

Chapter 3

Discovering Your Own Spirit

Topics in this Chapter:

- * Discovering the spirituality in your life
- * Understanding your higher self
- * Seeing beyond your masks
- * Exploring what keeps you from experiencing your greatness

This chapter is dedicated to helping you understand that you are a unique expression of pure spirit. One way to achieve this awareness is by contemplating the big questions of life, such as, “Who are you?” and more importantly, “Who are you *really*?”

Even if you think you can’t be spiritual because you may have some faults, or even a lot of faults, you can still discover how to see those faults within a bigger picture of yourself as an individual expression of the great universal spirit.

The First Step: Knowing That You Don’t Know

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

—William Shakespeare

One of my favorite spiritual texts says, “He who thinks he knows, knows not; while he who thinks he knows not, truly knows.” This statement implies that the person who thinks he knows is the most ignorant. Why is this?

The truth is that humans don’t and can’t know everything. Countless layers of reality can be unraveled in every direction you look, from a seemingly infinite sea of galaxies to the invisible atoms on this page.

As a human being, you live and walk upon this floating pebble of water, rock, and moss that is called earth. You’ve come equipped with a body and approximately three pounds of electrochemical jelly, called your brain.

With these inherent limitations, you’ll never be able to completely understand everything about this very big universe. Everyone knows this deep inside, but sometimes people find it more comfortable to try and convince themselves and others that they have it all together and know what’s happening.

Spiritual Wisdom

Quotes by smart people who knew they didn't know

The funny thing about knowledge is that it just goes on and on. Every aspect of knowledge in this world opens into entire new vistas, with seemingly endless divisions and forms. Some great thinkers discovered this tricky truth and shared their wise humility in these quotes:

- "We don't know a millionth of one percent about anything."
—Thomas Edison
- "I know only that I do not know. "
—Socrates
- "None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free."
—Goethe
- "The more I know, the more I realize I don't know. "
—Albert Einstein
- "The fool thinks he is wise . . . The wise man knows himself to be a fool."
—William Shakespeare

Two kinds of ignorance

No matter what you're trying to learn, you can gain a new skill or absorb new information only if you first admit that you don't already know everything about that particular topic. In the spiritual quest also, a receptive attitude is the first step in opening up to greater spiritual wisdom.

Here I describe two kinds of ignorance: positive ignorance and negative ignorance:

- ***Positive ignorance*** is when you don't know and you know you don't know. This humble awareness keeps you open and receptive to divine guidance and helps you to educate, grow, and improve yourself.
- ***Negative ignorance*** is when you don't know, but you think you do know. This state of mind is really a double ignorance that closes the door to your own growth. Thinking you know when you don't know is like traveling to a party on the other side of town with no idea of where the house is, but being too proud and stubborn to admit it and ask for directions. Negative ignorance makes you drive around in circles and miss the party of spiritual delight!

Once, a university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked on and on about all the intricacies of Zen philosophy. The master filled the visitor's cup to the brim and then kept pouring. The professor watched this overflowing cup for several seconds, until he could no longer restrain himself, and finally blurted out, "It's overfull! No more will go in!"

"*You* are like this cup," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen until you first empty your cup?"

You are a worldview maker

Your *worldview* is the way you see, interpret, and experience the world around you. A simple example of a worldview characteristic would be whether you look at life with a cheerful, optimistic view or a moaning, groaning, pessimistic one.

The process of making new worldviews is not unknown to you — you've been making and changing worldviews throughout your life. Even if you don't think you have a specific worldview, know that this thought is simply part of your worldview. Different people have different ways of viewing the same outer circumstances, and throughout the stages of life, each person travels through many different worldviews.

Can you remember all the years of schooling and effort you had to go through to learn all that you know? Even to be able to read and comprehend these words, many small and large worldviews were created and destroyed throughout your youth. In fact, the human brain is programmed to create new views of the world as we grow.

Here's an example of a worldview change you've already experienced. Jean Piaget, a scientist who is often referred to as the founding father of developmental child psychology, conducted an experiment during the 20th century that demonstrated how a child's brain develops and expands into new world views.

Piaget would sit a young child in front of a tall glass of colored water. Then, right in front of the child, he would pour all of the liquid from the tall, thin glass into a short, wide one. Invariably, every young child would insist that there was less liquid in the shorter glass, even though they had seen the very same amount of liquid being poured with their own eyes.

