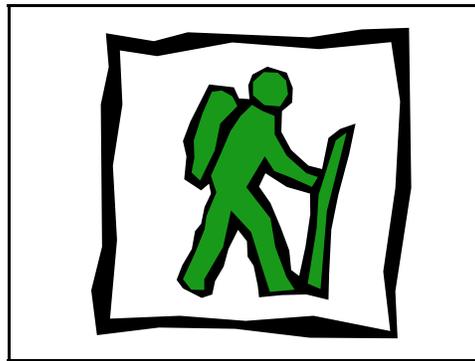
Spirituality Today

A SHORT COURSE IN CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

Your Life Task

Unbeknownst to you, perhaps, you have a life task that has been given to you to fulfill while living on this earth. You are here to complete a sacred journey—a journey that takes you to your destiny, toward human completion. This has been the special message given by all sacred traditions across the centuries.

Your life-work is to complete a sacred journey through what are metaphorically called, “the desert lands of earth experience.” You are to respect every aspect of your life and its journey and give it your full attention, for you are here only a little while. You have been given this opportunity as a great gift, and to complete the task is a great honor.



Yours is a “learning journey” in which you gain essential knowledge, wisdom and understanding of who you are and why you are here on the earth.

Spirituality as the Third Dimension

Human beings are said to be multi-dimensional creatures, inhabiting many dimensions. Sacred tradition asserts that we live in multiple but related realities. The first dimension or reality we inhabit is, of course, the physical world. We are obviously physical beings with material bodies living within the space-time dimension. We belong to the physical universe and our lives are inextricably woven into its fabric. As physical beings we enjoy the physical world in all its variety and complexity. Some of our highest achievements have been to explore this vast dimension of the universe through our five senses, extending and augmenting them through technological innovation.

We are also psychological beings, living in the territory of our own psychological space and social reality. Human beings inhabit themselves and their culture as they do physical space. Cultural space is where we live out this psycho-social dimension through all the systems of human

exchange: language, science, politics, culture, and the arts.

The psycho-social world is equally vast. In some ways it is even more complex than the physical world. In this psycho-social world we enjoy such things as one another’s company, entertainment through the arts, reading books, exploring artistic and musical achievements, creating the world of science and technology. All of these are extensions of complex psychological realities which we share with one another. We build buildings, create institutions, govern ourselves, and express our creativity in ways that are both personally unique and culturally diverse.

There is evidence, however, of another, and perhaps the most intricate and extensive dimension of human reality. That dimension is the realm of spirit. From the dawn of civilization and the recording of human history there is evidence that humans have journeyed into spiritual realms

A Wisdom Curriculum

Lesson Two

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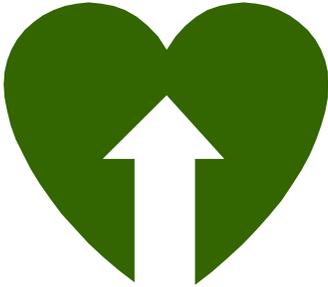
Special points of interest:

- Spirituality is the longing created by the third dimension of human being
- The oak is the destiny of the acorn.
- Relationship is the center of the religious perspective in the Western Tradition.
- Humans are designed for intimacy with God.



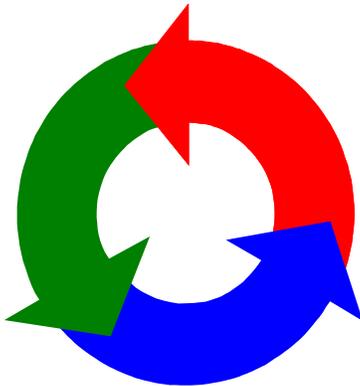
Lesson Two

Spirituality Today



There is a God-shaped vacuum in the human heart that can only be filled by God.
—St. Augustine

The fullness of our humanity is the integration of body, soul and spirit, working together in harmony and balance.



Human reality is the integration of three dimensions

as a further manifestation of what it means to be human. Humans everywhere have shown keen interest in matters of transcendence in religion and in spirituality.

Through the centuries, we have expressed the awareness that we are not alone in the universe. We sense we belong to a complex hierarchy of realities which includes but is also beyond the physical and psychological dimensions. We perceive that these higher dimensions may be inhabited by beings unlike ourselves. We have also expressed a perennial awareness of the presence of the divine reality, deeply immanent within ourselves but also beyond us, transcendent to our way of being.

The awareness of this third dimension has fascinated human beings through the centuries. World cultures and civilizations have been filled with symbolic representations of this religious sentiment. From the beginning of known history human beings have been suffused with the teaching and practice of spirituality. It is a vital part of what it means to be human.

Indeed, according to sacred tradition it is not until we embrace this third domain and allow it to fully develop alongside the other dimensions of our being that we can become completely human. The fullness of our humanity is the integration of body, soul and spirit working together in harmony and balance.

Interestingly, built into each one of us is a “will to completion,” which is the longing or the urge toward health, wholeness and maturity. It is “natural” to us to want to reach maturity and wholeness. Without forethought, our bodies strive for such completion. Psychologically we also push forward to maturity.

Reaching a state of maturity in these domains and finding a way to bring about their integration is what constitutes a “completed” human being. This may be the precise meaning of the words in the teachings of Jesus, “Be complete (perfect) as your Father in heaven is complete.”

Spiritually we have the same urge which is often expressed as an unfulfilled, but

constant longing or craving for “something” which we cannot define. The longing is there, but the satisfaction never seems complete.

Augustine, one of the early theologians of Christianity, diagnosed the human condition by saying that there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every human being which can only be filled by God and nothing else.

He believed that until we know the deep satisfaction of a maturing relationship with the divine, the longing for this completion will continue unabated. The desire for God is at the heart of the current spiritual search that many individuals in our world are undertaking. Many otherwise successful and seemingly “mature and satisfied” individuals are on a deep spiritual quest for something more than the mundane world they inhabit.

Courses and texts in traditional and contemporary spirituality from every part of the globe and every sacred tradition abound. The reason does not seem to be something external to ourselves, some fad of the moment, for example, but something far deeper, something permanently present within human beings themselves.

One working definition for this condition, then, would be that spirituality is the perennial expression and ongoing development of this third dimension in which we can both know and experience divine transcendence and immanence.

Spirituality is the hunger and the “natural” longing built into us to grow beyond the two dimensions we normally experience. It is the urge to know and develop this third, inner dimension of ourselves which will not go away until we fulfill it.

The Parable of the Acorn

Imagine that a gathering of acorns lying in the dust at the foot of some majestic, spreading oak tree could think and talk. Imagine what their thought-world might be.

As a whole, acorns tolerate their life down below, on the earth, fairly well. What they admire most is their acornness, how round and beautiful they each are, how glossy and firm they look adorned with that nice solid cap of theirs. Out of admiration and concern they have developed a science which they call “acornology,” the scientific study of all acorns. This study of acorns has developed into a whole science with sub-divisions and specialties. Curiously, the most important aspect of the science of acornology is how to keep acorns “intact”—from splitting apart. They’ve created the exact science of perfect “climate control,” developed for all good conventional and self-possessed acorns. There is also a lively science about how to maintain a glossy, healthy exterior free from cracks for as long as possible.

There are theories, of course, about the “self-destructive” qualities of some acorns who lose their caps and split open, revealing even stranger characteristics. These acorns are eventually lost altogether and tremendous fear has developed among the gathering of acorns living sheltered lives at the base of the tree about this uncharacteristic and what some have called “weird behavior.”

Now the fact is that acorns do a lot of complaining about their lot in life. The first matter is the tree itself under which they have learned to endure. Of course they do enjoy the shade and the cover the tree provides, but the truth is that a lot of stuff falls out of the sky, debris of all kinds, droppings of leaves and limbs from some unknown place far above. This particularly occurs when the winds are high. Every once in a while creatures with wings living in the great tree, just barely out of sight, swoop down and attempt to peck at or even pick up one of the acorns. This, of course, brings a lot of fear and discussion about the origins of things, and whether “birds” actually exist or are the

simply the figment of some overactive imaginations. Safety watches are often kept out of fear that an acorn might actually be “carried off” somewhere.

In truth most acorns resent the tree, and especially the story that some tell that acorns actually came from the great tree. Who could possibly believe such a tale as that? Why, look at all the differences! The unlikely “theology” that some tell about acorn origins and destiny is scorned by most thoughtful acorns. Who could entertain such patent nonsense, that the tree is the original source of acorns, and that acorns were meant to become trees? Again such talk must be the result of some instability or the overwrought emotions of unconventional acorns which serve only to stir up the young and the most unstable of the lot. These types eventually crack open anyway, because they keep getting out-of-cover and lying exposed to whatever falls from above and all around them.

Moisture of any kind always seems to be the biggest problem. Most acorns like it hot and dry, and the less wind that blows the less debris falls from above. When rains come the acorns huddle together and bemoan their lot in the mud, and it is always after the fall of rain from above that some acorns seem to split open and die, no matter what precautions are taken.

Some of these acorns, it is said, turn into trees themselves, sending themselves as deep as they do high, or so it is said. But again, who can believe such unconfirmed stories circulated and told from of old? Most acorns never see such things in their lifetime, and those who say they have ever-after live in fear. Most acorns live as dry a life as possible and then eventually are crushed under foot by the ravages of history and time. The few that do split open leave the company of acorns and are never heard from again. Some say they still exist in higher regions beyond the earth, but who would wish to follow their fate?



Acornology is the scientific study of acorns by acorns.

