Contemplative Spirituality

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Introduction

Many men and women over the past 2000+ years have done hard spiritual work yielding simple ultimate truth. They discovered the deepest aspects of classical Christian spirituality, stripped of religious dogma — tested, and found true for millennia, and beneficial regardless of religious preference or church activity.

Spiritual truths can't be found at the level of the mind. The answer is, and has always been, direct experience with God. Many people have achieved it, and through them we learn the real nature of things.

The concepts described here are bedrock concepts in spirituality, the inner work leading to God, whereas religion is an outward introductory form. Spirituality does not, and should not, replace your religion. Indeed, faithful practice of your religion enables you to put into practice the principles you've learned of spirituality. Each can help the other.

Pursuing spirituality requires effort and a thirst for knowledge. Knowledge and wisdom obtained by asking deep questions and being willing to discard previously held beliefs. As you practice asking questions, your skill in asking deeper questions will increase, and every answer will prompt a new and better question. There are more than a few doors to knock on leading through the interior castle, and the Creator is there to answer every knock.

Humans learned about God by directly experiencing Him, and there's a thread through recorded history of situations where God and man interacted. Directly experiencing God through unitive experience is **Mysticism**, an historic term which unfortunately has been misapplied and misinterpreted in modern society.

Mysticism has nothing to do with fortune-telling, astrology, the paranormal, channeling, hidden powers or occult practice. Historically Mysticism meant disciplined contemplative practice primarily within a Jewish or Christian tradition. The true mystic state follows a long period of purification.

Few arrive at the point of having direct unitive experience, and doing so needn't be the goal. In fact most will find happiness in following the steps leading in that direction, by being somewhat freed from the troubles of the world, and by achieving greater indwelling of the Spirit. Embracing concepts of the Path at any level fundamentally will transform you, lighten your load, and increase the space within your Soul for God.

According to mystical tradition work in the Soul must be done before one is qualified to meet God. This work requires putting to death the many urges and activities of the carnal man. From a historical perspective this is termed **Mortification**.

Meister Eckhart, a 12th Century theologian said:

> "Our salvation depends upon our knowing and recognizing the Chief Good which is God Himself. I have a capacity in my Soul for taking in God entirely. I am as sure as I live that nothing is so near to me as God. God is nearer to me than I am to myself; my existence depends on the nearness and presence of God." (Meister Eckhart's Sermons)

God is always waiting on us.

> "God is very zealous to be at all times with man... God is always ready, but we are very unready; God is near to us, but we are far from Him; God is within, but we are without; God is at home, but we are strangers." (Light, Life and Love - W. Inge)

But the path to truly finding Him is narrow.

> "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. " (Matt 7:13-14)

Religions are external to God, something we participate in beneficially for structure, purpose, belonging, and hoped for salvation, but they generally provide few tools for significant internal spiritual growth which can only to be learned from classical inward pointing Christianity.

Following the Path, or the Way as it was anciently known, is the rebirth spoken of in the scriptures.

Terminology

Spirituality is simple and achievable, and concepts can be readily grasped once terminology is understood. Some of these terms may be foreign or slightly different from what you're used to.

Achieving a cohesive spiritual terminology is challenging because source documents span 3 millennia from writers of different traditions and various languages, but the following work well:

God - Ultimate Reality beyond conceptual thought, Who can nevertheless be encountered and related to personally.

Soul - Defining the "Soul" in philosophy and religion is more difficult than might be imagined as it's meaning is very dependent on framework and context. The Soul is everlasting, separate from but created by God, and capable of experiencing God. It animates the physical body, and comprises faculties such as intellect, will, memory, and desire, as well as the deeper spiritual dimension through which the person can relate to, and have unitive experiences with God.

Human Being - Union of the Soul and physical body.

Self - The personal "I": the person as a center of identity, consciousness, desire, and will.

Spiritual self - The Self as it is oriented toward God, receptive to God, and conformed to God's will. The spiritually oriented level of intuition, discernment, and spiritually directed discursive as well as contemplative thought. The Spiritual self and Lower self are not separate entities but different orientations or conditions of the one Self.

Lower self - The Self as it is oriented toward being separate and self-sufficient, exercising self-will, and experiencing itself as separate from God. It identifies with what it does, has, controls, or appears to be, and identifies with the material world. It forgets or disregards its fundamental dependence upon and relationship with God.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the Lower self if it acts as an agent for the higher Spiritual self. The Lower self is not only concerned with physical things but performs all mental, emotional, and sensory activity that is not spiritually oriented. Most ordinary thoughts arise within this realm. Actions of the Lower self are appropriate as an interface

with the body's senses when danger is present, work is needed etc., but in most cases the Lower self practices misidentification when it forgets its true connection with God. The Ego exists here.

Dying to self - A phrase frequently used in older literature. The surrender of the will to God, the mortification of self-will, self-centeredness, and false identification. It is not the destruction of the person or the "I," but the death of the claim that the (lower) self is an autonomous center independent of, or above God.

Ego - A self-centered attitude arising from the false identification of the Lower self with its accomplishments, possessions, status, or outcomes. Ego reinforces this misidentified self.

Pride - The elevation of the self above its proper place, as being self-sufficient, self-originating, or entitled to determine one's own good independently of God. It may manifest as superiority, but also as self-reliance, vanity, refusal to receive / resisting God's will.

Mystic - Someone who seeks or experiences direct communion with, or awareness of, God or Ultimate Reality.

Mortification - Practices of renunciation, discipline, and self-denial that a person may take to support Purification which is the ongoing process of removing anything, especially self centeredness, that obstructs the person from experiencing awareness, receptivity, love, and unity with the Divine.

Contemplation - Turning the whole person, mind, heart, and will to intimate communion with God, rather than just pondering God or doctrine.

Contemplative - Someone who practices inward prayer, silence, meditation, and stillness to deepen awareness of God.

Indwelling - Presence of, or participation with the sacred or Divine within a person.

Transcendence - Moving beyond ego-bound awareness and limitations into direct relationship with the Divine resulting in seeing the ordinary world more deeply, clearly, and compassionately.

Spiritual self and Lower self are metaphorical terms.

Scripture as well as most religions recognize two components of the human Soul, the spiritually oriented, and the carnally oriented.

The terms Spiritual self and Lower self generally weren't explicitly used in early Christianity but are used because they're the best overall fit.

Spiritual self

For Spiritual self early Christians used concepts such as Spiritual, Nous (the highest seat of contemplative vision and direct knowledge), image of God, new man, and inner self which is God centered identity. A similar term, Higher self, has been used both anciently and recently.

Usage of the word "self" in "Spiritual self" unfortunately conflicts with the central spiritual concept of "dying to self." There really isn't a good workaround for this except to state that

Spiritual self is totally different from the word "self" used in most writings when the concept of "dying to self" is discussed.

Spiritual self for Protestants would be similar to: new man, born again, renewed heart, inner man, Spirit led, sanctified, spiritual, regenerated nature, man of faith.

For Catholics the terms include Soul, spiritual Soul, renewed Soul in grace, renewed self, sanctified Soul, higher faculties, inner man, interior man, image of God, and rational Soul.

> “The inward man is renewed day by day.” (2 Cor 4:16)
>
> “And have put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” (Eph 4:24)

The Spiritual self is capable of transcending discursive thought through contemplation.

Lower self

For Protestants, the Lower self would be similar to: old self, the flesh, sinful nature, carnal self, unregenerate self, sinful, corrupt heart, and enslaved to sin.

For Catholics the terms include the flesh, concupiscence, passions, lower faculties, sensus, appetitus, old self, disordered self, sensual self, exterior man.

> "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit." (Rom 8:9)
>
> "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom 8:7)

In Early Christianity

Early Christian thinking on the two natures is described by St. Gregory of Nyssa in his book "On the Making of Man":

> "I think that by these words Holy Scripture conveys to us a great and lofty doctrine; and the doctrine is this. While two natures, the Divine and incorporeal nature and the irrational life of brutes are separated from each other as extremes, human nature is the mean between them: for in the compound nature of man we may behold a part of each of the natures I have mentioned."

St. John of the Cross was an early adopter of the term Lower self.

> "The Soul gains so many benefits that it holds it to be a happy chance to have escaped from the bonds and restrictions of the senses of or its Lower self" (Dark Night of the Soul)

St. Augustine used the phrase Lower self to refer to the baser level.

> "A different law in my bodily members was warring against the law of my mind, imprisoning me under the law of sin which held sway in my Lower self." (The Confessions)

St. John of the Cross uses both higher and lower parts of the Soul.

> "The Soul is wont, during some of them, and without knowing how this comes to pass, to see itself so far withdrawn and separated according to the higher and spiritual part, from the sensual and lower portion." (Dark Night of the Soul)

Modern Terminology

In relatively modern times the concepts have been described using these pairs: True Self / false self and Higher self / Lower self**.** Unfortunately Higher self has sometimes incorrectly been associated with spiritualism. Here modern writers use them in the traditional sense:

> “The Lower self must die if the Higher self is to live; meekness and self-renunciation are the way.” (A.W. Tozer)
>
> "The 'higher life' was always tending toward union with Reality; towards the gathering of itself up into One. The 'lower life,'... was always tending to fall downwards." (Practical Mysticism - Underhill)

Chapter 1 - Life and Spirituality

The Purpose of Life

A significant purpose of human life is to rediscover your connection with God, your identity. Not the outward identity that others generally see, but your true inner self. True joy on earth is escaping the prison of what has been termed the false self.

We are meant to work with God in developing our life, identity, goals and aspirations. We actively participate with Him in discovering our true selves, a process which is hindered to the degree, and for as long as we see ourselves through the facade of our ego.

Life is a school in which we're presented with lessons that, if taken with the right attitude, and internalized, will improve our Soul. We are born into duality but must see past that physical illusion to the point where we see God in other people and things, and in ourselves. Our purpose should be, with God's help, to raise our consciousness and spirituality to the point where we know God.

Spirituality

Spirituality is the art of pursuing union with God. It requires transcending identification with form, complete removal of the ego's false identification with the world, and surrendering independent authority.

Spirituality recognizes that:

- Everything and everyone shares a single underlying reality with God.
- There's a transcendent dimension beyond ordinary material existence.
- God can be immanent, reaching down and pervading the world.
- Ultimate reality is mysterious, partially beyond human comprehension.
- Mortification is required to subdue the lower carnal self.
- Prayer and contemplation lead to awareness and direct experience of God.
- Faith is needed to see a reality that can't be proven fully by reason, and that faith is given by God to enable us to approach Him.

Reaching God Inwardly

The physical world and spiritual world are sharply separated. We live in the physical, with only fleeting glimpses of the spiritual. Most of our activity in the phenomenal (physical) world draws us away from the spiritual.

God is approached inwardly. Physical religious practices, are outward, hopefully leading to the inward path. The mind is external because it's the interface with the physical, which is why the mind cannot ultimately bring us to God. God is found at the highest level of the Soul, above the mind.