This incorrect worldview happens, Piaget explained, because these young children have not yet entered the developmental stage that brings a capacity for comprehending what Piaget called *conservation of volume*. If you showed these children the same demonstration a few years later, they would have no problem understanding that the volume of liquid in both glasses has remained the same.

This conservation of volume shift is a good metaphor for the experience of shifting from a materialistic to a spiritual view of the world. The way the children in this experiment misunderstood the value and size of what they were seeing is similar to how many people mistakenly think that worldly accumulations are worth more than spiritual qualities like inner peace, just because the outer objects or positions of stature are more tangible.

The Truth Is Simple, But You Have to Be Ready

Once, a spiritual seeker traveled to a distant town to receive initiation from a highly respected guru. The seeker bowed before the master and asked to be given the secret knowledge that would grant him the state of self-realization. “Oh, guru, please tell me the secret of life that will free me from all bondage.”

The guru looked at this seeker and saw that he was not prepared to contain the highest truth. His mind and heart had not yet been scrubbed clean of their tangled webs of memories, desires, misunderstandings, and limited self-identifications. The seeker needed first to be purified by the lessons gained by living an austere, surrendered life of service and contemplation.

Nevertheless, the seeker continued to impatiently entreat the guru to give him that very truth, and so the master compassionately touched the seeker on his head and spoke. “Thou art That.” Actually, he said the words in Sanskrit: “*Tat tvam asi.*” In this statement, “That” refers to the unnamable divine source of all, and “Thou” represents all the different facets that make up you.

The seeker sat down and prepared to hear the rest of the master’s secret teachings, when he realized the discourse was already over. “That was it? This is ridiculous,” he thought to himself, “Thou art That? These three words sound esoteric, but make no sense. Maybe this guru has gotten too old to remember the teachings, or perhaps his respected reputation is, in fact, undeserved.”

The seeker politely thanked the master and asked to be dismissed, thinking, “I’m sure I can find a better teacher who can give me an experience of the truth.”

For several years, the seeker searched far and wide until he came upon the monastery of another highly respected guru. Again, he bowed before the master and asked to be granted the highest state of realization.

This guru also saw that the seeker was unripe and told him, “First, you will have to offer service in this monastery. Go and work in my fields for 12 years and then come back to me. I will give you the secret knowledge then.”

The seeker thought, “Wow, he must be really good to be able to charge so much!” and agreed to the terms. For the next 12 years, the seeker lived in the monastery and toiled in its fields. During this time, inner understandings about the higher nature of life revealed themselves inside his awareness, preparing the soil of his heart and mind for the sacred seed of initiation.

At the end of his assignment, the seeker came once again before the master and bowed with humility. “Oh, guru, I have fulfilled your command and worked in your fields for 12 years, and you have promised to enlighten me. Tell me, master, what is the secret of life that will free me from all bondage?”

The guru now saw before him a shining light — a purified vessel ready to accept and hold the truth. He looked into the disciple’s eyes and spoke, “*Tat tvam asi. Thou art That.*”

The seeker was about to think, “Hey, that’s the same thing the other guru told me . . .” when his mind stopped and grasped the essence behind these three words. With “Thou art That” throbbing in every particle of his being, the seeker ascended to the spiritual state of the masters, and in that very moment was enlightened.

Don't Forget

Just as words on a page are meaningless to one who hasn't yet learned to read, in the same way, even the highest truths will slip through the fingers of a seeker who isn't spiritually mature and prepared to receive them.

Who Are You?

All my life, I always wanted to be somebody. Now I see that I should have been more specific.

—Jane Wagner

One of the most interesting questions you can ask yourself is “Who am I?” This primordial question is ultimately the foundation for all knowledge and experience. Every aspect of your culture, genetic makeup, life experience, family history, education, and social stature affects the way you experience the world. Therefore, when seeking greater wisdom, truth, and spiritual enlightenment, it is supremely important to first look at yourself and ponder the question, “Who am I?”

This simple question would appear to have a reasonable answer, right? Usually, you're able to ask what something is and receive a satisfactory answer. What is that? My car. Who is that? A friend. Where is that? Two blocks down and turn right. So then, who are you?

