

Chapter 5

Finding Your Spiritual Path

Topics in this Chapter:

- * Exploring your spiritual options
- * Being guided from within
- * Steering clear of traps
- * Opening to wisdom and grace

Today more than ever, people are searching for meaning in their lives. Yet, many who search find a confusing array of spiritual teachings and traditions and end up wandering through their entire lives without ever breaking through into the great realms of spiritual awareness. That's like going to a store and forgetting to buy the one thing you needed most. (Don't you hate when that happens?)

Today's world offers many people an impressive freedom to create and follow their dreams, spiritual and otherwise. For example, even kids who grow up in terrible financial situations in today's world still have opportunities to become incredibly successful in any and every possible field — if they have the right ambition, vision, perseverance, karma, luck, and grace. “Where there's a will, there's a way” rings truer today than ever in terms of individual possibilities, including spiritual growth.

Yet so many questions arise as you look for the right spiritual road to travel. How can you find the right path? From where can you draw the inspiration and information necessary to transform and uplift your life?

What teachings can guide you to uplift your spiritual perception?

How do you keep from being snookered by “spiritual” frauds?

Who can you trust?

With whom should you travel?

Should you practice alone or in a group?

Should you read ancient texts or modern bestsellers?

How much does it cost to be spiritual?

This chapter gives you tips, tools, and guidance for seeking and finding the wonderful and vibrant spiritual path that you deserve.

You're here for a reason

According to spiritual sages, you didn't just arrive here just by accident or as a fluke. Rather, you are here because it is in the circumstances of your life that you are able to experience what you need in order to learn the life lessons you are meant to learn.

The universal intelligence has arranged all the circumstances of your life, including the time and place in which you have been born. You are living on this planet at this time because you're meant to be here.

Part of your spiritual calling is to learn how to not only survive but to spiritually *thrive* in the midst of all the pretense and illusions of modern day life. In a world filled with falsehood, your calling is to grow into greater truth, just as a beautiful lotus flower grows and even draws nourishment from the muddy waters in which it grows.

Searching for Truth in a World of Pretense

Spiritual Wisdom

I do not believe in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance.

—Thomas Carlyle

Today's world is an amazing time and place for seeking, discovering, and nourishing your spirituality. As they say, it's the best of times and the worst of times. Most people have the freedom to explore and seek higher spiritual truth in ways that were unavailable in previous times and cultures. Yet, at the same time, authentic spiritual teachings and practices can be hard to find amidst the busyness and noise of modern life.

Never before has this world seen anything like the massive scale of illusory commercialization and pretense that floods today's modern cultures. In recent years, the media have done their best to turn audiences into obsessive-compulsive gossipers, as they shamelessly pound out each salacious detail of celebrities' personal lives for hours, days, weeks, months, and even years — for what? Bigger ratings and more revenue.

Advertising and commercialism pervade every corner of today's urban landscape, with little care for the sanctity of people's right to a peaceful environment. Millions of dollars are spent to research how to trigger and draw your subconscious attention to all kinds of products you don't even need, without regard for the side effects of these mental manipulations. If advertisers could figure out how to beam their commercials directly into your head, you can be sure that many would jump at the chance.

Your calling is to find truth and spirituality in the midst of all this worldly pretense. However, to complicate things further, spirituality today also tends to be compromised by the same motives of greed, ignorance, and sensuality that pervade other areas of society.

Consider

In a way, today's world of pretense can actually benefit a spiritual seeker who is proceeding with open eyes. The glaring chaos of commercialized illusions can drive ripe spiritual seekers to become even more vigilant about absorbing themselves, mind, heart, and soul, into the peaceful presence of the divine. The key is to take full advantage of the spiritual benefits of this time (see Chapter 2) while steering clear of potholes along the way.

Consider

Tips for reading divine texts

Some religious followers insist that texts such as the Bible, Koran, Torah, or Bhagavad Gita are the actual, unblemished Word of God. Others see these scriptures as records put together by spiritually inspired but potentially fallible and culture-based human beings. Many religious records have been translated, edited, and retranslated by other perhaps not-as-divinely-inspired, fallible human beings through the centuries. To get the most when reading spiritual scriptures, you may want to:

- Give extra focus to the parts of a text that are supposed to be actual spoken or written expressions of the divine sage(s) who sparked that particular religion or philosophy. For example, if you're reading the New Testament, focus on the words of Jesus.
- Keep your attention on the parts of scriptures that make sense and resonate with your current interests and understanding. Putting other sections aside doesn't mean you are dismissing them forever, but that you are paying attention first to what connects with your soul's journey. Focus on the spiritual teachings you grasp, and they will take your hand and guide you from where you are now into greater awareness and understanding.