In older cultures, religious knowledge was performed and embodied in the fabric of society. Elders taught it and communities recited it. Rituals reinforced it, and memory was held collectively by the group. Reliance on the written word weakened spiritual internalization.

The tendency of written word to weaken memory was noticed by Plato.

> "This subject will engender forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it, for they will not make use of memory. Because of their faith in writing, they will be reminded externally by means of unfamiliar marks, and not from within themselves." (Phaedrus)

Society has moved from the spiritual to the physical with evermore reliance on objects and devices. The cloud is now home to memory, and increasingly to thinking. Each step further distances us from the spirituality that ancients lived and felt.

Many people have forgotten, or have not witnessed what it's like to inwardly ponder God while laying under the stars.

Awakening *of* the Soul

In our hyper materialistic world, what causes a person to seek a spiritual path and begin the practice of mortification?

Awakening *of* the Soul is something that happens to you. You didn't ask for it. How could you have asked for it, if you didn't know what it was? God chooses to awaken you.

Many, most unfortunately, never experience it.

More than a religious experience, it's viewing life beyond self, life within a much larger whole. It's the emergence of a deep thirst for the Divine. While it may appear to occur suddenly it likely follows a long period of spiritual restlessness, searching, and stress. Once realized it marks an abrupt change in how you view reality.

> "We might describe it as a sudden, intense, and joyous perception of God immanent in the universe; of the Divine beauty and unutterable power and splendor of that larger life in which the individual is immersed, and of a new life to be lived." (Underhill)

As magnificent as God's outward manifestations can be, it's the hope of a close inward personal connection with Him that stirs your Soul and motivates you towards purification.

Chapter 2 - Ascetic Spirituality - Mortification

The term "mortification" (Latin mortificare, “death”) comes from classical Latin meaning “making dead.” What are we making dead? Undesirable characteristics of the Lower self, and finally the ego's false identification. Mortification is used because historical writers use the term and it's most correct technically.

The sequential process of mortification includes (not necessarily sequentially):

1. Control of physical desires and want for material items.
2. Practicing Non Attachment to things and outcomes with people.
3. Elimination of what have been termed the "Seven Deadly Sins."
4. Correct false identification of ego. Eliminate pride.
5. Surrender the self's will to God's will (often called 'dying to self')

Contemporary synonyms for mortification are self-discipline, self-denial and asceticism, however these don't fully encompass the process as traditionally know.

Mortification is worked on in parallel with prayer. A substantial amount of purification and mortification are needed to support sustained contemplation.

Working on the Lower self and Ego

The most damaging thing to spirituality is the ego of the (misidentified) Lower self, with its associated pride, sin, unbelief, and self-will. Being full of self leaves little room for God.

The Lower self seeks attention by achieving (transitory) beauty and acquiring possessions. "Keeping up with the Joneses" has become, through modern technology, keeping up with hundreds of images of bodies, fashions, makeup, food, cars, vacations, homes and technology.

A person who doesn't know God, and whose life is centered on self will try to find themselves by fulfilling their own desires and ambitions in a struggle with the world in which they try to capture a share of what others have. This emphasizes the difference between themselves and others, both in their own mind, and in the other. They build barriers which is the opposite of exhibiting Christ centered love for, and community with our fellow beings.

The Lower self, despite being the domain of the mind, is often more the domain of emotion. Saturated with, and responding to advertising, the importance of the (lower) self has grown to gargantuan proportions. Inflated egos develop if one is doing well, deflated egos if not, and both damage the Soul.

Society has transformed to allow people to satisfy these vanities through purchase or debt. Incurring debt further threatens the ego and leads to a continuing cycle of purchase and debt. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity!" (Eccl 1:2)

Words dealing with the Lower self far outnumber words associated with the Spiritual self. Even New Age terms such as higher consciousness typically pertain to thought related processes of the Lower self.

Words related to the Lower self today are: individual, self, self reliant, self righteous, self esteem, self aggrandizing, self-improvement, self indulgence, self absorbed, self loathing,

victim, genius, egocentric, self pity, self delusion, myself, self conscious, self deprecation, 'i'dentity, self destructive, himself, and herself.

Through repetition these confirm to the mind the importance of the (lower) self ego, and that importance leads to separation from God.

> "You love the self – it's lit in you a fire
> Of nagging lust, insatiable desire,
> A blaze that burns your vigor, wastes your heart,
> Leaving infirmity in every part –
> Consuming all your strength, till deaf and blind
> You're old, forgetful, rambling in your mind."
> (Sufi - The Conference of Birds)

With awakening comes a clear view of the world, and that leads to deeper introspection.

Impurities within the Lower self are what have been attached to it, or disordered within it.

The Soul must be purified of impurities and attachments that obscure its relationship with God, just as dross floating to the top of molten metal is discarded. In re*fining*, the metal is first melted, with flux added to aid in the separation of dross.

In spiritual matters, work and trials melt the misdirected Lower self, to which God adds His grace as flux. The spiritual dross can then be separated and discarded, leading our Souls to increasingly operate at the level of the higher Spiritual self.

Purification of the Lower self begins with physical appetites. The goal is to reduce impulsivity, have fewer cravings for comforts, and fewer moral failings. To avoid discouragement it's best to work on one issue at a time.

The process of spiritual cleansing can last a long time, even years, as it will, layer by layer, expose flaws hidden over a lifetime. Testing is also part of the process, and failed tests will set one back temporarily as they are repeated.

While improving, avoid pride in austerity or self-righteousness. Avoid using mortification to appear to ones self or to others as being spiritual.

Repentance (Metanoia)

In His transformative injunction Jesus promised:

> "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt 4:17)

Metanoia is the Greek word for repentance, derived from the words meta ("after," "beyond," "change") and nous ("mind"). Traditionally and for the most part it means change of mind, change of heart, or change in one's being or thinking.

An alternate, less used, contemplative interpretation understands metanoia as moving beyond ordinary thinking to a transformed way of viewing reality. Since normal thinking is a function of the Lower self, God asks us to not be limited to ordinary thinking or be identified with it, and to begin functioning at the level of the Spiritual self.

Metanoia's general meaning is deeper than the usual definition of repent, that of turning from a particular sin. It's not a singular act, but an ongoing state through which deeper spiritual problems are exposed, and cleansed. The real work is done internally on problems disclosed through prayer and contemplation.

Repentance requires awareness and humility to see yourself as you are.

> "We will continue to shed layers of conditioning together with our compulsive thought patterns. At unexpected moments of the day, we will suddenly become aware of aspects of our corrupted condition that had previously been hidden from us." (Christ the Eternal Tao - Damascene)

For Orthodox, and mystics in general repentance is not about penance or a ritual act. Genuine remorse results in confession of shortcomings directly to God whereas religious confession is a function of the believers particular tradition. One should avoid obsessive self scrutiny which may lead to paralysis, defeating the growth God wants for us.

Positive actions in the process of repentance include sincere acts of service and charity, prayerful naming of faults, intercessory practices, and the practice of forgiveness.

> "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." (Matt 6:14)

Ego & Humility

When a Soul enters the material world, the world of polarity between spirit and matter, it identifies with thought rather than spirit and the ego is born within the separate identity, the misidentified Lower self. Separation of the Lower self from God was necessary to permit growth but the ego unconsciously knows that it's a false self so it does what it can to protect it's illusory existence.

Think about daily life and how people act. "I've done great things, I'm smarter than most, I'm powerful, I'm pretty, or I'm humble," are examples of the 'I'-ness that affects us. The ego wants to keep it's identity and to feel important.

Man's ego is the source of great trouble in the world. We need to absolutely know ourselves, and who we are not and therefore must be watchful. In spiritual matters having a large ego is fatal. Not only is Ego a barrier to communion with God, but it's also a barrier to learning truth, both spiritually and often temporarily.

Ultimate progression isn't possible until we relinquish the false part of the Lower self. Our ego cannot be conquered by thought or by will of the ego itself. Only to the degree that the Lower self has been purified can it be transcended.

Do we have a large ego because of possessions, titles, education, occupation, or money? Are ego, pride, and lack of humility keeping us from waiting on God?

The goal is to get rid of, to mortify impure aspects of the Lower self and get rid of ego so the Spiritual self is open to God.

> "To think of oneself as nothing, and always to think well and highly of others is the best and most perfect wisdom." - (The Imitation of Christ - Kempis)

Charismatic teachers can, unfortunately, boost your ego. A good teacher will instead lead you to situations where humility is learned.

Progress on the Path, if you're not cautious, will strengthen your ego because of your greater knowledge compared to others.

Appearance is a strange subject often entangled with ego. We shouldn't present ourselves as more than we are. But we also shouldn't present ourselves in a way that makes others

uncomfortable. While it shouldn't be a status symbol, ego booster, or cause for comparison, dressing and presenting well has an elevating effect on ourselves and on society as a whole.

Humility should be prayed for, and situations leading to it patiently suffered. It's an essential component of the Path. Spiritual masters of every age were humble, and knew themselves to be nothing (no self). In other words, they had transcended the Lower self.

A good way to acquire humility is to be sufficiently humiliated.

> "I once saw a yogi prancing about and barking like a dog in the middle of a bazaar. He was not begging. I asked what on earth he was doing that for, and was informed that he was a holy man who was doing this as part of his training [sadhana] for overcoming self-esteem. He could not have chosen a better means in India, where the dog is despised. Everyone took the yogi's antics as a matter of course." (Boy and the Brothers - Puri)

The book "After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path" says a Buddhist will often bow forward with hands in prayer form when meeting someone. They do this to acknowledge that the other human is a noble Soul, having had a lifetime of struggle.

This simple gesture, even if done mentally, comes naturally when we recognize that we're all connected and share the human condition.

Humility is the most valuable virtue, because humility makes room for faith and leads to perfect confidence in God.

Pride

Pride is a slippery slope kind of word. Even in its best form, as a sentiment regarding doing a beneficial thing, it should probably be reframed. Saying "thank you" to a compliment may be the courteous thing to do, but can be troublesome if the ego dwells on thinking "I did" whatever it was. Nevertheless be gracious.

Often pride reflects the ego's attempt to boost itself. A proud person is actually weak as he depends on being better than others for self esteem. Maintaining good works for the wrong reasons is hard to sustain.

An offspring of Ego, Pride can also be dangerous.

> "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." (Prov 16:18)

> "Self-indulgent and self-centered as we are, peril besets us on both sides. Those who love God are saved through the trials and temptations He allows them to undergo; but despite such trials we are threatened with destruction because of our pride." (Philokalia - St Peter of Damaskos)

One possessed of ego and pride will unconsciously do "spiritual" work for his own sake rather than for God. He will do good because he wants to admire his own works. But the motive is hollow and instead of feeling the support of God, any frustration in the work will result in bitterness and impatience.

Pride resulting from feeling superior to others is wrong. The easiest way to not put yourself above others is to not think about yourself at all when thinking of others.

C.S. Lewis claimed that what we consider the primary vices: drunkenness, gluttony, immorality, greed and anger are minor, "mere flea bites in comparison". The central vice, the greatest evil is pride. "Pride leads to every other vice." (Mere Christianity)

Attachments

To the extent that your Lower self is insecure or incomplete your ego will form attachments because attachments bring comfort. Being attached to people isn't bad as long as it stems from pure love without expectations, but expectations of people is a destructive form of attachment.

