

GUIDELINES FOR A RULE OF LIFE

A Template for the Oriental Orthodox Order in the West

Following a Rule of Life is an important part of the spiritual path and a traditional aspect of Christian monasticism. By using a Rule an individual becomes an intentional pilgrim on a sacred journey through space and time, seeking wisdom, and the Rule acts as a guide (or a template) by which one can maintain balance, equilibrium and navigate that Path. It is also a means by which an individual might measure the progression of his or her spiritual pilgrimage and practice accountability toward a higher power or authority. Historically, a Rule of Life was imposed by some external authority with little or no input from the seeker. However, this custom is as perilous as trying to construct a Rule without any guidance whatsoever. The purpose of these guidelines is to assist you so that you can begin to construct a Rule consistent with your own spiritual needs and unique life-circumstances.

A Rule of Life is about spiritual awakening, healing, and the development of the central organ of your being—the heart. It is not about ego-suppression or putting yourself under “tight control.” It is not meant to make your life miserable. Instead, its focus is on the core of what it means to be a fully formed (or completed) and functioning human being who is open and alive to God as your Source of existence and as an inner Presence which guides you. However, because a Rule is grounded in something greater than yourself, it will indeed challenge your agendas and narrow interests—the mere pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain—in favor of a life open to something greater and more universal than your egoic self.

Because the central concern of a Rule of Life is the heart, there are certain conditions necessary for its awakening so that it stays open to wisdom and its flow of teaching. Just as you have certain physical and psychological requirements for proper health and functioning, so too, the life of the spirit centered in the heart has its own needs and requirements. With the body, soul, and spirit in balance, you can begin to live from a wider range of faculties and conditions, which assist in your completion. You will need, however, to establish your own unique relationship to a Rule, one that reflects this balance within the particular circumstances of your own personal life.

THE GUIDELINES

I

Spiritual Parentage and Direction:

Every human being exists because of parents. This obvious fact also applies to the realm of spiritual birth and growth where there may be many more than two individuals involved in spiritual parenting. As one grows, guidance is necessary though it need not create excessive dependency. Indeed we must learn to reach a state of greater and great independence beyond external human support and receive direction that comes from many transcendent sources both beyond and within ourselves.

- **Taking Personal Responsibility:** You are the architect of one solitary life—your own. You should look, therefore, at the span of your life on earth as the unique opportunity to build and create a being of great value, dignity, and worth. If you do not accept responsibility for your own development, you give up your freedom and allow others to make choices as to what sort of being you will

become for you. The divine purpose is that you become a “co-creator” in the work of personal transformation. As you think about this first point, ask yourself these questions:

1. *Who has responsibility for your becoming? Have you perhaps given it away to someone or something else?*
2. *Make a personal statement of what you want your life to become—your life’s mission.*

- **Making Contact with a Master of Wisdom:** For most of the members of the Order, Yeshua plays the role of a living Master of Wisdom. (*This may or may not be the case for you, so you may first need to discuss this issue with one of its Abbots*). Yeshua, however, was a wisdom teacher of extraordinary power. He continues to play an indispensable role in the wisdom tradition of the Christian path to this day. Knowing him personally as a living Master and Guide is an important (if not essential) beginning point for all of those who consider him to be their teacher. Everyone has their unique relationship to him so it is not possible to say exactly what yours will be. Establishing that relationship by talking to others in the Order about it. Tracking your own relationship through journaling and prayer is a way of finding the Presence of the Master who said he would be with us until the end of the ages in your own heart.
 1. *Read one of the Gospels and write your impression of Yeshua*
 2. *Spend time with an icon of the Pantocrator (Image of the Christ) and establish a relationship with it.*
 3. *Take time to be with Yeshua as Master and listen inwardly for his Voice.*
 4. *Write your reflections on these experiences.*
 5. *If you find that Yeshua does not play that role for you, this does not exclude you from the Order, but it certainly means that you will want to establish a similar inward relationship with someone in kind and perhaps explore further what your relationship with Yeshua will be.*
- **Affiliating with a Community:** Humans are communal beings and do not live well without the companionship of others. This is a fundamental fact of physical, social, and spiritual life. Finding and affiliating with a community of fellow pilgrims who share the same desire for journey as you do is essential to your well being. Making regular and repeated contact with fellow pilgrims is crucial. It may not, however, always be possible to have such a group in immediate proximity, but one can establish even distant links to a spiritual community through deliberate associations with churches, orders, and communities of seekers. When you do, it is important to determine their level of spiritual development and authenticity (their ability to assist you in the process of transformation). One may need guidance from a spiritual director in making these determinations.
 1. *Who and where is your circle of fellow pilgrims? Be specific.*
 2. *How often do you need contact with that circle?*
 3. *Is there a priory nearby, or might you establish one of your own?*
- **Finding a Mentor or Spiritual Director:** Guidance from other human beings gives us stability on the spiritual path. A spiritual director or mentor acts as a guide and often as a corrective to some state of imbalance that may occur. He or she plays a vital role helping to maintain perspective needed for both growth and progress on the path. In finding a suitable individual look for someone who manifests a strong degree of spiritual maturity. Determine whether this person is willing to assume the responsibilities of giving spiritual guidance in your life. If so, then work together to form an understanding about the kind of relationship that needs to be developed and the time involved. Establish a relationship which is neither so restrictive that you become overly dependent, nor so libertarian that you have no accountability. Be open to any thoughtful direction without becoming blindly obedient or uncritically passive.