Being a good editor

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

—Aristotle

One secret to benefiting from spiritual teachings is this: Be a good editor! Drink the nectar and leave the dishwater. Eat the peanuts and throw away the shells. Use the good film footage and cut out the shaky shots. Choose and digest what makes sense and rings true and leave the discards respectfully in a bin for possible future consideration.

You have to be a good editor when it comes to reading and hearing anything in life, but especially with spiritual teachings. Be open-minded, but not naïve. The greatest teachings often come along with other ideas that appear to be less than great. However, if you completely avoid these teachings because you disagree with certain elements, then you may miss out on some of the greatest guidance for your spiritual journey.

Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint.

—Mark Twain

Following your intuition

Your intuition is a great friend. It's like having a wise guide, mother, father, brother, sister, and comrade, all inside of you. Intuition helps you to find and recognize what you want in life..

Remember the game you played as a child, where you look for something that has been hidden? The other children who know where the item is will say, "You're getting colder," or "You're getting warmer," or if you're lucky, "You're getting *really* warm," or "You're super-hot!" Following your intuition is similar to playing this hot or cold game, except the communications are not spoken aloud, but whispered from the universal mind into your personal mind.

Consider

Even if the communication lines between your intuition and personal awareness have become blocked or ignored, you can still train yourself to open up more to intuitive guidance.

Steps you can take to improve your intuition include:

- Asking for guidance and being open to receiving it
- Trusting that the inner wisdom already guides you, whether you've been aware of it or not
- Acting in accordance with whatever intuitions come, as long as they don't seem to be wrong or harmful in any way
- Staying peaceful when some intuitions don't always appear to pan out as true, with an understanding that the spiritual journey is a learning process
- Being aware that you can't always know whether the results of an action are beneficial or harmful without seeing all its future repercussions and underlying effects
- Remembering to have gratitude and appreciation when your intuitive guidance is successful

Consider

Sensing your heart's recognition

The best way to find your spiritual path is to be guided by your heart's recognition. If you don't know what this recognition feels like, then you may not have found the right path yet. It is a sense that you are in the right place for growing in a positive way.

In the late 1970s, while attending the University of Michigan, I discovered my main spiritual path during a college field trip to a local ashram. I had almost skipped the trip because I wasn't too interested in religions after my nonreligious upbringing. I also thought the place might be some kind of strange cult because it was headed by a swami from India.

Although the ashram was somewhat exotic in appearance — with Sanskrit chanting, swirls of incense, and pictures of Indian saints along the walls — it surprisingly didn't feel strange at all. In fact, the strangest thing about the experience was that it didn't feel strange! Through this sense of comfort and recognition, my heart was gently pointing toward this path, which then rocked my world, awakened my spirit, and transformed my life. This gentle sense of familiarity is an example of what it can feel like to be guided toward a spiritual path, teaching, or teacher.

Spirituality Is Not One Path Fits All

The truth is that spirituality is not “one size fits all.” Many roads lead to one great destination, and your assignment is to find the right pathways for you. Start by looking at your tendencies and what naturally appeals to you.

Have a delicious spiritual life

If this world didn't have such a variety of religious and spiritual expressions, it would be like a really boring food court with just one restaurant. Including more cultural foods helps to make a better food court or restaurant row.

In the same way, experiencing a variety of spiritual flavors can help you to have a more delicious and colorful spiritual life.

Here are several pathways that can lead to spiritual growth:

- **Self-control:** Some seekers dissolve their small self through disciplined practices that diminish their lower, unspiritual thoughts and tendencies, such as denying themselves sense pleasures. (Note: This is not the most fun way to go, although it can be very effective.) When the clouds of ego and self-identification disappear, a seeker can see the divine light that has always been shining behind those clouds, as the *Bhagavad Gita* says, “brighter than a thousand suns.”
- **Devotion:** Some seekers prefer to jump into the deep and intoxicating waters of devotion, worshipping whatever form or forms they consider to be an expression of God. This approach is a special gourmet variety of spiritual experience that is not familiar to most.

To get a sense of how powerful devotion is, just think about how strong the effects of regular, ordinary, human love can be. People have sold their lives, careers, ambitions, and even souls for just a taste of ordinary love or lust. They give it all to attain oneness with the object of their desire, and are sometimes shocked to find that their loved one is not so different from other people, and that he “poops” just like everyone else. But God never “poops” - or cheats on you with your best friend, for that matter. God belongs equally and fully to everyone, and God is always great. The nectar of devotion connects you to this divine greatness in amazing, tender, and inexpressible ways.