Having material things isn't intrinsically wrong, but love of them can be. Whenever attachment to an item becomes more important than another human being or God it's a problem, but the real problem is that we've become more attached to living in our Lower self through the things we cling to.

One needn't go on an anti-materialistic crusade though. We've been blessed with created things, which are often a window into God's imminence in the world. Man's creativity extends from God's creativity, and to the extent that created things reflect beautiful values, they should be enjoyed with thanksgiving, without attachment.

Attachment goes from enjoying something, to need, to entitlement, to can't be happy without.

We can be attached to emotions. We dwell on sorrow, experience the rush of a fast car, or gamble for thrill. We can be attached to our thoughts or ideas and to stories we tell ourselves, all of which solidify in our minds as we have sunk cost in them. Confirmation bias hampers rational thought. Are we willing to give up the cherished but wrong ideas we're so attached to?

Attachment to intellectual thoughts and positions is problematic as they are connected to the ego.

> "Some men love knowledge and discernment as the best and most excellent of all things. Behold, then knowledge and discernment come to be loved more than that which is discerned; for the false natural light loveth its knowledge and powers, which are itself, more than what is known." (Theologia Germanica)

Even images and icons, while helpful if used to focus on God, can be detrimental if too connected to the ego.

Pious people can become attached to their religious works and aspirations such as fasting and prayer, various devotions and contemplation itself. These unconscious forms of attachment are harder to detect. Even on the spiritual path it's easy to become attached to readily visible things in a subject object fashion, and that connection amplifies self. Sadly, this substitutes immediate experiences for the grandeur just beyond view.

Emotions are of the Lower self. Even love, if it comes from your 'I', rather than God's love passing through you, is of the Lower self, especially if you tie expectations to it. Extreme negativism, hate and anger break down ones spiritual armor allowing entry of darkness.

Controlling outward expression of negative emotion is insufficient, as it's the inner association with it that damages the Soul. It's common to form attachments to emotions.

Progress and transcendence do not require absence of emotions and passions, as they're a natural part of the Soul. You can experience feelings but shouldn't be attached to them. The Spiritual self can witness them and grow from them. Sorrow and joy can both be catalysts for purification.

Embrace feelings then detach by moving back to being centered at the level of the Spiritual self, the inner ground of prayerful attention and silence. Your Soul will learn to experience emotions without being defined by them, enabling transcendence.

Detach by engaging in physical activity, which, if not ego based, offers the opportunity to take mind off of "me" and "mine." It has the beneficial result of disabling the mind. A quiet hobby or work, especially using your hands, allows space to offer thanks, to pray, and to contemplate.

Thinking too much about yourself is damaging.

Cleansing, and Putting Away Outward Things

When your Soul awakens and desires the fullness of God, it goes through regeneration, shifting focus from the Lower self to the Spiritual self. This process is usually hard because of the dross most of us have.

Mortification describes putting to death inordinate bodily passions, vices, and the old self. It includes weakening the dominance of Lower self appetites, sensual desires, pride, and attachments. Putting away outward things through mortification is a step on the Path, but not the end.

> "The first step is for the Soul to put away outward things and look within so as to know its own real interest." (Christian Perfection - Fenelon)

Things cleansed in mortification are sometimes known as the 7 deadly sins:

> Lust: Any form of unbridled desire for people or money.
> Gluttony: Overindulgence of anything in excess, particularly food.
> Greed: An inordinate desire for more than what one needs.
> Sloth: Avoiding spiritual, mental, or physical responsibilities.
> Wrath: Anger, rage or hatred.
> Envy: Covetousness towards the possessions or qualities of another.
> Pride: Ego driven, pride is the worst of the sins as it can lead to every other vice.

The Soul needs to rid itself of everything not in harmony with God, false beliefs, evil desires, blotchs. This requires knowing ourselves and honestly acknowledging our flawed nature. Until we're honest about ourselves our thoughts about every subject will be distorted and we won't clearly see what we need to work on.

The Lower self is so centered on the material world that it's almost incapable of perceiving the higher realms as it's tuned to the illusions of the senses. In duality we work hard to preserve our fake personal identity.

Most everything in modern life takes us away from God and ultimate reality. Our idols are our cars, homes, clothes, bank accounts, and credit ratings from which the Soul should detach.

> "Vain is the man who puts his trust in men, in created things. Do not be ashamed to serve others for the love of Jesus Christ and to seem poor in this world." (Imitation of Christ - Kempis)

Purification includes caring for the body, as well as subduing the mind and controlling emotions. Spiritual pursuits require energy and clarity, and you can't do that effectively with a sluggish body. Lust for food centers the Soul on the lower sensual level and prevents it from recognizing and rising to it's higher level. Proper sleep helps both the body and mind rejuvenate.

> "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are." (1 Cor 3:16-17)

Purification of the Lower self is the doorway to a spiritual life, but it doesn't end there.

Dying to Self

Once the Lower self has been mostly purified it's necessary for ego to die. Most references to self and "dying to self" in spiritual literature refer to death of the ego, not to the "I" or entire Self.

> "Because all turning to self is so far turning from God, and so much as we have of self-love, so much we have of a hellish, earthly weight, that must be taken off, or there can be no ascension into heaven." (The Spirit of Prayer - William Law)

If elements of "me" or "mine" are present then the ego is still present, and purification is not complete. The Soul must detach from them, as they are part of the world of duality. Focus on God and on the intimate knowledge possible with Him.

We truly own nothing in this world, we are stewards, and share with God the rest of His creation. The key to the following is "preoccupation."

We are preoccupied (*occupied*) with ourselves (self). It's only after we get rid of that pre-occupation and possessiveness of me and mine, and regard nothing as our individual property, that we can view the world as "ours," meaning ours and everyone else's.

The gospels showed Jesus in a variety of settings but hardly ever revealed Him as having a personal self. He, as well as great spiritual masters had only two aims, unitive knowledge of God, and serving others.

In the dark night of His soul Christ totally abandoned self in the garden and upon the cross. He wasn't concerned with Himself, even knowing the agony he would go through. "Not my will but thine be done." Our soul should also seek to abandon everything ego related, in order to return to God.

The ego can never be spiritual so it must be sacrificed.

> "If anyone feels his heart revolted by such entire sacrifice of the ego to Him who has created us, I deplore his blindness. I feel badly to see him the slave of himself, and I pray God to deliver him from himself by teaching him to love without self-interest." (Christian Perfection - Francois Fenelon)

In meditation and prayer, it's hard to escape what can be called monkey mind, that constant mental chatter that creeps in as a distraction. Rather than using the mind to try to quiet the mind a better way is to not entertain thoughts as they come. Just don't pay attention to them.

The same applies to getting rid of the ego. The ego will not allow itself to be disabled by mental force. It's best to just give it no time or energy, as fighting ego only makes it stronger. Love your neighbors, drop attachments to things, and work on purifying the Lower self.

While direct communion with the Father occurs at the level of the Spiritual self, God's influence is felt by the Lower self through the Holy Ghost (Spirit), through God's angels, and through God acting through man. Thus, while we need to work on purifying ourselves, we are always assisted

by God. Common prayers from the Lower self raise our spirituality, while contemplation within the higher Spiritual self connects us with God.

Mortification, or the dying of self does not imply that a person loses individuality or existence. Individuality survives, but instead of being centered in the Lower self, it is grounded in the higher Spiritual self. The Soul still acts independently but sees things from God's perspective rather than the worlds. It finds happiness in being freed from the world.

Implementing the concept of dying to self is simple, requiring humility and dedication to God.

> "But the one true Way of dying to Self is most simple and plain, it wants no Arts or Methods, no Cells, Monasteries, or Pilgrimages, it is equally practicable by every body... It is the Way of Patience, Meekness, Humility, and Resignation to God." (Spirit of Love - William Law)

A person who claims to have transcended self but becomes arrogant, contemptuous, or impossible to live with has only strengthened his ego. The path to holiness is only through truly giving up self.

C.S. Lewis ends his landmark work Mere Christianity with these words:

> "But there must be a real giving up of the self... The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. Your real, new self... will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him... Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead... Look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

Chapter 3 - Positive Spirituality

The material world must be mastered as well as the spiritual. When people become aware of the spiritual there's a tendency to want to live only in it, to escape the hardship of physical life.

But, spirituality is fullness, and mastering personal aspects of life both low and high, *is* the Path. If it were possible to learn everything we needed solely in the spiritual world we wouldn't have needed Earth. The lessons and testing here are of enormous importance.

Live in the world but not of the world, enjoy the world but don't be attached to it.

The Path involves acknowledging our faults and flawed nature, repenting, loving God and people, long suffering, service, and getting rid of self.

It starts with an unwavering desire to know truth and to know and love God. It may take years to progressively unveil the truth and you have to lose your old life to gain the new.

Knowing God and loving God are related. One does not proceed the other, neither can one exist without the other, they have to grow together.

Knowledge of God progresses through a lifetime. When we're children our parents teach us that God exists and that He loves us. We're taught to pray to (an external) God, which is a good first step.

Then as we grow older and our particular religion shapes our view of Him we read scripture and see both a vengeful, angry, jealous God as well as a more caring and fair Son. These contradictory views partially reflect the time and the culture in which scripture was written.

The God you'll eventually discover is not one to be feared, but one who consistently loves and encourages your growth. Mercy and grace come before justice.

Once we see glimmers of truth, and feel the pull of God, it's time to get to work. The spiritual path, like all honest forms of work, produces in proportion to the effort put in. Even a little bit of effort however will give you a start and produce results. Treading the entire path is difficult. It requires total honesty about your faults and a willingness to change. The hardest parts of the Path are traveled alone.

Acquiring knowledge along the way is a solitary quest. It's very easy to be mislead by one teacher or another. You have to ignore the often loud individual and institutional voices pulling you this way or that, and listen to the still small voice in the higher part of your Soul.

Real progress on the Path is through inward work, but outward efforts such as prayer, study, and service are needed as these produce humility and discipline and lead to introspection. Sacrifice is needed. Emphasizing the pursuit of knowledge *of* the Path past a certain point can slow progress of actually progressing *on* the Path.

Don't waste effort trying to find perfection in the world. It will never happen and will lead to discouragement. The world is a temporary place, designed as a teaching place. To fulfill that function, parts of it are designed to disintegrate. Health decline, taxes, and rust are intended and needed. Our task is to show the disintegrating world hope by showing God in our continence and actions.

You'll be presented with uninvited situations in life, given to allow growth.

We encounter what we fear or dislike the most. Anything unfinished on the Path will be revisited and a lesson avoided will only come up again, likely with increased intensity.

Suffering will be required. It shouldn't be sought and those suffering should be comforted, but suffering can dig through problems in the ego.

New Age feel good spirituality falsely leads participants to believe the spiritual path is filled with bliss, joy, wisdom, and enlightenment. On the true Path these may be encountered intermittently, but must be paid for by hard work in purification and detachment from things one holds dear.