You are made up of your personality, your actions, your family, your body, your ethnicity, your religion, your culture, your job, your environment, your expressions, what you feel, what you do, what you say, what you know, what you see, and what you think.

The challenge of spirituality is to see all these qualities and colors of who you are, while also realizing that you are a unique expression of pure spirit, revealing itself as you.

Knowledge of your self brings power

Knowledge is power, especially knowledge of your own self. When you're conscious of who you are, you are also more conscious and aware of how you're thinking, speaking, and acting.

Self-knowledge gives you the objectivity and insight needed to purify and empower your thoughts, words, actions, habits, and character.

Knowing thyself

Why is it important to explore and understand your qualities, including your strongest points and weakest tendencies? Because you have to know where you're starting from.

Self-knowledge is like having the health benefit of knowing what kinds of foods work best in your body. After you discover that certain substances cause allergic reactions or create a bad mood, you can gain greater control over your physical and mental state by avoiding foods that will harm you. At the same time, you can work to strengthen your body so it will be healthy enough to properly digest more types of food.

It is the same on the spiritual path. You need to find out what motivates you and keeps you in a good, healthy, spiritual state. For some, this process may mean adding specific spiritual practices to your daily life (Part II of this book gives examples of spiritual practices for body, mind, and spirit)

Just as you may decide to stop eating greasy junk food or too many sweets to help your body stay in a good physical state, in the same way, you may decide to watch fewer violent movies or go to fewer wild parties to help keep your mind and heart in a good spiritual state.

Consider

Paying attention to your inner state and contemplating your history and personal nature help give you the resources to make better decisions about what works best for you.

Your nature is reflected in your world

Have you ever heard someone say, “Your actions speak louder than words,” or “What you are is so loud that I can’t hear what you are saying”? These statements are often used to insinuate that someone is acting in a way that is inconsistent with the image he’s wishing to present through his words. Yet, these phrases also indicate an important and magical truth about human expression — what you are expresses through everything you do. Therefore, all you really need to do to discover more about who you are is to look at what you’ve chosen to surround yourself with and ask a few questions, such as:

- What is decorating the walls of your home, such as paintings, photos, or other collections? Is it family? Nature? Accomplishments? Souvenirs? Spiritual icons?
- Do the objects around you represent happy times or sad memories?
- What kind of clothes do you most like to wear — fancy or comfortable?
- What kind of friends do you have — supportive, trustworthy, distant, or close?
- What books do you like to read — mysteries, spiritual, dramas, or romance?
- What kind of television shows do you watch — reality, sitcoms, news, or soap operas?
- What kind of car do you drive — safe, large, small, impressive, or dependable?

Be Careful

Too much honesty about your mutual tendencies can sometimes be damaging to a friendship. Be honest but kind in your assessments of each other, and remember that the goal of this process is to explore honestly *and* with a focus on uplifting your self-images and expressions. As with every other powerful practice, the key is moderation.

Discovering your tendencies

To discover your personal tendencies, observe how you react and respond in certain situations. How do you handle stress? How about criticism? Do you do well or poorly with tight deadlines? How do you respond when you're waiting to hear if you got the job?

Take a look, also, at the little things, which are just as revealing of your nature. For example, if you have an iTunes or other program on your computer, phone, or mp3 player, do you prefer to program the exact order of songs? Do you let them just play in alphabetical order? Or, do you press shuffle and let the winds of fate be your DJ? Do you prefer having control, or do you thrive on the thrill of the unknown? How much and in what ways?

It's like getting to know other people, only better!

One of the most amazing and wondrous aspects of personal relationships is to experience a deep level of intimacy with another human being. There is something magical about discovering every look and thought of the one you love and sensing how to dance with that person as you move together through the waves and events of life.

Now here's the good news. You can actually find the same level of joy and intimacy within your own mind and heart. You can have the same level of enthusiasm in getting to know yourself as you have when you're getting to know someone else. The key to spiritual awareness is to really know and understand yourself — to love, respect, and honor yourself.

Forget what the spiritual correctness police might say if they think you're being too self-absorbed. The self-absorption you should avoid is the kind of limited self-identification that can make a person inconsiderate toward others. The journey of self-knowledge makes you more considerate of others, because you begin to sense the deep connection of all beings.