1. *Who is your spiritual mentor or director? If you do not have one, get referrals and talk personally to potential mentors.*
 2. *In consultation with that mentor or director, determine how often you want to meet?*
 3. *Do you have a close spiritual friend with whom you share your journey? This can provide another form of direction.*
 4. *Keep a journal of your learning in direction.*
- **Receiving Guidance from Beyond:** Wisdom has accumulated through the centuries, and there are guides available to us beyond the veil of death in the communion of saints as well. The Abrahamic traditions recognize that at the center of historical reality is the Divine Immanence which is active and alive on the “inside” of things. The pilgrim is always, therefore, “inside” that Presence and the speaking of the Eternal Word. We can become alert to that teaching first by learning to listen to that interior Word spoken in the depths of the heart, and then to walk according to its instruction. Identifying how that Word is spoken to you is part of your spiritual practice. This is an issue to discuss at length with a mentor or spiritual director.
 1. *Can you name the saints and spiritual beings that mentor you from beyond time-space?*
 2. *Find an icon of at least one of them.*
 3. *Be intentional in your journal about instruction that you receive from beyond.*
 4. *Selectively share that learning with your circle of spiritual pilgrims, friends,, directors, and mentors.*

II

Study and Ingestion of Sacred Texts as Spiritual Food

There is a proverb which says, “you are what you eat.” This statement is also true spiritually. What we become inwardly is determined by the nutrition we take in. So much depends upon nourishment. It is easy to become spiritually undernourished or malnourished in life. A spiritual pilgrim must feed on a balanced diet of essential foods. Each of the great sacred traditions has preserved a rich variety of sacred texts and Scriptures which are of immense value because of their nutritive value. On their surface they may sometimes appear forbidding, but they are known carriers of divine light. They bring revelation and truth to the soul.

- **Divine Qualities:** The first question you must ask is what sustains and nourishes your heart? The answer is complex, but it involves, foremost, Truth or Reality which is the manifestation of the divine Qualities, Names and Essence of God in our world. This is the heart’s food, which we come to “taste” in our world as full of beauty, goodness, and truth. These substances feed us at a very deep level. There exist vast treasuries of nourishment and great underground reserves of spiritual water that refresh the heart. These “sources” are dynamic, transmitted horizontally across both time and history, but they also descend from above along the vertical axis by means of intuitive understanding and visionary insight. Opening yourself to those sources is crucial.
 1. *List the truths and realities which continue to feed your heart.*
 2. *Can you link these to divine Names and Qualities? What is that link?*
 3. *What has fed you “from above?” Can you name something from this dimension?*
 4. *Share your insights with your inner circle of spiritual pilgrims and mentors.*
- **Regular Intake of Truth as Light:** The heart receives Truth as divine Quality very differently from the way the mind receives it. Although the means for conveyance may be through word and symbol (or it may by-pass these through silence), the essence remains the Light of wisdom carried in various “vehicles” which the heart learns to “read” or grasp intuitively. It is important, therefore,

to fully enter this transmission of wisdom so that sacred texts become vehicular to wisdom's light. Much can be gained by studying and meditation upon these texts in the context of a gathered community who share their insights and experiences with the readings.