- **Study and practice:** Some seekers find spirituality by studying teachings and performing spiritual practices of whatever tradition they’re following. If done right, these efforts help you to experience the divine spiritual treasure of life.

Consider

You can and should combine elements of different approaches to create your own vibrant spiritual journey. Today’s spiritual environment offers a wide variety of avenues and styles that seekers can choose to highlight, based on their personal preferences and inner guidance. Some seekers prefer traditional religions, while others want to go out of the box. Some like to worship, others to philosophize, and still others like to focus on quietly practicing or serving. Some want spirituality to be a family activity, others join large communities, and still others prefer the solitude of resting in a peaceful inner communion with spirit.

Be Careful

Please remember that choosing what’s right for you doesn’t mean that what’s right for you must be right for everyone else.

Separating the Wheat from the Chaff

The goal of pursuing your spiritual search within a group or tradition is ultimately to find the essence that exists within and beyond all groups and traditions. While the intention of spiritual groups may be to assist you on your quest, in practice, the outer expressions of religious and spiritual paths, teachers, and communities can sometimes become skewed away from this essential goal and pointed instead toward dogma or greed.

How dogma is created

Here's a story that illustrates how certain dogmas can muddy the waters of a spiritual path.

Once there was a spiritual teacher whose lectures mesmerized and inspired the many monks and seekers who would gather every evening at his monastery to receive his teachings.

The monastery had a cat that liked to hop around on people's laps during these spiritual gatherings, disturbing the peaceful focus of the space. The teacher told one of the monks that every evening at 6 p.m., the cat should be tied with a rope to a post outside the monastery and released when the gathering ended.

This schedule went on for many years, until the teacher passed on, leaving his foremost disciple to give the lectures, as was the practice in his tradition. More years went by, and eventually the cat also passed away. The monks immediately got another cat for the monastery and continued to tie that cat to the post outside the monastery every evening during the spiritual discourse as part of the daily protocol.

More years and then decades passed. Within 100 years, the doctrine of this path was set down in writing, and one important spiritual practice was that a cat had to be posted outside the lecture hall during all programs. If a monastery didn't have a cat, it would have to get one, because tying a cat to the post was essential to the sanctity of the place. This metaphorical tale shows how dogma, or in this case, catma (sorry), creeps into spiritual teachings, practices, and doctrines.

Sometimes spiritual paths and religions fall into behaviors that are similar to politics. The pure purpose of politics may be to support the quality of life for human beings in this world or in a particular country or state. However, in practice, many politicians bring a club mentality and greediness into their work.

Sometimes politicians in one party will consider attacking a rival party as their most important goal, above improving the greater good of the people whom they were elected to serve. A politician's campaign promises can sometimes be put on a back burner, with other greed-based concerns getting top priority.

In the same way, the purpose of a church, spiritual path, or house of worship is to create an atmosphere for its members to commune with God. Yet, just as with politics, these religions and spiritual paths are headed and run by people, and people can sometimes be thrown off their purest intentions by a few threads of greed, ego, or rivalry.

Don't Forget

Even as you love and respect the teachers and members of your spiritual community, the purpose of any group, temple, church, or spiritual teacher should be to give you the resources needed to attain your own great spiritual wealth. A good spiritual group should help you to find your own individual spiritual path of growth and service, and not try to make you dependent or codependent on outer forms.

Don't Forget

When you approach spiritual teachings and paths, keep both your heart *and* your eyes open! The best tools you have for discerning the nourishing spiritual wheat from the useless chaff are your intuition, intelligence, integrity, and your spiritual practices and studies (see Part II).

Benefiting from Teachers, Thinkers, Saints, and Sages

Spiritual Wisdom

Arise, awake! Approach the great beings and know the Truth!

—Katha Upanishad

Saints and sages are like waterfalls of divine grace and portholes to heaven right in this world. Their inspiring wisdom is like a fishhook that takes you — not to be fried up as a meal — but to be lifted out from what Indian sages call the *ocean of samsara*, the ocean of illusion where you suffer all the pains associated with forgetting your true nature.

This fishhook that pulls you out of the dark waters of illusion and into the light of higher spiritual awareness is a hook that you *want* to clamp onto tightly.

In the company of great spiritual teachers and masters, your own wise, great being can be elicited and awakened, even without your having to do a lot of practices or study all kinds of books. Just be open to resonating with their elevated energy and level of vibration.

Whether you're with a great master in person, or reading their writings, listening to their voice, or thinking about them, their elevated energy and level of spiritual vibration resonates with your own palette of being, calling forth elevated states of awareness that you may have never imagined you would be able to experience — but which have always existed, though perhaps latent, inside of you.