God will support you as you progress often with undeserved grace. You'll find joy in increased perception of Him both as a transcendent being, and in His creation. He will reveal his plan as you progress on the Path. Worldly desires will decrease and an indescribable feeling of love for others and God's creation will sweep over you.

The practical side of the Path, detachment from material goods and expectations of people will free you from many of life's burdens. The intellectual framework of the Path provides insight and access into the transcendent aspects of God. The simplicity of the Path will free your time to experience beauty in art, music, and nature.

The mortified Soul is a simple Soul. It's no longer weighed down with the things of the world. Time is in the realm of the Lower self. The Spiritual self isn't concerned about the past, or the future.

By following the Path you can become a saint in the fullest sense, one who has paid the price of the inner journey to God.

> "Souls that have reached the transforming union are, so to speak, nothing in themselves and all in God. For when the Soul is wholly transformed in God, it loses its proper being and becomes, as it were, a pure receptacle and instrument of God’s operations." (Ascent to Mount Carmel - St John of the Cross)

Goals of the Path

1. Eliminate as much as possible traits of the natural man.
2. Subdue ego and all things involved with self.
3. Transcend the personal self bringing it to alignment with the Divine. Be one with God in thought, purpose and action.

Prayer

Prayer is spiritual / metaphysical action, and was practiced prior to the establishment of any religion. Properly understood it is the expressed desire to raise one's Soul toward the Divine.

The Greek ἀναλήμψις (*analēpsis*) describes "taking up" or "ascent," the Soul's ascent or elevation of lower desire into higher love.

The English word sublime means an elevated, lofty, beautiful thought.

In physics and chemistry sublimate describes the process of a substance converting from a solid phase to a gas phase. The best known example is water, which can sublimate directly from ice to water vapor without the intermediate liquid phase. The ice is giving part of itself to the gas.

In human terms, sublimation is devoting and giving a part of yourself to a principle, a person, or an entity. It's taking a piece of yourself and feeding it to something else.

In a negative sense we sublimate by giving part of ourselves to an endless number of distractions in life. Giving in to evil, one little piece at a time, is also a process of sublimation.

Prayer is the expressed desire to sublimate our thoughts to the Divine. Prayer with uplifted hands is symbolic of the desired spiritual sublimation where the Soul is willing to sacrifice the lower physical self to achieve Divine union. It's allowing increasingly more parts of your Self to float up, or sublimate towards the Divine.

Prayer is essential in purifying the heart. When we pray we lay our whole heart and our failures before God, trusting that He will fully understand and forgive. It's an intimate sharing between friends and a time to be alone with He Who loves us.

Pray with a contrite heart, with knowledge of your deeply seated faults, and a desire to improve. Pray to know Gods will. Pray to know what to pray for. God will answer prayers of a timeless spiritual nature, and sometimes those of a temporal nature. One should not pray for things one does not truly need.

Spiritual people may begin vocal prayer without intentionally formulating what they want to discuss because they constantly carry a prayer in their heart, and vocalizing is just an extension. Sometimes though, we jump into a performative prayer with no idea about what we want to pray, saying things that seem good, perhaps things that cover our immediate friends, relatives or food.

If we looked forward to meeting with a head of state, wouldn't we learn as much about the person as we could, and prepare our minds with what we wanted to discuss? Why not with God?

> "When you approach God then, try to think and realize Whom you are about to address and continue to do so while you are addressing Him. If we had a thousand lives, we should never fully understand how this Lord merits." (The Way of Perfection - St Teresa de Avila)

Prayer should happen often while ignoring distractions.

> "He prays too little, who is accustomed only to pray at the times when he bends his knees. But he never prays, who even while on his bended knees is distracted by all kinds of wanderings of heart... For at the time of its prayers the mind cannot help being affected by its

> previous condition, and while it is praying, will be either transported to things heavenly, or dragged down to earthly things by those thoughts in which it had been lingering before prayer." (The Conferences Of John Cassian)
>
> "For whatever our mind has been thinking of before the hour of prayer, is sure to occur to us while we are praying through the activity of the memory. Wherefore what we want to find ourselves like while we are praying, that we ought to prepare ourselves to be before the time for prayer. For the mind in prayer is formed by its previous condition, and when we are applying ourselves to prayer the images of the same actions and words and thoughts will dance before our eyes." (The Conferences Of John Cassian)
>
> "When you pray, guard your memory strongly so that it does not present you with its own passions... for by nature the mind is too easily pillaged by the memory at the time of prayer." (Early Church Fathers - Evagrius Ponticus)

God hears the humble and loving, and responds by opening spiritual and physical opportunities.

As a result of our prayer God helps us with repentance and cleansing of the Lower self. Continued prayer then helps to illuminate our mind and spirit.

If possible, considering health, age and experience, move from vocal prayer to mental prayer.

> "There is no thing that can compare to the grace of mental prayer! Angels do not have sensible voices, but mentally they offer up constant praise to God... When you enter your closet and shut the door, i.e. when your mind no longer wanders to and fro, but enters the inner recesses of your heart... then you are like the holy angels." (St. Gregory Palamas)
>
> "The use of voluntary vocal prayer in order to contemplation (sic) may, in the beginning of a spiritual course, be proper... yet it must always give place to internal prayer when they find themselves disposed for it." (Holy Wisdom or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation - Baker)

And this will lead to contemplation.

Worries, worldly thoughts, and evil images may plague your prayer. They're unsettling because they come to mind when you're doing your best to do what's right, but they can also be viewed as lessons in humility, helplessness and dependence on the grace of God.

Distractions fall into two categories. The first are lewd imaginations or memories. Concentrating on these with the mind only make them worse, though humor is very helpful as it has a way of breaking through thought patterns.

The more damaging distractions are those related to real life concerns, health, or work. Pressure in these areas can be unrelenting and meditation can wind up being a planning session. The solution to this is to do whatever's possible to reduce these external worries when not in prayer.

God will recognize your desire to know and love him through your sincere effort.

Contemplation

In a spiritual context "contemplation" is *much* more significant than simply thinking deeply. It is awakening, awareness, and realization that God lives in us and certainty that He's intervening in our daily life.

Contemplation in spirituality may be divided into 3 levels:

Ordinary contemplative practice is available to everyone and includes quiet prayer, meditation, silence, and attentive awareness. This can be sought without withdrawing from normal life and leads to the indwelling people hopefully experience.

Contemplation as a life orientation is possible for most who desire it. It requires more dedicated renunciation, less ego, less attachment and openness to, and awareness of a greater presence of God. It's following the spiritual Path in relation to work, relationships, suffering and responsibilities.

Profound contemplation or unitive knowledge of God. Infused contemplation is something that God calls one to. Even with preparatory effort there is no guarantee that God will grant this. If it comes it will be experienced through grace after you prepare the best you can.

Contemplation is not something we obtain solely by our own effort. It is a transcendent gift from God who approaches us at His choosing if we are ready. Thomas Merton (New Seeds of Contemplation) explains that the contemplative unitive experience isn't something you can purchase with spiritual "coin" or "heroic mortifications." Contemplation is a pure gift, and is best sought in gradual steps as that lays a proper groundwork.

Contemplation is beyond prayer and the peace that may accompany prayer. Prayer and meditation can appropriately be used preceding contemplation. You'll know when to lay aside meditation on thought and forms and make the transition to contemplation when, aside from distractions, you no longer find pleasure in meditation. Details of this can be found in Ascent to Mount Carmel; search for "He can no longer meditate."

Contemplation cannot be taught. It's a function of the Spiritual self, beyond thinking and normal feeling. God is not a concept that be reached through thought. God must be reached through intuition and contemplation.

Contemplation is about being *with* God rather than talking *to*, or asking things of God.

> "Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being... above all, awareness of the reality of that Source." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Thomas Merton)

The highest purpose of life is to obtain personal knowledge of God.

> "In all the historic formulations of the Perennial Philosophy it is axiomatic that the end of human life is contemplation, or the direct and intuitive awareness of God." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

We are called to contemplation. St. John of the Cross explains God's desire as follows:

> "How this can be so cannot be explained in any other way than by showing how the Son of God has raised us to so high a state, and merited for us the 'power to be made the sons of God.' (John 1:12) He prayed to the Father, saying: 'Father, I will that where I am they also whom You have given Me may be with Me, that they may see My glory which You have

> given Me.' (John 17:24) That is, 'that they may do by participation in Us what I do naturally, namely, breathe the Holy Spirit.'" (A Spiritual Canticle - St John of the Cross)

Yet we are not to become as God (as proponents of Oneness would suggest):

> "We are not to suppose from this that our Lord prayed that the saints might become one in essence and nature, as the Father and the Son are; but that they might become one in the union of love as the Father and the Son are one in the oneness of love." (A Spiritual Canticle)

Contemplation, and it's fruit - unitive knowledge, cannot be taught, explained, or be subjected to scientific analysis.

Seeking contemplation too early or too earnestly can be a hindrance if it results from delusion and self. Too strong a desire for contemplation, if unreasonable or disproportionate, when it fails to materialize, will lead to disappointment and possibly loss of faith, as we often perceive our faith, based on sentiment or emotion, to be stronger than it is.

> "I have seen many men enter monasteries with an earnest, devouring hunger for God, for contemplative experience. And I have seen them leave the monastery beaten and frustrated by the very intensity of their unfulfilled desires." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Merton)

Contemplation is a higher experience of the Soul, beyond verbal and mental prayer. It's the sustained, receptive state of focused attention in which your mind quiets its restlessness and opens to direct perception, insight, and knowledge. Although you should quash wandering thoughts, the contemplative state is not one of mental drifting or thoughtlessness, rather it's the state of *being* in the presence of God. The highest part of the soul, the Spiritual self is the ground upon which we meet God.

> "Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground." (Acts 7:33)

Shoes are soiled by supporting the soul in the outside world of the Lower self, so loose and remove them.

The highest levels of contemplation are beyond ordinary prayer.

> "The highest prayer is the most passive. Inevitably; for the less there is of self [lower], the more there is of God." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

Contemplation has no connection with prophecy.

Many mystic contemplatives have had ecstatic experiences, but there are false social forms that mimic it. These include the enthusiasm associated with social movements of nation, party, or class, as well as concerts, music, and sports that stir up emotions of the external self. They are false because they work one up emotionally, while deadening awareness of God and of the true inner self. This emotional component can unfortunately be found in some contemporary religious services.

Contemplation is not prolonged isolation as community is important to develop traits of sacrifice and service.

Contemplation should not be the whole of one's existence although your existence will be enhanced by it.

> "[In contemplation] time and eternity, the phenomenal and the Real, are essentially one... There is a general enhancement and intensification of consciousness, and at the same time an extension and transfiguration." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

Because Contemplation's end result is union with God contemplation necessarily includes relationships with other people. To be a contemplative requires understanding their weaknesses and strengths. Close connection with others helps to knock off parts of one's ego that can't be reached any other way. Purification is helped through the patience and the humility learned in loving people and dealing with their sometimes unreasonable demands. Christ can't live in you if you don't find Him in others.