*“Splitting open”
is both life
and death.*



An oak tree is the completion of the acorn.

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**The Oriental Orthodox
 Order in the West**



Mutuality is the basis of all relationships, including the one between the human and the divine.

Only when you come to know your true Self will you be fully known—realizing at last that you are the child of the Living One. However, if you never come to know who you truly are, you are a poverty-stricken being, and it is your “self” which lies in poverty.

—A portion of Logion 3, *Gospel of Thomas*



Said the Master to the businessman: “As the fish perishes on dry land, so you perish when you get entangled in the world. The fish must return to the water—you must return to solitude.”

The businessman was aghast. “Must I give up my business and go into a monastery?”

“No, no. Hold on to your business and go into your heart.”

—Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom*

Mutuality and Intimacy

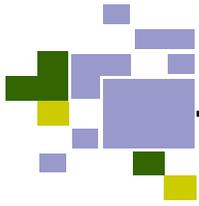
The crucial question raised in this study is how one becomes a spiritual being and begins to satisfy the longing of the third dimension, growing to maturity. Answers to this question are both interesting and full of possibility. A good place to begin is with sacred teaching concerning relationship—particularly the relationship between God and human beings.

Again, according to sacred teaching humans are encouraged to seek a personal relationship with the divine, with the Ultimate Reality which we call “God” in conventional language.

How to create a relationship with a power greater than ourselves has been the subject of countless personal human searches and stories. The spiritual records that have been left by those who sought for such a relationship, and of the teachings of the great religious traditions of humanity, are full of such accounts. From the perspective of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic worlds (the Western Tradition) not only has humanity been searching for God, but it has been a mutual search. All along the divine has also been

searching for us. In fact, from this perspective, God has been “courting” human beings in an ongoing love-relationship throughout history. Mutuality and intimacy are said to be the characteristic features of this “love story.”

We are often told that God desires relationship with us, and that our thirst for God is only a mirror (or even the response within us) of God’s reaching out to us. We are thirsty beings because God is causing us to search. But the relationship can only unfold through mutual self-disclosure and self-surrender. Like any other relationship we know, if it is to mature and grow in intimacy, it must know this kind of mutuality. God discloses God’s self to us at a personal level, and we reveal ourselves to God. God surrenders to us as the divine Presence as we surrender ourselves to God. This is the mysterious teaching of spirituality, but one that can only be known over time by experience.



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STUDY GUIDE: Lesson Two

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you experience spiritual longing and thirst? How would you describe it?
2. Have you tried to satisfy this “unnamed” desire for “something?” What have your experiences been?
3. How have you experienced this “third dimension” of human being? In what other ways has it manifested itself?
4. What is the relationship between spirituality and religion? Are they the same or different? In what way?
5. What would spiritual maturity look like? How would it be different or the same compared with physical or psychological maturity?
6. Are psychological and spiritual maturity the same thing? Can one be mature in one dimension and not in another?
7. What do you make of the parable of the acorns? What are its parallels with human life? Where might human life be different?
8. How does the parable describe our human difficulty with spirituality and the third dimension?
9. If you were an “acorn theologian” how would you attempt to describe to other acorns the realities that lie beyond acornness?
10. How is “splitting open” described in the spiritual teachings of Jesus, Christianity or any tradition with which you are familiar?
11. Where are you in your own relationship with a “higher Power” (conventionally called “God”)? Is there any kind of intimacy there?

Readings for Insight

The world needs people who want their lives not only to be filled, but to be full and fulfilled. If we are to be artists of our lives, we need to be in touch with the One who is a “greater artist than all other artists ... [who] made neither statues nor pictures nor books; but loudly proclaimed that he made ... living men and women, immortals.” The world needs people who will allow time for God to recreate them, play with them, touch them as an Artist who is making something beautiful with their lives.

—Don Postema, **Space for God**

Daily Practice

- A. In a time of quiet, personal reflection, use the parable of the acorn to examine your life. Who are you just now? Where are you in the process of growth and the realization of your potential? Remember we all start as acorns. We spend a lot of time on the “surface of the earth” worrying about our current condition and keeping our small identities. In a time of quiet, reflect on your potential. Are you simply extending who and what you are now, or are you sensing what to the acorn must ultimately be unimaginable?
- B. Every morning sit quietly in solitude. As the Master said, “Go into your heart.” Do you know where that is? As you experience solitude and quiet, what happens? Is it blocked by the noise in your mind and thoughts, or can you slip past that and sink deeper into that quiet space inside you, at the core of your being?
- C. Go through a day looking for the “third dimension” inside of you or manifesting itself through other people. Can you find it? If you don’t find much of it, could you make a space for it to appear? What would this look like, be like, feel like as you did this? Imagine that this is the divine artistry being created in you, but unlike other works of art, it needs assistance for the “art object.” You assist the artist. What happens when you do this? Journal your findings.