Spirituality in Action

You can find more to explore inside every aspect of how you relate to the world. The field for this research into your own nature is wide open and available any and every moment of the day. Here are a few more questions you can contemplate:

- If God promised you an unconditional “Yes” right now, what would you ask for? (Feel free to take some time to contemplate this question, because you never know who may be listening!)
- When someone says they have good news and bad news, which do you want to know first and why?
- When you are in hopeful situations, such as playing a slot machine, being up for a cool prize in a raffle, or awaiting news of a possible promotion, what psychological maneuvers do you use to try to bend the universal flow to your will? Do you feign detachment? Do you beg? Do you ask sweetly or try to make deals with God? Do you surrender by offering it all to God’s will? And if so, are you truly surrendered or offering to God’s will out of laziness or in hopes that this “surrender” will help you get what you want?
- How do you respond when windfalls of great fortune seem to shower down upon your head or alternatively when everything seems to be going wrong? What are your beliefs during these times? For example:
- During great times, do you feel concerned that the universe is going to balance things out by bringing some rough times?
- During bad luck times, do you feel that God must be angry about something you have done?

This exploration isn’t an exercise in making judgments against yourself; rather, it’s intended to help you become more self-aware. Just as you have to fully trust friends or a therapist to be able to truly confide in them, in the same way, you must be able to trust that your own love and respect for yourself won’t waver. This unwavering self-respect and self-love allows you to safely unravel tendencies that may clash with who you thought you were or wish to be.

Consider

Always be your own best friend.

A side trip into psychology

One of the most fascinating psychological topics I've encountered is that of *Multiple Personality Disorder*. MPD is a condition where extreme trauma has shaken a person's psyche, which then responds by separating into different personalities to block the experience and memory of this extreme physical or emotional pain. Once formed, these subpersonalities can sometimes continue to exist and grow almost as psychic tumors or separate entities living within the same body.

I first learned about this multiple personality condition when I was less than 10 years old. My parents were both psychology teachers who taught all the coolest aspects of psychology to their high-school classes, including attraction/aversion, behavioral psychology, extrasensory perception, and much more. Our bookshelves always had a steady stream of the hottest new psychology books of the 1970s, and I read a good number of them.

The most interesting topic for my young, developing mind was that of Multiple Personality Disorder. In these cases, it would appear that different people were sharing the very same body, either peacefully or not so peacefully. Some would have a wide array of personalities — including boys, teens, women, and men — yet all these very different “people” were actually facets of the same overall person.

Studies have shown that in some cases, different personalities within the same body have even had different allergic responses — such as common allergies to animals, pollens or foods — with some subpersonalities being very allergic to something and others who are expressing through the very same body, having no allergic reaction at all. Some subpersonalities have been shown to have different brainwave patterns, handwriting styles, gender identifications, left- and right-handedness, voice patterns, reactions to different medications, cysts and diseases that appear and disappear depending on the personality, and different levels of visual acuity. Some multiples even have to change to different prescription glasses, depending on who's steering the ship at any moment. It would be hard to find a more compelling demonstration of the amazing and flexible power of your mind and the fluid nature of personality!

Looking at your shadows

One reason many people don't like to look too closely at themselves is because they inevitably encounter their shadows — pockets of action, speech, and attitudes that aren't always in keeping with their highest views of themselves. Therefore, before you delve too deeply into your shadows, you can first adjust your worldview to the forgiving vision of spirituality.

Understand that in your spiritual journey, even mistakes you've made along the way can be transformed into fuel for the fire of spiritual evolution. (This conversion is even better than recycling!) Once you understand this process, you can wave goodbye to those old staples of guilt and shame, along with their friends by the names of anger, greed, and hatred.

If you have habits and personality traits that you or others have judged harshly through the years, now is the time to begin to look at every aspect of yourself with a more objective, kinder, and knowledgeable eye. Ignoring your bad habits doesn't help, nor does overfocusing on them, such as being filled with shame about past actions or thoughts. In fact, trying too hard to get rid of a habit or trait can backfire because the nature of thoughts is to empower whatever they're directed toward, whether positive or negative (see Chapter 15).

Consider

You can even have gratitude for your shadows. Just consider that all your faults, flaws, and past missteps will give you an even more interesting and inspiring testimonial once you grow beyond them into a more spiritual life.