> "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." (Gal 6:2)

Pursuit of the spiritual Path will eventually, while in contemplation, lead to a state of intuition, which is different than simply emptying the mind and letting it drift while in prayer.

> "Some people begin to think it their duty to cultivate a kind of pious imbecility. There is a notion in the air that when man turns to God he ought to leave his brains behind him... We cannot hope to imitate the crystalline simplicity of the saints; a simplicity which is the result, not of any deliberate neglect of reason, but of clearest vision, of intensest trust, of most ardent love." (The Essentials of Mysticism - Underhill)

Augustine Baker in his work "Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation" divided spiritual life into three parts:

> The Purgative way, in which all sinful defects are purged out of the Soul.
> The Illuminative way, by which divine virtues and graces are introduced.
> The Unitive way, where a Soul attains a union with God through contemplation.

Finally, regarding sharing knowledge of contemplation with others:

> "The mere fact that you have discovered something of contemplation does not yet mean that you are supposed to pass it on to somebody else." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Merton)

Watchfulness

Prayer, repentance and watchfulness are interlinked. Watchfulness is continued attention to heart and mind. Lifelong watchfulness prevents relapse into ego, maintains teachability, and encourages discernment in experience and decisions.

In order to be watchful you need to know yourself, especially your vulnerabilities, by inward searching prayer.

Maintaining a state of repentance requires vigilance, attention and watchfulness. The Greek word γνώση (gnṓsē) means watchfulness, but also vigilance.

> "Vigilance first goes on ahead like a scout and engages sin in combat. Prayer then follows afterwards, and instantly destroys and exterminates all the evil thoughts... By means of vigilance we keep prayer pure." (Philokalia Glossary)

Jesus put a high priority on being watchful:

> "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matt 26:41)

> "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." (Matt 24:42)

Peter and Paul emphasized watchfulness:

> "Be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer." (1 Pet 4:7)

> "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith" (1 Cor 16:13)

Awareness is important. Society is more sensually than spiritually oriented. What we're presented with on a daily basis requires watchfulness to hold it off.

> "It is well to have misgivings about oneself and not to allow self-confidence to lead one into occasions which habitually involve offenses against God. This is most necessary until one becomes quite perfect in virtue; and there are not many who are so perfect as to be able to relax when occasions present themselves which tempt their own peculiar disposition." (The Life of St. Teresa of Avila)

Regarding attacks by the adversary:

> "Man cannot prevent provocations from assailing him; what does lie in his power, however, is to maintain constant watchfulness and so to reject each provocation as soon as it emerges into his consciousness." (Philokalia Glossary)

In the forth volume of the Philokalia, St. Symeon states that watchfulness protects prayer and helps you acquire other virtues.

> "Without such watchfulness you cannot become poor in spirit, or grieve, or hunger and thirst after righteousness, or be truly merciful, or pure in heart, or a peacemaker, or be persecuted for the sake of justice. To speak generally, it is impossible to acquire all the other virtues except through watchfulness. For this reason you must pursue it more diligently than anything else." (Philokalia)

Silence

Silencing the mind is important.

> “The Lord is in His Holy Temple, let all the earth keep silence before him” (Hab 2: 20).

> "Inward silence is absolutely indispensable, because the Word is essential and eternal, and necessarily requires dispositions in the Soul in some degree correspondent to His nature, as a capacity for the reception of Himself... [Christ] when He would speak within us, requires the most silent attention to His all-quickening and efficacious voice." (Short and Easy Method of Prayer - Guyon)

It's important to seek a suitable time to relax and meditate on God's blessings. Everyone has enough time to do this, if unnecessary activity, idle talk, and technology are put aside. Though community is essential for development, silence is too.

> Regarding boisterous associates: "Very many great saints avoided the company of men wherever possible and chose to serve God in retirement. 'As often as I have been among men,' said one writer, 'I have returned less a man.'" (Imitation of Christ - Kempis)

Your soul in silence and meekness seeks the divine light.

> "The nearer it approaches this idle tranquility the more abundantly will the spirit of divine wisdom be infused into its Soul. This wisdom is loving, tranquil, solitary, peaceful, mild, and an inebriator of the spirit, by which the Soul feels tenderly and gently wounded and carried away, without knowing by whom or from where or how... This wisdom is communicated without the Soul's own activity." (The Collected Works of St John of the Cross)

For some though, far enough on the Path, external settings are less important.

> "To have a restful or peaceful life in God is good; to bear a life of pain in patience is better; but to have peace in the midst of pain is the best of all... He knows God rightly who knows Him everywhere." (Eckhart's Sermons)

Grace

Grace is an undeserved gift given by God. It's not a reward for obedience or moral living. It originates from Divine love and helps engender a better relationship with God. Grace embodies God's readiness to forgive and transform despite our shortcomings. It is a gift that radically transforms you as the receiver.

No one escapes life's difficulties. We all have periods of hardship, some worse than others but we also have heavenly helpers who are personally interested in each of us.

In a broad sense, everything in the world is here because of God's grace. Specific examples are the grandeur of nature, our very existence, unexplained healing from illness, and the gifts of faith and ability to love.

Grace is experienced during enlightenment where it deepens insight and transforms the heart. It then helps throughout the difficult process of repentance by affording strength to carry through. Indwelling of the Holy Spirit is given through grace.

God's grace is an essential part of contemplation. We can't make the final approach to God simply through our own efforts. We need to do the preparatory work through mortification and prayer, but final access is granted only by the grace of God.

The grace of God is bright as perceived through the Spirit.

> "The grace of God in a Soul is like a candle in a lantern or in a glass vessel; for it enlightens, and brightens, and shines through." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

Faith

Foundational faith is necessary for spiritual growth. One must have faith that God exists, and is approachable, faith that He loves us, and that He sustains our life.

> "When the Divine Light penetrates the Soul, it is united with God as light with light. This is the light of faith. Faith bears the Soul to heights unreachable by her natural senses and faculties." (Eckharts Sermons)

Religious formulas (dogma's and ritual) are like glass through which you see reality, they must be clean and free from distortion, presenting God truthfully. They are not the end, but only lead to where God can reach you. If you stop at the point of dogma, institutions, and personalities you will not have the faith necessary for contemplation and union. The closer you get to God the less your faith will consist of images and concepts.

Faith isn't something that we can generate solely within ourselves. Though we should pray for faith, it's always a gift bestowed through God's grace.

> "When a man gives his assent to the things of faith, he is raised above his own nature, and this is possible only through a supernatural principle which moves him from within. This principle is God. The assent of faith, which is the principal act of faith, is therefore due to God, who moves us *inwardly* through grace." (Nature and Grace - Thomas Aquinas)

Faith is not a feeling, or an emotion and not solely a product of the mind. Faith begins as an intellectual climb towards God and then becomes the condition of having been "persuaded" by God.

Charles Price in his book "The Real Faith" said: "You cannot have faith *in* God, unless you have the faith *of* God... Grace and faith are so closely related that you cannot separate them. The wonder of it lies in the fact that faith is many times *imparted* when we feel the least deserving.

Doubts will come and go, especially if faith stems entirely from intellect. Testing can come at any time, but the most severe tests accompany our having doubt, and doubt can last for a long time. Similar to our being on earth, and not constantly in God's presence, His temporary withdrawal enables us to honestly take the tests of mortality, but He has not forgotten us.

Sacrifice

Sacred is the root word of sacrifice. Sacrifice is to offer up to God, to make sacred. You must be willing to give everything up, and will in fact have to give up the illusory part of your Lower self as you transcend towards the higher, still individual, but not ego centered higher Self. Keep what you actually need and give up the rest. Give up everything that isn't God in order to make room for God.

Sacrifice is offered throughout the spiritual path. It's needed during mortification for giving up attachments, comforts, and ego driven desires, as well as in fasting, living simply, and foregoing status. It disciplines the will and weakens habitual passions.

Sacrifice then becomes central while serving others through offering time, comfort, and perhaps material goods. When you arrive at this point it's less about restricting the Lower self, but about being an embodiment of the Spiritual self's unconditional love.

Finally, the ultimate sacrifice is giving up the ego entirely to make room for God and do His will.

Charity

Charity is selfless love, and compassionate giving towards others. It's God's love flowing through you to the recipient. It is both intention and action.

> "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am

> nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up." (1 Cor. 13:2-4)

Charity is love that doesn't depend on the response of the recipient, acknowledgment or reciprocation, as these accompany self love instead of charity. Selfless charity brings us closer to others and to God.

> "Charity is a bond of love, in which we are drawn up to God, and through which we renounce ourselves, and whereby we are united with God and God is united with us. But natural love turns back towards itself, and towards its own profit, and ever abides alone... The good man always seeks, and means, and desires, with an aspiring heart, to glorify God; but in natural love a man has always himself and his own profit in mind." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

Charity appears as simple, regular acts of kindness and generosity without expecting return. It's a commitment to others' needs motivated by love rather than duty.

Service

Service alleviates suffering in others and helps build community.

The ego, being insecure, desires recognition for serving others, or serves on a transactional basis with hopes of return. The Spiritual self serves others without any expectation whatsoever.

Service increases our love for others, and the recipient feels the unselfish love offered. Resentful service damages the Soul.

> "It is the Spirit that maketh the work perfect, and acceptable in the sight of God. All that a man undertaketh and doeth in faith, he doth in the Spirit of God, which Spirit of God doth cooperate in the work, and then it is acceptable to God. " (Way to Christ - Jacob Boehme)

We meet Christ in the people we serve.

> "In everyone who is poor, oppressed, or sick, it is Christ who encounters us, asking - through this abasement - for our help. In the outstretched hand of the poor is the outstretched hand of Christ; in the faintness of his voice we hear the faint voice of Christ." The Experience of God - Staniloae)

Inviting the Spirit

The presence of the Holy Spirit within us increases as we purify the Lower self.

> "For according to the manner and way in which the Spirit of God urges, and drives, and draws, and streams into us, and stirs us; in this way we must go out and progress in our inward practices, if we are to become perfect. But if we withstand the Spirit of God by a life that does not accord with it, we lose that inward urge, and then the virtues will depart from us." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

It's of paramount importance to actually invite the Spirit, not only for ourselves but so that we may help others. If we've not received it we shouldn't pretend.

> "Whenever those who possess in themselves the divine riches of the Spirit take part in spiritual discussion, they draw as it were on their inner treasure house and share their wealth with their hearers. Those, however, who do not have stored in the sanctuary of their heart the treasure from which springs forth the bounty of divine thoughts, mysteries and inspired words, but who cull what they say from the Scriptures, speak merely from the tip of the tongue... For this reason we must first ask God that these true riches may dwell within us, and then we can readily benefit others and speak to them of spiritual matters and divine mysteries." (Philokalia Vol 3)

So, ponder about, seek, and formally ask for the presence of the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit brings a deepening feeling of the presence of God, and will permeate your inner life.

His presence allows grace to rework you, deepen trust, and redirect priorities.