1. *Where (from what or whom) do you experience truth as light?*
 2. *Describe that light?*
 3. *Have you learned to read texts "from the heart?" If not, you need some practice and a discussion about this practice with spiritual mentors and friends.*
 4. *List the texts or sources that you find to be light. Add to that list as time progresses.*
- **Daily Ingestion of Spiritual Food:** As we have noted, there is the need for daily "bread" (or light from above). What each person ingests will certainly be different from person to person, but that we take in spiritual energy through the reading, study, and meditation upon sacred texts and their teachings is crucial. Among the things that constitute a spiritual diet are sacred Scriptures, spiritual and sapiential writings and teachings, biography, and metaphorical wisdom through poetry, aphorism, and parable, to name just a few. These are transmitted to us in both ancient and modern streams. Of particular importance to Christian monastics throughout the centuries has been the daily recitation of the Psalms. Learning to "read" this sacred text and other sacred literature as a spiritual diet requires the use of *Lectio Divina*, a traditional form of Christian meditation.
 1. *What is the time and place for your daily ingestion of spiritual food?*
 2. *List the texts you are using.*
 3. *Is there enough variety?*
 4. *What do you know about the practice of *Lectio Divina*? How do you use it?*
 - **The Development of Spiritual Consciousness:** In order to receive Truth from the vertical axis we must experience the growth of spiritual consciousness, or as St. Paul says, "the renewing of the Mind" (Romans 12:1-2) Such growth means the development of a form of awareness beyond the rational and analytical levels that grows in us from level to level. Although it is difficult to describe such growth in words, it involves intuitive levels of awareness that supersede discursive thought and work with the nature of Truth as "icon" (Truth which is expressed symbolically and saturated with a "surplus of meaning"). Such work involves struggling with the metaphorical tensions and paradoxical contradictions which are always present at the literal level of understanding but which can be engaged as a coherency by intuitive consciousness. The symbolic, metaphorical and paradoxical nature of sacred Scripture and its teaching must therefore be explored in such a way that the surface structure is transcended and the specific modes of assimilation from the literal level to the non-literal level are learned.
 1. *Describe spiritual consciousness and the intuitive levels of awareness as you feel you have experience them. Share that insight with your spiritual friends and mentors.*
 2. *Put on your list of spiritual texts a book of poetry, parables, or some other form of material that specifically involves metaphor, for example, the writings Jalaluddin Rumi, Hafez, Thomas, or the poetry Mary Oliver.*
 3. *Journal your awareness of the metaphors and paradoxes as they appear as you would journal dreams.*

III

Establishing Rhythms of Contemplative Practice

Just as one needs regular rhythms of eating, breathing, and sleeping, etc., so spiritual equilibrium is maintained by the establishment of daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and life-long rhythms of practice that sustain health and balance in spiritual life. Practice (or *praxis* as it is also called in the early

tradition) is a complex set of activities and attitudes that involve body, soul, and spirit that are sustained rhythmically over long periods of time. This complexity (sometimes called *orthopraxis*, or a complete practice) includes the following:

- **The Sacrament of Silence and Centering Practice:** Regular rhythms of silence, rest, and order are necessary if we are to maintain spiritual balance, sanity, and an inner alignment with the vertical axis in the midst of a confused and confusing “horizontal” world. At its heart this practice involves a continuous “return to the Center” (or to the core of our own being which touches the Center of all Being). It is from that central point that we daily align ourselves with the vertical axis and its many dimensions—the great pole at the heart of Existence. This vertical alignment opens us not only to the entire cosmos of transcendent reality, but, more importantly, to the divine Heart itself. Properly aligned to the Heart-of-All-Things, we are able to sustain our awareness of the divine Presence. Finding silence (coming to our core and becoming centered there), therefore, is crucial if we are to know and experience inner alignment to the vertical axis. It means that we must make room for regular times of inner and outer contemplative silence (or spiritual rest). This is the first step in the ordering our lives. Eventually this must become a part of our continuous practice so that the two axes meet at our core. Find time in your life daily, weekly, monthly and yearly life to practice a rhythm of rest, silence, and spiritual centering at various levels of intensity.
 1. *Specifically, when and where are your daily or weekly times of silence and silent centering?*
 2. *What do you need to let go of in order to create the necessary silence in and around you?*
 3. *What other aspects of this sacred time-space do you need to add to your practice?*
 4. *To understand the pattern better, read Cynthia Bourgeault’s book on **Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening**.*
- **Learning the Language of Contemplative Worship and Prayer:** Contemplative prayer and worship can be thought of as a language. As you would learn some other language not your mother tongue, you may need to study the vocabulary and grammar of contemplative prayer “spoken” (or prayed) by men and women throughout the centuries. The totality of that language belongs to you. At its heart is the Silence of God – a language so subtle it is beyond mind, speech, or image, and yet it is the Word eternally spoken at the depths of the cosmos and in the depths of you. Your aim is eventually to live in the silent flow of that language. Surrounding and supporting it, however, are many other forms of contemplative prayer which lead you to its Center. For example, human prayer in the language of Scripture and the prayer anthologies of the Church are available to you, as is symbolic language of all kinds which inform the heart. In addition there are numerous forms of prayer which draw you to your own center through chant, body prayer, invocatory prayer, icons, rosaries and canonical or liturgical forms of remembrance through Eucharistic and liturgical celebration. Invocation, remembrance or prayer of the heart is central to the inner attention we bring to the divine Presence we carry within us. In experience there also is a silent “falling into the Abyss” of the divine Consciousness itself called “pure contemplation.” Inevitable, however, we must return to the world of ordinary experience full of the gifts we have received from contemplative prayer. All these are aspects of that complex language.
 1. *Where are you in your learning of the language of contemplative worship and prayer? With what forms are you most familiar and what is new to you? What do you need to learn and from whom?*
 2. *In your periods of meditation by yourself what is your practice? What do you practice within your circle of friends? Where and how do you worship?*
 3. *Specifically, what is the rhythm of your contemplative prayer practice using the full vocabulary of its language?*
 4. *Where in your contemplative prayer life is there opportunity for worship? Does that form of worship satisfy your heart’s need and longing?*