Don't Forget

You can be sure that if an all-intelligent and all-powerful God gave you and everyone else all these different combinations of personal qualities and histories, it's because you're intended to be different. You're unique, just like everybody else, and you're meant to have all your tendencies, conflicts, and complications, along with all your blessings and great qualities. The spiritual challenge behind being you is to take all that you have and all that you are and to raise it up as a joyful toast to the Divine. With this approach, the darker aspects of your nature are naturally lifted up into the light, and you are less likely to do what is harmful and more drawn to creating what is beneficial.

Appreciating your depths

Spiritual Wisdom

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.

—Teilhard de Chardin

Human personality isn't an item or a stable object. You are a *flow* — a spiritual light that becomes fragmented into the many colors that make up your multifaceted personality.

Therefore, it's possible that you may feel and act a certain way in one moment and very differently at another time. For example:

- If you're in a great mood, you may be extra charitable toward the people around you, tossing out friendly smiles and kind words as you go through the day.
- If you're in a bad mood, you may instead find yourself impatient and angry with the same people in the very same situations.

Your responses to the same situations can vary drastically depending on your mood or personal state of consciousness at the time because you aren't just a single, limited, tangible

object. You are the flow of pure spirit expressing itself freshly in every moment as you. Think about your own life and how you act and feel in the following situations:

- When you're playing with happy children
- When you're teaching someone who is eager to learn from you
- When you encounter someone who thinks you're an idiot
- When you feel confused, upset, or fearful
- When you feel the power and light of grace shining through you

Get to know all the facets of your gem, and you'll find it easier to experience the spiritual light that is shining through your gem.

Don't Forget

On your journey of spiritual evolution, each facet of your personality grows and blossoms. You may be very spiritually mature in some ways, while in others, you've still got more work to do. Even the aspect of your personality that gets irritable, and the parts of your mind that entertain thoughts you wish were entertaining someone else's mind, begin to move higher from wherever they are to become freer and lighter.

Once you realize how big and amazing your personality and everything else is, then you can also relax a bit more about the small details of life and have faith in this amazing universe.

Consider

Don't be too upset with yourself if you falter here and there on your spiritual journey. Even the upward flow of spiritual evolution will appear to have some ups and downs.

You are the flowing water

Here's an analogy to help you understand the many levels of who you are: Imagine a rushing stream of water flowing along the riverbanks. In one area, you see piles of rocks that have created a diversion in the water's flow. As you look at this area, you notice the shape of a whirlpool that has been formed by the water rushing across this pattern of rocks.

To an objective eye, the whirlpool shape created by the water flowing around the rocks may appear to be a solid object. To someone who doesn't understand the dynamics of flowing water, this whirlpool shape may appear to be the same water from one moment to another. However, those who understand what is really going on know that this seemingly stable pattern is constantly being animated by fresh flowing water.

The rocks in this riverbed are like all the outer circumstances of your life that have created certain flows and shapes in your character and awareness. The whirlpool shape created by these rocks is like the part of you that others can see — all the appearances and behaviors that make you similar to or different from others.

Nevertheless, spirituality says that what you really are is the flowing water. Your deepest essence is neither the rocks nor the shape of movement, but the fresh stream of divine life force and Holy Spirit that streams through the circumstances of your life, creating this image of you.

In this analogy, what you identify with says a lot about how you experience life:

- **Identifying with the rocks** in the stream is akin to identifying with present situations and past memories, such as what you own, what you've done, or your childhood experiences of having too much of one thing or too little of the other. Focusing on the rocks is like having a materialistic point of view that may lead you to struggle endlessly to rearrange the rocks with hopes of creating changes in the water's shape.
- **Identifying with the whirlpool shape** is also a lower road to go. If you think the personality shape created by the rock circumstances of your life is you, well, then where will you be when those rocks come tumbling down one day? If the whirlpool dissolves or changes, you may actually think you've died!
- **If you identify instead with the flowing water** — with the spiritual energy that invigorates and gives life to the body, mind, heart, and soul of every being that emerges out of the spring of life — then you know a great and wonderful freedom. Even if all the rocks fall down and even if the shapes of water patterns change a million times, you remain identified with the ceaseless flow of water that's unaffected by shifts in the riverbed.

Consider

The truth is that you're really all three — the rocks, the patterns of water flow, and the water.