Discernment, however, is required to prevent misattributing ordinary feelings to spiritual guidance. In fact, feelings in general should be suspect as they center in the Lower self. Music and other things that stimulate emotion can easily be mistaken for the Spirit.

You are near to God when the Spirit's indwelling becomes prominent in your ordinary life.

Chapter 5 - Practical Spirituality

Joy and Fun

Life needs balance and should be enjoyed when the joy comes through the higher Spiritual self.

Joy is deeper than fun. Joy can stem from union with God and love of others. Fun can be a healthy enjoyment of life, or can distract from spiritual transformation.

The factor that differentiates appropriate from inappropriate is the spirit embodied and expressed in the activity and where in the soul it centers.

Shared laughter and play encourages people to express affection and gratitude for each other. Taking delight in another's happiness is good for both people.

On the other hand, making fun of people, mocking, humiliating, and cruelty bring out the worst aspects of the baser self.

Constantly needing entertainment, excitement, or diversions to avoid silence, solitude and awareness indicates an imbalance.

Jesus participated at the wedding at Cana, shared meals with others and was even criticized for eating and drinking with others. His conduct shows that spiritual life includes human enjoyment. He undoubtedly viewed these interactions with love for those around Him. "Rejoice with them that do rejoice." (Romans 12:15)

In short, enjoyment rooted in the Lower self is needing excitement to feel alive, making others objects of entertainment, seeking pleasure to escape, and becoming attached to experiences.

Spiritually compatible enjoyment includes appreciating ordinary pleasures, sharing laughter without diminishing others, enjoying things without dependence, and recognizing with gratitude that good things come to buoy us up.

Gratitude

Life is hard for many, but regardless of our situation there's always some little thing we can express appreciation for. God appreciates our sentiment.

> "Every inhalation of the breath prolongs life and every expiration of it gladdens our nature; wherefore every breath confers two benefits and for every benefit gratitude is due." (Rose Garden - Saadi Shirazi)

> "Only he who gives thanks for little things receives the big things. We prevent God from giving us the great spiritual gifts He has in store for us, because we do not give thanks for daily gifts... We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts. How can God entrust great things to one who will not thankfully receive from Him the little things?" (Life Together - Bonhoeffer)

Prayer, supplication, and thanks bring us closer to God and help us develop gratitude.

> "Inward devotion often brings forth gratitude; for none can thank and praise God so well as the inward and devout man. And it is just that we should thank and praise God, because He has created us as reasonable creatures, and has ordained and destined heaven and earth and the angels to our service." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

Relationships

You can never find completion in another person. In fact you can't find completion in anything outside of yourself, not even an external God. Completion can only be found in God within.

Relationships help us to see ourselves clearly and are designed to encourage and test the spiritual growth of both people, bringing out good and bad qualities. A relationship with a perfect match wouldn't produce much spiritual growth, whereas a moderate amount of difference is helpful. It helps if both parties are self aware and acknowledge their weaknesses.

Unless there's true abuse, don't end a relationship simply because it's hard as it presents an opportunity for learning. Through pure love you may point out weaknesses in others from an unattached standpoint, but not out of anger, fear or selfish reasons. In marriage assisting your partner to reach his or her highest desired spirituality is a noble goal.

You become who you associate with and this is especially true in spiritual matters.

> "It is of the utmost importance for the beginner to associate with those who lead a spiritual life, and not only with those in the same mansion as herself, but with others who have traveled farther into the castle, who will aid her greatly and draw her to join them." (The Interior Castle or the Mansions - St. Teresa de Avila)

Solitude and Aloneness

Solitude, aloneness, and loneliness are different. Solitude can mean physical isolation, or when internal can be termed aloneness. A person can be experience internal solitude either among people or in isolation.

Physical solitude is needed in some circumstances. but it's important to consider why you desire it. Will it help you eventually reach out and be united with others in your community, or will it divide you from other men and God?

> "If you go into the desert merely to get away from people you dislike, you will find neither peace nor solitude; you will only isolate yourself with a tribe of devils." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Merton)

Modern society, noise, and crowds makes it difficult to achieve peace in prayer. Crowds tend to dehumanize individuals to where compassion for others is stifled and acts of kindness become embarrassing.

Immersion in society makes room for a false solitude. Instead of going to the top of a mountain or being separated by an expanse of desert, the crowd provides a place to hide but sense of community is stripped away in a crowd, and community is essential for spiritual development.

> "[To] live in the midst of others, sharing nothing with them but the common noise and the general distraction, isolates a man in the worst way, separates him from reality in a way that is almost painless." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Merton)

We should be compassionate for men who have forgotten the concept of solitude and for those who cannot experience it.

Interior solitude or aloneness can be achieved while among people but temporary isolation from people may be necessary. The proverbial closet may suffice but you may find greater peace and refuge in a religious edifice, because in a very real sense it's absorbed the spirit of the many spiritual people who've proceeded you. Jesus sought solitude in the wilderness.

You may feel that the world you now see is unreal, that you don't belong. People run as a herd and tend to reject anyone out of the norm, and as you pursue a spiritual path you'll increasingly be out of the norm.

You'll feel inwardly alone, especially when being tested, as tests are generally an individual matter.

The aloneness the Lower self experiences often coincides with increasing companionship with God. However until this link is established loneliness may ensue.

As the Path narrows towards the top aloneness will become more pronounced. Your changes will be noticeable to other people. They will recognize perhaps subconsciously that they aren't doing what's necessary. They may think you're aloof or misguided. Religious friends may feel insecure around you.

Show unconditional love to them, and be confident that you're doing what your Soul needs. Let God's unconditional love shine through you.

We need to learn to stand alone in facing life's tests. The end of the Path, the most difficult part where you purposely lose self, is actually an initiation, and must be done alone. Such were the final hours of Jesus. He had gone the whole Path but at the very end said "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (John 3:16)

Abandonment may be encountered before enlightenment is found.

> "Inasmuch as God here purges the Soul according to the substance of its sense and spirit, and according to the interior and exterior faculties, the Soul must needs be in all its parts reduced to a state of emptiness, poverty and abandonment, and must be left dry and empty and in darkness." (Dark Night of the Soul - St. John of the Cross)

Community provides essential support through this journey.

Suffering

Do individuals suffer for society's sins? It seems the answer is yes. We're not as independent as we think we are. We're part of humanity and suffer as individuals for errors made by the whole and by its leaders.

Personal suffering such as childhood disease, mental illness, loss of a loved one, and chronic pain can be intense, physically, mentally and emotionally, and may come instantly or may occur over several years. Personal suffering is often very unfair.

The sufferer may receive compassion from others, or may have to bear the pain alone. In either case, the burden is best carried by detaching from the situation as much as possible by avoiding excessive identification or reaction. The problem is real and shouldn't be ignored. Emotions should be felt, but then viewed from a larger perspective. To the extent you can, give the problem to God (and don't come back to retrieve it).

> "If man is in himself emptied of all things, whatsoever befalls him without his co-operation, is a gift of God, and is the best thing for man, whatever it be, be it grateful or painful, sour or sweet. For when a man turneth himself away from all things and holds on to God, God must needs go to meet him." (Following of Christ - John Tauler)

Jesus said "Let your heart not be troubled." Your Spiritual self, the God-oriented part of your Soul, is beyond reach of the world and cannot be ultimately damaged by what happens in the material world. There's a difference between damage and suffering. Jesus wept and suffered, but not for himself. He wasn't damaged, but suffered because of His love for others.

What counts the most is how we deal with the brutal realities of life.

> "The more the victor has to struggle, the more he is honored, and from this he derives great joy." (Philokalia - St Peter of Damaskos)

We should do whatever is in our power to help others through compassion and service. We should help the unfortunate who suffer, as they are in a sense part of us, and we part of them. Suffering can help develop compassion, strip away attachment to worldly comforts, and refine the heart.

> "Behold, I have refined thee, I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction.' (Isa 48:10)

The spiritual path does not promise to eliminate the things that happen to us, but to the extent that we can detach, it can soften the effects.

It's important not to judge others' response to suffering. We each have different pain thresholds and life stories. Excruciating pain of any sort can be debilitating and can pull one down mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Judge not, for circumstances may someday give you a deeper understanding.

Our mind can also contribute to our suffering. We suffer when self expectations aren't met. We suffer when others let us down. We suffer, after suffering at the hands of others, for as long as we don't forgive. We suffer thinking about missed opportunities, and suffer worrying about future problems.

As horrible as physical or externally induced suffering can be, it's often self-induced ego-related suffering that hurts the most, and may ultimately be more damaging to the Soul. Following the spiritual path helps with this.

The best outcome for any kind of suffering is to let it transform you to see things more from a timeless God-centered reality.

Cruelty in the World

Cruelty and violence are extreme negative manifestations of the of the separate self. The cruel person makes his own desires and power more important than others. His cruelty is a disorder of self. The cruel person sees others as objects which can be exploited or humiliated, whose pain provides satisfaction.

Why he does this depends on his history - evil influences, alcohol, possible abuse, or destructive choices. Our own humility reminds us that we don't possess the knowledge or wisdom required to judge another's spirit.

Jesus encountered evil, yet said:

> "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you." (Matt 5:44)

But, what does love mean in this context? It doesn't mean offering affection, approving the persons actions, or placing trust in him. It means honestly wanting the best for him.

See evil clearly and, without emotion, confront it. Don't be passive in the face of cruelty. You may love the person while still refusing to associate with him, while opposing his actions, and by preventing him from harming others. Once the evil has been addressed, forgiveness and your spiritual work can continue.

It's extremely important not to allow the actions of another to control the condition of your inner self. You can express anger and move past it in time, but you can't rise above anger if you cling to the wrongs you have suffered, as this is just a destructive form of attachment. Looking past yourself and serving others will help.

> "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21)

Seek justice for wrong but do not seek revenge. Ultimately, leave judgment to God

Judging and Forgiving Others

Beware of judging other's sinfulness.

> "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." (Matt 7:1-2)

If done without emotion or energy, and simply for planning purposes judgment is reasonable. If judgment involves emotion, ego, power, or elevating oneself over the other it amounts to assuming a power reserved to God.

Sometimes we judge another person, group, or even religion because we secretly wish to see failure in them. We look for their failure because it means that we succeeded when they couldn't. We will proudly go to heaven as the other will go to hell.

Fundamentally it's hazardous to criticize anything or anyone created by God, directly or indirectly.

> "There is no greater curse than discontent." (Lao Tzu)

Emphasis of the concept of forgiveness is another gift given to us by Christ. In pre-Christian times forgiveness wasn't necessarily considered a virtue. Older societies had practices and virtues overlapping with forgiveness, but the interpersonal moral idea of unilateral, grace-centered forgiveness found emphasis in Christ.

> "Pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;" **(**Matt 5:44)

Having a forgiving heart precedes obtaining forgiveness.

> "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." **(**Matt 6:12)

Sin

From the beginning man began to regard his own self as higher than God. This is the essence of sin, putting one's own thoughts, desires, and choices above those of God. Carnal man perceives this as normal, if not healthy.