5. *If you have not already, read Metropolitan Anthony Bloom's book **Beginning to Pray**. Increase your vocabulary by learning new forms of prayer from many sources.*

- **Awareness of the Living Presence:** The Abrahamic traditions affirm that you are surrounded by the divine Presence. Inside that Presence are many entities and beings held in communion by the fullness of the divine Consciousness itself. To rest in that awareness means, first of all, to enter and remain in the presence of your Master-Teacher. To be there is often “just to sit or be” as one would with a dear and intimate friend without speech, without premeditated purpose, in the absence of discursive thought, but in full mindful awareness. To “be” in the Eternal Presence with the Word (traditionally called the **Logos** or the Manifestation of God) who speaks in silence is to begin to “hear” with the inner ear. This may sound impossible, but spiritually it is not. That silence is a womb pregnant with fecundity out of which something transformative is born. To go deliberately into that interior darkness is also to come at last to the place of profoundest healing, growth, and transformation at your depth. One must be prepared to remain in the contemplative darkness before the Presence with attention and hope, where time is no factor so that Wisdom can “build herself a home.”
 1. *What is your practice of awareness before the Presence?*
 2. *How often do you go to “be with” your interior Master? What happens when you do?*
 3. *How are you being instructed and guided? Write your reflections and share this with your spiritual companions and friends.*
 4. *How comfortable are you with non-discursive darkness (being aware, in silence, without formal image or thought?).*

- **Taking Time for Retreat:** The life of a monk includes taking time for serious spiritual retreat. As with other aspects of practice within the Order, participation in spiritual retreat requires regular periods of withdrawal from the normal world of activity. Retreat opportunities are provided by the Order and may be self-guided or done under the direction of a mentor or guide. For centuries men and women have withdrawn from the world in order to listen and receive wisdom for themselves. This has sometimes been called “vision quest” and is a venerable part of mystical tradition. Retreat from the normal activities of life allows you to go deeply inward and seek contact with the sacred in, perhaps, a visionary way.
 1. *As a monk of the interior tradition what is your rhythmic need for retreat from normal activity?*
 2. *Develop a retreat plan for a year.*
 3. *Make contact with a retreat center and someone who can provide you guidance during retreat as you need it.*
 4. *Have you ever made a retreat for the purpose of “vision quest?” Prepare for one under the guidance of an Abbot or Prior.*

IV

Spiritual Work and the Vocation of the Heart

Following the model of Yeshua, while we live on earth we not only begin an inner journey to our homeland in God, we also embark on an outer path of service in the cosmos and for the life of all. This means, of course, that we must fully engage the world as the arena of our practice, allowing the divine Presence in the world also to be a school of learning that teaches and forms us. We are called by the Master into a life of intensive practice and service to the world. Part of our heart's vocation, our “calling,” is to an exterior vocation that can express the essence of who we are formed in the image and likeness of God.