Yes, But Who Are You Really?

This whole universal creation is bigger than anybody can fathom, and guess what? So are you.

In spite of the ultimately indefinable nature of the human soul, sages from spiritual traditions throughout the ages have worked hard to explore and discover what really lies inside themselves and the world around them. Although each religious tradition has its own culture-specific images and doctrines, several themes appear in many spiritual and theological theories.

One common element is a belief in an invisible, divine part of you that lives on in some way even after your body takes its last breath — a spark of God that lives within you, as you.

Spiritual Wisdom

Meditate on yourself, honor yourself, and worship yourself. God dwells within you as you."

—Baba Muktananda

Don't Forget

When you need to remember how special you are

If you ever start thinking that you're insignificant or unimportant, just stop for a moment and look at your physical body. What a miracle you are! Appreciate how the profound complexity of nature conspires to keep you alive — from the unceasing work of your heart and other organs to countless molecular functions and other energy transformational processes.

It simply isn't logical to conclude, upon contemplating these things, that you are anything less than exceptional — and somehow worth all the effort!

Big Self, little self

You can think of yourself as having two aspects: your big Self (with a capital “S”) and your little self.

- **Your small self** is an egocentric mass of conditioned responses and defense mechanisms that pulls you to into illusion and keeps you from receiving the wealth of your own inheritance.
- **Your big Self** is the great reservoir of eternal wisdom that's always pulling you toward liberation, freedom, goodness, and divine light. It is also the Self of all.
- **You, as an individual being**, are the juncture point between these two, as they pull your awareness, often in opposite directions.

Don't Forget

The inner effulgence of your spiritual Self shines more visibly when you clear away the clouds of ignorance and delusion that block its great light. You can clear the way for more light to express through your life through meditation, contemplation, purification, and the elevated teachings from those who have gazed long and lovingly at their own shining Self.

Some religions, such as Buddhism, have different worldviews that don't include the idea of a permanent, abiding, eternal self. Rather, they may see the self as a temporary flow of causes and conditions that come and go from a particular body/mind system.

Good news! You already are spiritual

Not only is your essence made of pure spirit, but no matter who you are or how you've lived, I can guarantee that you've already been spiritual, with or without knowing it. Here are some ways you may have been spiritual:

- Remember as a child when you used to daydream during school? Wasn't it a great feeling to get absorbed in your own being and enjoy all the entertainment of your inner creations (until the teacher called on you)? In some cases, your daydreaming may have been a form of meditation, turning your awareness away from the outer world of a boring lesson and into the rich realms of inner creativity.
- When your heart is moved to volunteer your time, finances, and other efforts to a good cause, then you're touching the spiritual practice of selfless service. If you can keep in mind that you're honoring the divine in each person you help, then this practice becomes even more spiritual.
- Every time you go to sleep and every time you wake up, your consciousness passes through a porthole of awareness that scientists call the *hypnogogic state*. Spiritual scriptures refer to these juncture points of wakefulness and sleep as powerful times through which you may be able to grasp the divine presence that exists behind your thinking mind. Don't rush so fast to jump out of bed in the morning. Savor that peaceful yet dynamic space between sleep and wakefulness!
 - While watching a beautiful sunset or smelling the delightful fragrances of flowers in spring, it is likely that you've experienced some spiritual feelings of love and appreciation for the beauty of God's creation.
 - Holidays, weddings, funerals, and birthdays bring opportunities for thinking spiritual thoughts, feeling spiritual emotions, and saying spiritual things. Consider:
 - **Thanksgiving Day:** What are you thankful for?
 - **New Year's Day:** What resolutions are you making to improve your life?
 - **Weddings:** What blessings do you wish upon the happy couple?
 - **Funerals:** Where do you feel your friend or family member has gone? What was the value of his or her life?

Fanning the divine flame

Spiritual Wisdom

Someone inside of us is now kissing the hand of God, and wants to share with us that grand news. —Hafiz

Spirituality is a calling from your soul that ignites a wick that has been sitting inside of you for a long time. The flame in your heart may have glowed at times from the sight of a new lover, the love of your children, or other joyful accomplishments. Perhaps your flame has shined especially brightly during times when you've risen to a challenge with passion and vigor. These kinds of flames can wax and wane depending on outer events and inner interpretations.