Sin is setting our will against God, dethroning Him and making ourselves king in our own minds following Lucifer's lead:

> "For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High." (Isa 14:13-14)

Sin is "I know what You want, I don't care, I want what I want." Sin is stronger than prayer because it is action based, it's a message we send to God showing how we feel about Him or that we don't care about Him.

Sin at a fundamental level is knowingly going against the natural Divine order as it pertains to humans. Since actions can easily be rationalized religions have moral codes. Within Christianity the moral code is summarized in the Ten Commandments as well as admonitions to practice forgiveness, humility, and charity.

Sin can be a corrupt variation of good. Examples are greedy action to acquire goods to give to another, gluttony to be part of the others overindulgence, drinking to be part of the party, lust to please another, wrath so the gang feels support, and pride to be part of the team.

In traditional Christianity much of the power that churches hold comes from their perceived ability to identify and in someway cure or facilitate forgiveness of sin. Sin is cast as a destroyer of Souls, which if not properly handled may result in eternal damnation.

Sin has a different meaning in truly Eastern traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, and Zen treating it not as a legalistic offense against deity but a mental distortion or energetic blockage that keeps the seeker separated from God. In Taoism, sin is going against the natural flow, creating disharmony rather than moral guilt.

Significantly, in non religious spirituality, the subject of sin is rarely touched upon. Sin is a manifestation of a deeper spiritual problem, and the problem is what needs to be addressed, not suppressing its expression as sin.

Christian Mystics frame sin as a spiritual condition, a disruption in the Soul's communion with God rather than a break of moral code. Improving man's relationship with God is emphasized rather than guilt and institutional penalties. Sin is a wound to the Soul, particularly the Lower

self. It separates the Soul from the light of God. It's forgetting our true Self as an image of God, and misidentifying with the temporal Lower self of the senses.

Just like wood that can split due to an internal weakness, humans often have a particular weakness they may not know about or may try to hide from. Uncovering those weaknesses is the work of watchfulness and prayer.

God will help when we're ready.

> "To turn from sin by one's own power and come to God is still much more impossible. Therefore, whosoever is to turn from sin and come to God in His heavenly kingdom, must be drawn by the heavenly Father with the might of His divine power. The Father also draws the Son who comes to help us with His grace, by stimulating our free will to turn away from, and hate sin." (Meister Eckharts's Sermons)

After a lengthy discussion on the problems with immorality C.S. Lewis concludes with this interesting comment:

> "If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual... bossing... patronising... back-biting... power... hatred... [The self-righteous] who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute." (Mere Christianity - C.S. Lewis)

God's Forgiveness of Sin

Christian mystics base God's forgiveness of sin on Christ's atonement but don't believe he paid for our sins in a legalistic sense. His sacrifice opened the door enabling humans to spiritually follow and become like Him.

> "For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example [leaving you a copy*], that ye should follow his steps." (1 Pet 2:21) * More literal Concordant Version

We receive ongoing sanctification through Christ. His atonement is a shelter for us as we progress past our sins, helped by the love and grace of God.

> "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (a propitiatory *shelter* concerned with our sins*)." (1 John 4:9-10) * More literal Concordant Version

Inward healing, transformation, and conformity to Christ are the means to obtain forgiveness. Forgiveness is tied to ongoing inner purification of the Lower self. God loves us, and draws us towards Him while forgiving us.

Mystics describe progressive healing of the mind and passions as the person becomes less attached to sin. They describe forgiveness as being part of Christ's saving work. The Soul is united to Christ so His life and righteousness become part of the believer.

Obedience

Organizations require some degree of hierarchy and authority in temporal matters. Organizational rules of conduct should be followed, but spiritual truth ultimately comes from within, and to that, obedience is always owed.

Obedience to a church leader depends on the commitments you've made, especially with regards to faith sacraments. A Catholic for instance who has received the sacramental disposition of penance by a priest following reconciliation, should follow his direction as it is perceived to be directly from God. Most faiths however believe there are no intermediaries other than Christ, only to whom obedience is required.

Obedience to anything contrary to God's law is wrong.

> "It appears clearly that those who command things evil are not to be obeyed, especially when in yielding to wrong commands, in which you appear to obey man, you show yourself plainly disobedient to God, who has forbidden everything that is evil. For it is altogether unreasonable to profess yourself obedient when you know that you are violating obedience due to the superior on account of the inferior, that is, to the Divine on account of the human." (Life and Works of Saint Bernard)

Obedience without humility is folly.

> "From this humility there springs obedience, for none can be inwardly obedient save the humble man. Obedience means an unassuming, submissive, and pliable humor, and a will in readiness for all that is good." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

Spiritual Training, Learning from Life

Embrace what life throws at you. Learn from all of life's experiences. Go with the flow of life, as it carries you to people and places where you'll find opportunities for growth.

Spiritual progress will stop if successes on the Path cause arrogance and refusal to learn from practical experience.

Studying about something is nowhere near being something.

Taking shortcuts on the spiritual Path won't work, as God sees through them. The price for entering His kingdom is dedication and hard internal work.

Don't use another's faults as an excuse for not working on your own. Imperfect people may become our source for growth because they are uniquely positioned to play a part in a lesson we need to learn.

No one can do the work for you.

Miracles

Normal experience is in the worldly domain of the Lower self. God's grace occasionally reaches down into this realm through miracles, breaking the normal order. Miracles are lower level manifestations that can however awaken the Spiritual self. They reveal Divine love and mercy and open the Soul to a personal encounter with God.

Miracles have occurred throughout history to show non believers the existence and power of God as well as to bolster believers. Across traditions they inspire devotion, and provide tangible evidence of the transcendent.

Scriptural instances include Jesus turning water into wine, feeding the 5,000, walking on water, healing the blind, and raising Lazarus from the dead. From Moses onward and especially through New Testament times, miracles demonstrated who was sent from God.

In the Catholic Church, miracles are taken as signs that God approves the holiness of a deceased candidate for sainthood. The Church requires verified miracles to confirm that the person can intercede for the living.

The importance of miracles in proving God's interest in humanity can't be overstated, but on a personal level they are of little importance as they occur in the Lower self physical domain and are not in themselves central to the Soul's growth.

Enjoy and appreciate them when they happen, but it's best not to overemphasize them.

Angels

God has helpers, Divine beings that watch over us.

> “For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.” (Psalm 91:11–12)
>
> "In heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.” (Matt 18:10)
>
> “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” (Heb 1:14)

St. Teresa described one angel as:

> "He was not large, but small of stature, and most beautiful—his face burning, as if he were one of the highest angels, who seem to be all of fire: they must be those whom we call cherubim. Their names they never tell me; but I see very well that there is in heaven so great a difference between one angel and another, and between these and the others, that I cannot explain it." (The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus)

The Soul is directed by angels.

> "The Soul is guarded and directed by the angels, who whisper Divine counsel and intercede for her on the way to perfection. " (Spiritual Canticle - St. John of the Cross)

Angels are beautiful.

> "Take the lowest angel in his pure nature: the smallest splinter or spark that ever fell from him would suffice to light up the whole world with bliss and joy. " (Eckhart Sermon 5)

Church

In the New Testament the Greek word translated as "church" is ekklesia which means God's people or gathering of His people. According to that original meaning "going to church" is an

oxymoron. Now however "church" refers to the people, the building, and the service, and is commonly mixed up with the word "religion."

Church attendance or association can help on the spiritual path by encouraging spiritual bonds between people. It provides a unique opportunity to serve, fast and pray for others within a faithful setting. Churches provide important structure and moral guidance, especially for youth and young adults.

Religion, used as a base gives a start, but it's only a belief system, and faith shouldn't be the acceptance of a decision that has been made by someone else. You must allow yourself to doubt your faith. Only doubt, and the questions that ensue, will increasingly open you to truth.

Religion and the physical church are always in a different realm than God. There won't be a church as we know it in heaven. No church is perfect, and imperfections seem to be intentionally built in (by or allowed by God) to encourage question asking. A person not noticing the imperfections of a religion hasn't dug deeply enough.

A church member may begin to take on their churches personality, suppressing their own. It's always important to be authentic.

Spirituality can be pursued from within any religion and following the spiritual Path is no reason to leave a religion. Some religions however are more conducive to spirituality than others.

Spiritual Teachers

Seeking must be initiated from within by a pure heart. You are ready to be taught when you have pure intent and a love for God. Your goal should not be happiness or joy, but truth. You should be open and ready to adopt new ideas, after proving them.

God will bring teachers in many forms - friends, nature, and others further along on the Path. Teachers or teaching situations will appear when you need them, but you are likely to run into a false teacher if your motives are wrong or your heart impure.

Your spiritual teacher should love to teach because he loves to helps others. He shouldn't do it in any degree to feed his own ego. He should be humble and teach without receiving any personal reward, especially money or recognition.

He does not want, and will discourage his students from becoming dependent on him, and will leave if you do become dependent. The teacher's only goal should be to help raise you to point where you receive knowledge directly from God through your higher Spiritual self. The teacher will emphasize, and the student should pursue, dying of self, service to others, and love of God rather than so called enlightenment.

You can recognize a true spiritual teacher because you see little ego in him. Instead you'll feel the presence of God, which flows through him as calmness, presence and love.

The old adage promises "When the student is ready, the teacher appears."

Helping others Spiritually

Progress on the Path increases spiritual depth, provides an example for others to follow, and gives insights into others needs. A spiritual person can share his knowledge when appropriate.

> "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house." Phil 2:14-15

Following the Path is not like being in a proselyting religion. While you have the desire to help others, you also recognize that each individual must find and enter the Path by themselves. Spirituality is not something that can be pushed.

> "The contemplative who tries to preach contemplation before he himself really knows what it is, will prevent both himself and others from finding the true path to God's peace... No one teaches contemplation except God, Who gives it." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Merton)

It's relatively easy to show an active truth seeker the right direction and offer support along the way. If they're not consciously on the Path your love and general help will still be uplifting. A loving attitude and example will go a long way, as the light you shine conveys the message without saying a word.

Evil

Evil is not an independent force but a corruption and inversion of truth, love, and communion with God. It can be seen as pride, deception, cruelty and injustice. Evil has real destructive effects, but has no existence in itself, rather it's a misdirection or corruption of good.

Satan and evil spirits exist independently and personalize the opposition. Humans participate when they purposely alienate themselves from God and others. Evil is subordinate to the Divine, and God may allow evil spirits for testing and purification, which provides the Soul an opportunity for growth.

Evil spirits seek to tempt, deceive, test and turn people from the spiritual path. Their influence relies on human cooperation. Evil thoughts may be due to external evil spirits, or they may stem from the mind itself.

> "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Eph 6:12)

God can help in the fight against evil.

> "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds" (2 Cor 10:3-4)

Evil can influence us directly, or influence us through those we're around. It's hard for evil to gain entry if we're watchful, but easy if we leave an opening through sin of any sort. If it can't get to you directly it will try to influence those close to you. Most emotions in daily life are honest responses to things we encounter, however actions may be due to evil influences.