- **Simplifying Your Life:** You live in an age of incessant noise and ceaseless activity, the levels of which are often an assault upon your spiritual life and inner world. It is imperative to find a life-style and pace that will support your inner work and practice. Practically this will mean establishing priorities and letting go of things that only clutter your life in order to live wisely as a contemplative. No one but you can make the critical decisions about how to simplify your life. Many of them can only be made through trial and error. You can find and use guidelines to experiment with a simple and environmentally balanced life.

 1. *Is your life-style conducive to (or destructive of) your spiritual practice?*
 2. *Make a list of your priorities. What from the bottom of that list can be dropped away?*
 3. *What do you need to negotiate? Talk this out with your mentor or with friends on the path.*
 4. *Begin to outline your response to and responsibilities as a world Christian using the “Pledge” as your guide.*

- **Practicing the Presence of God in the Midst of Daily Life:** Becoming aware of the divine Presence in the world and staying awake to it through a practice of “double awareness” (yourself as an actor and yourself also as a “watcher of the action”) begins the “practice of Presence” in the midst of daily life. Staying aware of that Presence surrounding you (and “in which you live and move and have your being” as the Scriptural text says) is the ideal life-principle that makes learning and living with Wisdom possible along the horizontal axis. As Actor and as Watcher you are constantly held in the divine Presence and you can continually use this as your practice.

 1. *What is your experience and practice of double awareness? Talk this over with a mentor or spiritual friend.*
 2. *Using Logion 6 in the Gospel of Thomas, explore the issue of Presence and how you can enter it more fully.*
 3. *Be intentional in your practice and journal your experiences.*

- **Living the Principles of Spiritual Life:** The sacred traditions are rich in resources that will assist you in the applying principles of spiritual life to your everyday experience. These principles cannot remain simply ideas or concepts learned through study, reflection and inward meditation alone. Even those fully understood and accepted by the heart must gain be embodied through practical application. What one learns inwardly must be applied outwardly in practice. How to do the work of spiritual practice is something that we learn again through trial and error assisted by mentors, guides, directors, and the support of a community of fellow pilgrims and friends that understand life as a sacred pilgrimage—a journey undertaken to the Center.

 1. *An understanding of the practice of spiritual life in the world begins fundamentally with Yeshua’s own teachings in what is traditionally called, “the Sermon on the Mount.” Read this in several versions, and list the practices he teaches for our life in the world.*
 2. *Add to your list by reading the Gospel of Thomas and the practices found there.*
 3. *Using, then, this treasury of Yeshua’s wisdom to assist you, begin to practice these principles using his teaching.*
 4. *You may then turn to other spiritual texts from in our wisdom bibliography to add to your understanding. Make a possible list of texts on this topic that you may want to read in the order you believe would be helpful to you. Share that list with your mentor or spiritual director.*
 5. *Be willing to read beyond the Christian tradition.*

- **Finding Your Heart’s True Vocation:** Following the Christ, we each carry the work of reconciling the cosmos into the specifics of our own world. How we accomplish that, however, is unique to the imprint of the divine image and energies upon our own being and the calling that we each hear. There have, however, been four traditional ways of understanding that work originally

given by Yeshua as the Way of the Teacher, the Way of the Warrior, the Way of the Healer, and the Way of the Visionary. These are expressed as the four-Gospel Tradition. Learning about these pathways and your heart's vocation is an active part of the Order's work. At the center of your vocation you hold an axial or metacosmic position in the created world from which you can begin the fulfillment of your sacred task as mediator and reconciler, reuniting and reintegrating the cosmos back God. Once balance is re-established in your life, you can begin, then, your sacramental function in the world through the work of love and reconciliation by which all are ultimately restored to God. Your sacred work involves you as a "logothete" (that is, you are a "word" sent into the cosmos after the pattern of the divine Logos. As one modern writer, Charles Williams, has put it, you are to manifest the invisible realm through the "visible mathematics" of the Glory of God in our world). You yourself are the place where time and eternity intersect and the time and space is opened to mystery. It is from there that you work as a site for the ultimate reconciliation of all things, the bearing of burdens and the transposition of energies.

1. *What are you being drawn to do in the world? What is your heart's vocation? Explore these questions with your spiritual director.*
2. *Each of the four-fold paths authentically expresses the work of a "logothete," restoring the universal order. Sketch out your understanding about what one of these means for you, and how you see yourself contributing to its work.*
3. *Begin to explore your heart-vocation with a prior or abbot of the Order.*

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