However, once the *spiritual* flame is lit and blazing inside you, it becomes like one of those magic candles that you just can't blow out. Oh, it may appear to fizzle here and there, or seem to wane when you blow worldly or negative airs towards it, but your spiritual flame always reemerges to shine as brightly as ever, if you have the spiritual eyes to see its radiance.

Taming the donkey

Each person has a great, wise soul inside. Most people also have a lot of stuff and not-so-spiritual tendencies. The Sufi sages refer to these two aspects of a human being as the soul and the donkey. The higher soul is also sometimes called your inner angel, and the word *donkey* refers to the undesirable qualities of your lower self and is appropriately synonymous with the word "ass". Every person is a combination of donkey and soul, animal instinct and higher divinity.

It is not that all of your animal instincts are bad, by any means. Many instincts, such as self-preservation and maternal concern, are essential to life and the propagation of this donkey/angel species called humanity. However, other animalistic instincts can make you do things that aren't in the best interest of anyone, including yourself.

Don't Forget

One goal of spirituality is to raise all the different layers of yourself into greater realms of wisdom and grace.

Diving into the experience of pure soul

One fine day, you'll come upon the doorstep to your inner sanctum, whether in the midst of your life or at the moment of death. Each soul must enter this space naked and free. No societal expectations can touch this place. No parental advice enters here either. No lover, teacher, student, friend or foe, and no fear, judgment, pride, guilt, attachment, or sadness can exist in this pure space. Your clothes and good looks aren't needed, nor will those few extra pounds keep you down.

No outer events can change or affect your pure soul. It's a whole different ball game from the familiar world of physical qualities. Though your life dramas seem to take years, to that soul, there is only one timeless point of time. Your deepest soul exists in the beginning, middle, and end of everything. This is the eternally happy ending to every story.

Moving Beyond Ego

Question: What is it that makes people forget their true spiritual nature?

Answer: Ego, also known as limited self-identification

When the Indian scriptures tell you to “get rid of your ego,” they aren’t referring to ego in terms of Freudian theory, or to the common usage of the word for someone who is overly proud or arrogant. In spiritual circles, the word *ego* is commonly used as a translation of the Sanskrit word, *ahamkara*, which comes from two roots:

- *Aham* means, “I am.”
- *Kara* is an action verb, which can be translated as “to make.”

Your ahamkara is the *I-maker*. It makes the idea that “I am, and I am separate.” Ahamkara is the misconception that you are an object — disconnected from everything and everybody else — and that you have to always look out for yourself in this world. This limited ego makes bad decisions and becomes the distorting force in a person’s life. This is the ego that spiritual practices and efforts chop away to reveal your hidden gems.

Ego isn’t only the part of you that thinks you’re better than anyone else, but also the part of you that thinks you’re worse or less than another person. It’s not the good or bad feelings that decide whether your experience is being tainted by ego; rather ego is the false and limited view of yourself that’s creating those good or bad feelings.

Spirituality in Action

To explore what some of your limited views of yourself may be, listen to how you talk to yourself and others about yourself. How do you describe yourself? Do you focus on your talents, gifts, and contributions to life, or on your challenges, human frailties, and other negative descriptions? Do you judge and compare yourself to others? Do you feel burdened by your responsibilities, accomplishments, and failures, or do you remember to identify with the flowing water of spirit that is expressing as the various shapes of your life?

Praising yourself doesn’t necessarily mean that you have a big ego — in fact, you may simply be free enough from ego that you gratefully appreciate your individual gifts without the limited self-identification of ego. Alternatively, you may appear to be very humble but still have large pockets of hidden ego. Because ego can be so tricky and difficult to discern, some choose to study under spiritual teachers and guides who have an elevated vision that allows them to see where your ego buttons are and how best to heal them.

Be Careful

In spiritual circles, you’ll be sure to find many who will be all too happy to take on the role of “busting your ego,” such as those I call the “humility police.” Some of these people may be anointed, while others are simply annoying.

Chapter 5 gives you helpful guidance on how to know who and what to follow and listen to as you travel on your spiritual path.

A Sufi poet expressed the ego’s condition very well, explaining that “when worldly people don’t get something, they are restless; and when they do get it, they become arrogant.”

Isn't this the truth? Sometimes good fortune can be transmuted into harmful ego, which is quite a shame. Conversely, difficult times can sometimes push you out of the ego's complacency and limited self-importance, and into something greater.

Be Careful

When you feel an ego-based impulse stirring, such as when people are praising or challenging you, don't fall for the temptation to get swept away by their flattering or insulting opinions. Stop the sense of limited identification before it starts. It may feel good at first to feel special, like a big shot, or even righteously indignant, but those fleeting sensations aren't worth the cost!

Are you really God?

When the great spiritual masters declare that "You are God," they're communicating a truth discovered in the depths of contemplation — in that innermost sanctum of spiritual consciousness and soul communion.

However, if you have an incomplete understanding and image of who you are and what God is, then this statement doesn't really make sense.

After all, if you were God, things would look a heck of a lot different around your world than they do now, right?

Well, not necessarily. You see, it's not the "little you" who is worried about getting to work on time that is Lord and Master over all creation. It is the great, wise you who sees beyond outer appearances and into the heart of life — the YOU that exists within you.

Spirituality in Action

Breaking free from egocentric, limited identifications is the key to spiritual growth. Here are two basic approaches to moving beyond ego:

- **Shrinking your ego:** This approach calls for you to file down all the desires and impulses that arise from wrong identification of yourself as a limited human rather than a divine being. While working to shrink your ego, you become vigilant over any thoughts or desires that come up and may even put yourself into situations that

challenge you to let go of limited ego comforts. Saints and sages of many traditions have willingly undergone austerities such as fasting and days of unending prayer to subdue their ego-based instincts and tendencies.

- **Expanding your ego:** With this approach, if someone gives you a huge compliment, you receive it, perhaps agree with it, and continue to move forward without having your ego get puffed up in a limited way that would make you act arrogant or egotistical. Rather, your ego's identification begins to grow and grow, getting bigger and bigger as you realize that you are great and divine — and so is everyone else! In this awareness, the small ego sense bursts into a million fragrant rose petals of universal grace, as you begin to see supreme oneness everywhere.

Being Nothing Isn't So Bad Either

Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.

—generally attributed to Abraham Lincoln

One day, a rabbi and his cantor walked into their temple together and found themselves overwhelmed by the immensity of God's presence. Both fell to the ground in humble awe and exclaimed, one right after the other, "O Lord, I am nothing!"

The temple janitor was cleaning behind one of the pillars when he saw these two devout men fall to their knees. Moved by their striking display of devotion and humility, the janitor stepped out from the pillar and also fell to the ground, crying out, "O Lord, I am nothing!"

Seeing and hearing the janitor's passionate display, the cantor nudged the rabbi and whispered, "Hey, look who thinks he's nothing!"

But seriously, folks, being nothing can be a very high spiritual state, or admittedly, it can be an excuse for living a shallow life. For a spiritual person, being nothing can open the door to becoming everything. It's one of those funny twists of life: By being nothing, you become everything. How does it happen? What does it feel like?

The following three-part contemplation can help you open to the possibility of living fully while being nothing, walking lightly in your heart even as you walk upon the earth:

1. Imagine what it would be like to have no worries, no fear, no confusion or stress, nothing that you're wishing for or waiting for, nobody to be angry at, and no pressing matters at hand.

Of course, this clear state of mind is easier said than done, right? Nevertheless, just by opening yourself to the possibility of entering this state of inner freedom, you're paving the way to its door.

2. In your mind's eye, invoke an image of yourself as a young child.

You may not have felt a truly deep level of security, comfort, and freedom since your early childhood, before school responsibilities came in and disrupted your little party of being a carefree child — bringing stress, test scores, peers, deadlines, homework, teachers, and all the responsibilities and challenges of being thrust into a large group of other souls. I remember this time as a big shock after a relatively smooth and carefree toddlerhood. Imagine and remember what life was like at age two or three, when your biggest concern was hopefully about which color candy would pop up when it was your turn.

3. Take all that carefree feeling and bring it into the circumstances of your life as it is now.

Imagine what it would be like to live your life with all the things and people that have accumulated around you, but with absolutely nothing to worry about. You're not worried about death, money, or someone else's opinion about you, nor are you afraid of losing anything, yet you're still joyful, caring, vibrant, and involved with everything that's going on. This peaceful state is what it feels like to integrate spirituality into your life.