One analogy used for this spiritual alchemy in the company of great ones is of the resonance between one violin and another. If the “master” violin sings a note, the strings of a second “student” violin near it will also begin to vibrate at the same note. The second violin’s tone won’t be as strong or clear as the master violin, but (metaphorically) it may be the first time that violin ever experienced that particular note.

In the same way, the presence of a great spiritual being can inspire and invoke in you levels of spiritual insight, awareness, and sensation that you may not have ever imagined. Then it is up to you to keep that note alive if and when the master violin stops playing it outwardly in your presence.

The purpose of a spiritual teacher or guru is to teach you how to be with the Divine, how to relate to the Divine, and how to receive, learn, and grow from your connection with the Divine. From a personal relationship with a spiritual teacher or guru, you should also learn how to relate to the universe or God.

For example, through challenging interactions with your guru, you may discover how to receive criticism in a positive way, or how to continue loving even when that love doesn’t seem to be returned, or how to receive an avalanche of love and blessings at another time without becoming greedy or egotistical. You may learn how to keep your trust alive and your heart open without fear of being hurt even when your feelings could be hurt.

Living with a saint is more grueling than being one.

—Robert C. Neville

Respecting the attainment of a spiritual teacher, pastor, rabbi, monk, or guru doesn’t mean that you have to believe they don’t have any faults. Rather, you see the sun of divine wisdom, love, and grace shining brightly behind, in spite of, and perhaps even *through*, their apparent faults.

Buddha describes the signs of a sage

In this excerpt from the Dhammapada, Buddha shares some of the qualities of a spiritual master. Even if you don’t consider yourself to be a saint or sage (yet!), you can still imagine how it would feel to experience these qualities.

The master looks deeply into things and sees their nature. He discriminates and reaches the end of the way. He moves with love among the unloving, with peace and detachment among the hungry and querulous. He wants nothing from this world and nothing from the next. He is free. He has moved beyond time. He is calm. In him the seed of renewing life has been consumed. He has conquered all the inner worlds. With dispassionate eye he sees everywhere the falling and the uprising. The way he has taken is hidden from men, even from spirits and gods, by virtue of his purity. In him there is no yesterday, no tomorrow, no today. He has come to the end of the way, over the river of his many lives, his many deaths. All that he had to do, he has done. And now he is One.

Be Careful

If some spiritual teacher comes along and tells you that they know everything and can tell you without any doubt exactly why you're here, what you're supposed to do, where you've been in previous lifetimes, and exactly where you're going after you leave this world, then this so-called teacher is most likely either a fool or a scam artist trying to fool you. Such overcertainty may be a sign that this person doesn't even know the simplest truth that everything is much bigger and more complex than any human being can know in their mind and express with words.

Good spiritual teachers can be the key to unlocking new levels of your journey. You may learn from personally available teachers, from distant teachers with large groups of followers, or from teachers who have already left this world, leaving behind their teachings for future generations.

In my case, the guru or teacher found me. It happened during a college course I took with one of the guru's followers. This professor brought our class on a field trip to the local ashram in Ann Arbor, Michigan and later drove me to New York to meet the guru.

I encountered my guru just as I was ready to dive deeply into spiritual life, although if you'd told me this at the time, I would have probably balked at the idea. I was right in the middle of my university studies of neuroscience and film-video, and had been delving into all kinds of meditative-style practices on my own, with more of a psychological than spiritual focus. Unknowingly, I had become ripe inside for letting go of worldly interests and jumping into the ocean of deep spiritual immersion.

I could have looked for a very long time and never found a guru who was such an amazing match for my eclectic mixture of interests, qualities, contemplations, and levels of consciousness. Muktananda was a brilliant philosopher with a primo sense of humor, an intelligent grasp of both science and spirituality, and the power to deliver spiritual goods in a way that inspired even world-absorbed students to be naturally drawn into living a disciplined spiritual life.

During my subsequent monastic years, I watched as many devotees would leave their busy lives in every kind of profession you could possibly imagine to spend a day, week, month, or year coming together in our ashram with other incognito spiritual sages to focus deeply on spiritual practices and teachings.

Don't Forget

The path that was right for me is not necessarily the one that is right for you. What's most important is for you to find whatever teachers and teachings are right for you.

As you proceed on your spiritual path and learn from the many good sources available to you, remember that the goal of learning from teachers, thinkers, saints, and sages, and the teachings they have brought forth, is for you to become a fountain of grace and wisdom unto yourself.

Don't Forget

Also remember that ultimately, wherever you are is your spiritual path.

Spiritual Wisdom

People want to run away from where they are to go find their Jerusalem — as if elsewhere they will find perfection. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing there, make that a Jerusalem.

—Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson