

# Spirituality Today

STUDY GUIDE: Lesson Five

## Religion and Spirituality

All over the world, people are seeking for a sacred path. They may not quite know how the search began, but they know they are on a journey seeking something—some meaning, some understanding beyond themselves that is not simply the product of their own minds or the society of the world around them. They are seeking for spirituality, something that transcends themselves.

Some people say, “I am a spiritual person, but not necessarily a religious person.” They may even avoid religion, but that does not mean they are not interested in finding new meaning for their lives—some new way of

authenticating the spiritual desires they feel deep inside them. They want answers and deeper satisfaction than material pursuits can give. They are seeking a sacred path that will lead them toward some higher, inner fulfillment.



So what is this search, and how does one find a sacred path? There are so many possibilities. Is this path merely finding what “feels good?” If so, how does one know what one needs? Is it safe to

say that whatever makes us happy is the answer? Or is there something larger, an answer that takes us beyond ourselves? Every sacred tradition has answered these questions by saying that we are seeking because we are being sought by what is higher, larger, and in some sense, Eternal. Eternity is seeking us.

Does a spiritual person need to be religious? Not necessarily,

but religion does provide ancient insights that have been passed along as an enduring wisdom that we need in our search. So how does one discern? First, by asking for guidance, and second, by testing what one receives.

## Finding a Sacred Path

What I am now is not what I shall ultimately be. I am a transitional creature, moving from my beginning toward a destiny which is understood to be a sacred mystery that is knowable. Wisdom traditions existing from ancient sources affirm that we are multi-dimensional creatures capable of living in both the material world, a mental world, and a spiritual world.

In order to unfold our mystery and realize its full meaning, I must take life seriously as a sacred quest. I am not here simply “marking time,” but using time and my journey through time as an adventure of spirit to awaken me and transform me into the full form of who I am ultimately meant

to be. To undertake this quest I am offered sacred tradition as guide on this path of wisdom. Finding and walking that path is the next step in the growth of wisdom within me. It is a commitment not only to something larger than myself, but also to my own self, my future and my destiny. It means investing not simply in the short-term gains of life, but in myself for the long term.

In order to ensure that we begin to know this higher realm, this greater depth, we must begin our journey of growth by walking a sacred path. The following critical steps are necessary to finding that particular path right for me.

### A Wisdom Curriculum

Lesson Five

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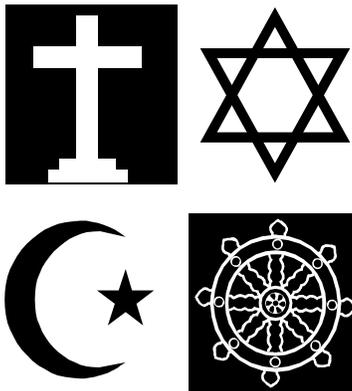
- The world is “seeded” with wisdom and provided with many sacred paths.
- It is part of work to find a path that will be good for us, and a teacher who will awaken, inspire and guide.
- Developing a support and community of fellow pilgrims is essential if we are not to walk alone.



*Your deepest questions, the unanswered and the unknown are the greatest paths to pursue.*

*Eventually, we are told by those who have climbed further up the slope than we, work becomes a silent, receptive attention in front of the unknown, a question sustained.*

*—Philip Zaleski*



*You may not choose a sacred tradition. It may choose you.*

## Let Your Questions Lead

Human beings constantly ask questions. By nature humans are curious, questioning and inquisitive. This is an essential part of what it means to be human and is critical to spiritual life as well. As you saw in the last lesson, your questions are vital to wisdom and the leading edge of your spiritual quest.

To ask a question of life, existence, ourselves or God and to pursue that answer is a way of moving forward. So let your questions “lead” you. Rather than suppressing questions, highlight them and allow your search for good answers to be the way you

begin your spiritual journey. As you begin to formulate questions, ask yourself, “What do I really want to know?” “How might I know when a good answer arrive?” “What would it take to find an answer?” Remember, if you have a “fuzzy” question, you will receive a “fuzzy” (inadequate) answer. The better your question is (the more focused and clear), the better will be the answer you eventually find. Remember also that as you change, your questions will change. One answer that satisfies you at one point may be inadequate later. Let questions and answers evolve and grow.

## Choosing a Sacred Tradition

It may seem strange, but it is highly important that you go on a search to find a sacred tradition that will speak to you and challenge you.

The sacred traditions are the “fertile ground” in which the “seed” of your own life will find rooting. Since the traditions are ancient and venerable, they will be like all older essences, wise but often strange (or perhaps even foreign) to us. Remember we are new to the earth, and they have been around thousands of years teaching and nurturing spiritual life on this planet.

A sacred tradition is a kind of spiritual “ecology.” It is a world of relationships and balances between many things, much of which is hidden to the untrained eye.

To fully access the power and help that a sacred tradition can provide, you must enter the world of sacred tradition and allow it to fully inform and teach you. This will mean that there will be things about each tradition that will not necessarily be clear or even to your liking, but which play an important part in its whole spiritual ecology.

Do not judge too quickly. In finding a tradition two issues are vital. First, not every expression of religion represents an authentic embodiment of the whole. In our world there are many institutions and movements that go by a sacred tradition's name, but represent only a fragment of the whole of it. It is critical, therefore, to find an authentic expression—one that is deeply rooted.

Secondly, it is important that a spiritual pilgrim not “pick and choose” between aspects of various traditions. This is like picking wild flowers because they attract our attention. The bouquet is beautiful, but in the end, because it is rootless, it will wither and die.

Sacred traditions challenge us. Their role is to provide us not only a path we might not otherwise take, but also insights that we would not normally have. These will often frighten us, or seem odd to our sensibilities. In the end what a sacred tradition does is to make us attend to things that would ordinarily make us uncomfortable, but which are essential if we are ever to grow.

## Following a Teacher

Each sacred tradition has at its heart a wisdom teacher—someone, typically, whose life and teaching brought wisdom to those who sought to follow a sacred path. Wisdom teachers abound. They are found in every age and in every culture.

Their role is one of awakening, guidance, and inspiration. Through their teaching and their practices, they help people to wake up to their own inner potentialities and the path that lies before each human being.

As the path is taken, the guidance of the teacher and the wisdom teaching become paramount, making it possible to stay focused and not be misguided, distracted, or afraid. Teachers typically give general instructions meant for everyone, but they also speak directly and personally to the individual circumstances of each student. This is often called “inner instruction.”

Following a teacher means being willing to set aside some (but not all) of one’s own agendas. Balance is critical here. A teacher has authority in the teaching, but is never to become “dictatorial,” taking away the personal choices and freedoms of the student. On the other hand, a student with care and respect listens to the teaching and makes every effort to carry it out without surrendering his or her own integrity. Finding this balance takes care.

As an individual journeys following a teacher, the relationship between them becomes important. In the end, both teacher and student are fellow pilgrims, but the teacher’s responsibility is to create a mature spiritual adult, not a dependent child who can never make free and independent choices. It is crucial to find a teacher who is balanced in this way, and though imperfectly human, is also capable of giving careful guidance and divine inspiration.

## Life Within a Community of Pilgrims

Without teaching that becomes food for your spiritual life, and without the opportunity to implement authentic spiritual practice, you will never be able to learn or grow. Typically this involves both participation in a community as well as individual learning and practice.

It is important, then, to find a place within a sacred tradition that has a sense of integrity for you. This does not mean you will always be comfortable with everything, but that you feel “at home” there, find refuge. Participate in the activities, teachings, worship, practices, rites, rituals and prayers which make up the life of that community.

Seek also for a spiritual guide or friend within the community who can give you support and direction upon your own pathway and help you find a place within the tradition. Remember you are probably new to the deeper levels of a sacred

tradition, so you need some sense of direction. Make room for yourself within the community by committing yourself to its authentic practices.

The question always is, of course, is this a healthy community? Does it express the deepest values of the sacred tradition that are open and expansive, or is it too narrowly conceived and restricting, cutting itself (or you) off from others in some way?

Communities in even the most profound sacred traditions can fail their founding principles and become closed and self-protective. Open communities offer love and support of one another, welcome contact with the wider world not simply to gain new members, and express love and concern for all creation and its creatures. These are the signs of thriving and healthy communities of spiritual pilgrims.



*Teacher is both a wise guide, and you as student always remain an independent being.*

*Regard everything  
that rises up  
as fuel for  
awakening.*

—Traditional Buddhist Saying



*Fellow pilgrims become a community of love and support on the sacred path.*

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**The Oriental Orthodox  
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*Accepting a spiritual path means that I  
assume responsibility for its outcome,  
the maturing of my own being.*

*As the Master grew old and infirm, the disciples begged him not to die. The Master said, “If I did not go, how would you ever see?”*

*“What is it we fail to see when you are with us?” they asked. But the Master would not say.*

*When the moment of his death was near, they said, “What is it we will see when you are gone?”*

*With a twinkle in his eye, the Master said, “All I did was sit on the riverbank handing out river water. After I am gone, I trust you will notice the river.”*

—Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom*

## Accepting the Consequences

If I accept life as a sacred teaching and a spiritual path, then I must accept the consequences—assuming responsibility for the sacred dimensions forming inside of me. To enable me, divine Providence has made safe paths available to the human spirit. Divine Revelation has made teachings accessible which will nurture me.

Traditional wisdom has seeded the cycles of time with sacred meaning through the religious traditions of the world. All these are part of the provision of spiritual practice which can awaken me, teach me wisdom and help me to reach maturity.

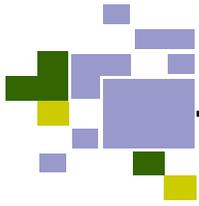
The insight that on our journey we spiral towards maturity is a vital wisdom teaching. The truth is we both move forward into new territory and yet repeat events and lessons over again, but usually on a different level or a new stage of development.

This journey takes us through inner and outer temporal cycles. These cycles of time are part of greater cosmic cycles. Obeying their

rhythms enlarges our perspective and takes us beyond mere egoic concerns. Through them we become available to much larger patterns because ultimately our lives are not simply about ourselves. We have cosmic purpose.

Walking this spiraling path involves a practice that we make real for ourselves and grow into. Like any practical learning, however, spiritual practice is a skill that cannot be gained overnight or in a single day.

Learning always takes place through a process of failure and success—the same way we learn how to do anything. We may have practiced an art form, or come to play a sport well only by doing it over and over again, gradually unlearning new things, new skills and techniques as we became better and more accurate with repetition. This is especially true in spiritual practice as a way of life.



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## Questions for Reflection

1. What difficult questions has life compelled you to ask? What are your questions now—the ones you most deeply need to know and are willing to pursue until you find an answer?
2. You may already have found a particular path. Or, perhaps, it has found you? Which is true, or is neither?
3. Which sacred tradition seems to draw you to itself? What is it about that tradition which attracts you? What is it about that sacred tradition that is important to you, that you feel that you need?
4. What is the wisdom that you feel you have found already? What teachers have already truly taught you? What is the essence or core of their teaching?
5. Have you ever been misled or become uninspired by a teacher or a teaching? How did that happen?
6. Who are your spiritual friends and companions now? What spiritual support do you have?
7. Is there a community of support to which you belong? For what reason are you a part of it? Is it helping you to awaken? Is it healthy? How do you know?

## Readings for Insight

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a foreign tongue. Do not seek the answers which cannot be given you. Because you would not be able to live them. And the point is: to live everything. Live the questions now! Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant way into the answer.

—Rainer Marie Rilke, **Letters to a Young Poet**

## Daily Practice

- A. If you have found a sacred path based upon a tradition, begin to read and expose yourself to its teachings—its sacred writings and its rich heritage, and its teachers, and to the particular communities that form around it. Secure a reading list, and find those texts which deeply inform and guide you. Ask for help in understanding them from those who are more acquainted with that tradition. When you read and study, keep a journal of insights and questions as they arise from the work and reading you do.
- B. There is a well-known text from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Prophet Micah (6:8). Ponder it in times of meditation and prayer. There are three keys to spiritual life and practice. Meditate on how you stand in relationship to them.

You have been told, O human being, what is good,  
And what the Lord requires of you:  
To do only what is right,  
To love Justice,  
And to Walk humbly with your God.