It's best to ignore annoyances. Evil entities, and for that matter negative internal thoughts, feed on anger, sadness, fear, and sin. What you think about expands, so don't give emotional energy to bad situations.

If someone hurts you, try to respond with love. If possible be thankful and view evil as a learning and testing opportunity. React outwardly if only absolutely needed to protect life and property, but never react inwardly.

Evil can't hurt your higher Spiritual self. Detach as much as you can, and rise above situations that cause a bad mental or emotional response within you.

Money buys and represents the things of the world that can trap the Soul:

> "They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil." (1 Tim 6:9-10)

While lack of money or things doesn't make one pure, elimination of excess physical wealth can somewhat free the Soul. How you're poor makes a difference though, if you're proud of your austerity then you've defeated the purpose. Being rich doesn't necessarily disqualify you from walking the Path, however walking it becomes much more difficult.

Temptation and Testing

In Hebrew the noun נִסָּה (*nissāh*) means temptation or trial.

In Greek the word πρόσκλησις (*prosklēsis*) means temptation or invitation. In a literal sense it is a "drawing forward" or an "invitation" toward sin. God allows temptation by evil entities as a means of testing and learning.

Temptation is generally encountered in an escalating fashion:

1a. Demonic provocation - the initial incitement to sin, an evil stimulation in the heart without images. At this point man is not culpable. Once images form in the mind it becomes the start of sin.
OR
1b. Disturbances in the mind - Not the same as provocation. Disturbances will occur prior to a certain point on the Path, but can eventually be moved beyond, whereas demonic provocation can still happen. Formation of images in the mind bring the start of sin.

2. Entertaining the thought - Finds pleasure in the mind, yet still not acted upon. Replaying the images.

3. Assent - The resolve to act on the thought.

4. History of repeated sin - If this is the first time the thought is entertained, the man may still eliminate it. If however there is a memory of repeated sin, it becomes harder to extinguish the thought.

5. Passion - If the the initial thought of sin is assented to, or memory of repeated instances is not fought against, the sin develops into a passion which is then acted on.

Spiritual schooling can be divided into two categories, lecture and lab. Class work includes studying the scriptures, listening to spiritual teachings, prayer, and contemplation. The lab portion consists of interaction with people, technology, and the environment. Testing occurs as we apply theoretical knowledge to everyday situations.

You'll be tested exactly in your weakest spots. When you think you've passed a particular test one way you'll be given another version in a disguised form. Testing difficulty will increase as you progress. You only really pass in a certain area when situations in that area no longer present a test.

The more intent you are on following the Path, the more frequently and more deeply you'll be tested. Tests will come in all sorts of ways. A poor person will be tested for resentment toward someone with money. A rich man may look down on the poor, perhaps thinking "if they'd only worked harder or made better decisions."

Failure can test, as can success. An easy life tests by encouraging spiritual laziness while a hard life is a test of ones resilience.

Spiritual highs can occur on the Path, followed by long periods of dryness. Feeling abandoned by God is one of the hardest tests.

> "Spiritual persons suffer great trials, by reason not so much of the aridities which they suffer, as of the fear which they have of being lost on the road, thinking that all spiritual blessing is over for them and that God has abandoned them since they find no help or pleasure in good things.... It is well for those who find themselves in this condition to take comfort, to persevere in patience and to be in no wise afflicted. Let them trust in God, Who abandons not those that seek Him with a simple and right heart, and will not fail to give them what is needful for the road, until He bring them into the clear and pure light of love." (Dark Night of the Soul - St. John of the Cross)

Thoughts

We're accustomed to trusting our mind. We're told we can solve problems by thinking about them long enough and by applying the right mental tools. But for large and especially spiritually rooted problems, the mind is inefficient at best, unusable at worst.

Profound spiritual truth comes through the higher Spiritual self while in contemplation, not from the mind. Raise the center of your consciousness to that level. Live a life without a lot of attachments. Approach God in prayer and contemplation, then trust what the spirit gives you.

At first it may be small things, but over time you'll be given more.

Critical thinking however, accompanies and balances prayer and religious practice. Religious doctrine in particular, as well as spiritual teachings, should be double checked for validity. The mind and heart should act as checks on each other. Does it totally check out analytically, and does your heart say it's okay?

> "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may *prove* what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." (Rom 12:2)

Be true to yourself. You must know yourself, and this requires being accountable for every mistake and every character deficiency. Spiritual progress cannot outpace mental and emotional and stability although progress spiritually can lead to improvements in these. Controlling your thoughts is vital.

Distractions, Worries and Living Simply

A perfectly elevated Soul will not be troubled by things in time and in the world, but few are at that point. We have to slowly dig our way out of worldly concerns as we try to reach upward.

We can't do much about concerns over world conditions but we can eliminate or reduce those immediately upon us.

A simple life is essential for spirituality. Too many nagging thoughts about things, finances, health, and issues with people make it difficult to settle into prayer and contemplation. Keep only quality needful things, then live abundantly.

To live simply:

Minimize Things - Everything owned has its place in the mind and is food for distraction.
Perform Maintenance - Keep absolutely needed items in good repair.
Settle Disputes - "Agree with thine adversary quickly." Forgive and move on.
Maintain Health - Eat quality foods if available, and exercise.
Reduce Media - Every image seen or video watched fills the mind unnecessarily.
Avoid Debt - As much as possible pay off obligations speedily to sleep well.

Over activity, even in religious settings can be distractions and detrimental to spirituality.

The Occult

Early on a presumed spiritual Path the seeker may be exposed to the occult in one way or another. Occultism draws from folk traditions and ceremonial magic. It's a deception and not a shortcut to spirituality. It's alluring to intellectuals but exists in the domain of the mind, of the Lower self.

Occult spiritual entities (demons, spirits, deities) have distinct personalities, motives, and agendas. The fact that they have a personality, name, or ego is a clear indication that they're not enlightened beings who have achieved death of self.

Occult personalities can be benevolent but can also be hostile and deceptive. Dialogues, contracts, invocations, or summoning rituals suggest interaction with an entity with an independent self. True spirituality by contrast aims for dissolution of the personal ego and separate self.

Examples of the occult are seance's, named spirit guides, and New Age channeling. Occultism is in the world of form, not in the realm of the higher Spiritual self. No true spiritual teacher has taught it because real transformation comes through God’s grace, not through secret knowledge or magical techniques, and generally not through the senses.

The New Age religion of Theosophy errors by concentrating on mediums, signs, wonders and false masters with personalities. It emphasizes sensationalism rather than true spirituality. Significantly, Theosophy diminishes the saving role and attributes of Christ. Theosophy reframes Christ from our unique, incarnate, divine Savior into an impersonal “Christ-principle.” It reduces His exclusive status, alters his nature, and removes the necessity of his atoning work.

Idolatry

God said: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." Exodus 20:4

Yet the ancient world was filled with idolatry including human shaped images of gods and deities depicted as animals. Nature was worshiped in trees, mountains, springs and celestial bodies. Small personal cult images and amulets were kept at home for protection and worship.

Why were these a problem?

> "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3)

> "God alone is unoriginate, and the source of all being. The basic sin of idolatry is to rob God of the worship that belongs to Him alone, and to apply it to creatures." (The Triads - Gregory Palamas)

In an advanced society people generally don't equate pieces of stone with a god, so it's easy to think we're above idolatry. But there are other forms of idolatry, more subtle, and more dangerous through which we gain our philosophy of life.

> "How different is the case with the developed and more modern forms of idolatry! These have achieved not merely survival, but the highest degree of respectability... Technological idolatry is the religion whose doctrines are promulgated, explicitly or by implication." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

Idolatry robs God of our dedication to Him.

> "Yet they love God no more when their oratories are ornate than when they are simple - nay, rather do they love Him less, since, as we have said, the pleasure which they set upon their painted adornments is stolen from the living reality." (The Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

Idolatry of self.

> "Self is both atheist and idolater. It is atheist because it has rejected God; it is an idolater because it is its own idol." (The Selected Mystical Writings of William Law)

Adorning images is wrong.

> "Holding not in abhorence the vain trappings of the world, they adorn images with the garments which from time to time vain persons invent in order to satisfy their own pleasures and vanities. So they clothe images with garments reprehensible even in themselves... [thus] the devil succeeds in canonizing his vanities, by clothing the saints with them." (Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

Love

Normal human love, sensible love finds difficulty uniting the Soul with the Divine because love involving emotion or the senses intensifies selfness.

Man first loves himself and his flesh, and flesh can't appreciate anything beyond itself. Realizing that he cannot exist by himself he begins to seek after and love God selfishly, viewing Him as something necessary for his welfare. After worshiping, and getting to know God, he starts to find God beautiful, then loves God not for what he can get from God, but because he knows God.

> "Should anyone ask what God is, this is what I should now say, that God is love, and in fact so loveable that all creatures seek to love His loveableness, whether they know it or not, or whether they wish to or not." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

> "We can only love what we know, and we can never know completely what we do not love." (Huxley)

True love isn't generated within ourselves. Rather love stems from God and flows through us. We can't directly teach ourselves how to love. If we "try" to love it's often an empty imitation unless Gods grace places it within us.

> "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is *of* God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." (1 John 4:7)

We open the door so that love can flow when we serve others, allowing the Divine substance of God's love to naturally flow through us. Negative thoughts and emotions of the ego stop love that should be coming through transparently.

A spiritual person loves as he recognizes God in others and in the world. Love a person not for what he is, but because he is.

> "God's love is like a river springing up in the depth of the Divine Substance and flowing endlessly through His creation, filling all things with life and goodness and strength." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Merton)

Spiritual Knowledge

The world is largely against truth because truth doesn't play well in the machine we call modern society. Truth usually doesn't sell products or political philosophy's.

> "Nothing true is popular, nothing popular is true" (K. Wheeler)

Ego is the enemy of spiritual truth as it prevents it's reception and corrupts its meaning.

Religion is centered in the mind. Modern religions, for the most part, don't train people to perceive the spirit, but address the wants of the mind and emotions by promising salvation, and more lately, prosperity.

Spiritual people recognize that God is manifest in all humans and throughout creation.

Spiritual truth is relatively simple, but can only barely be perceived by the mind. Thinking is a good start, but ultimate spiritual truth is perceived in the Spiritual self, beyond time, mind and thinking.

The mind cannot completely receive or process spiritual truth, yet can, because of preconceived notions or teachings, be limited in receiving spiritual truth.

For study, seek out the best original sources, that have been tested and which correlate with each other. Good spiritual books largely repeat the same time honored truths, as the principles of spirituality are simple. Eventually and ultimately, God will be your teacher, otherwise you would be "Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." (2 Tim 4:7)

Proof of the spiritual comes from within, not from without. Spiritual truth can only be known not thought, and it originates outside of time and space. It can be perceived in the brain, but doesn't originate there through purposeful thinking.

As you use what you've been given spiritually, more will be given to you, to the point where you will be overflowing.dj

> "His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things." (Matt 25:21)

Spiritual Experiences

You may have spiritual experiences occasionally, and especially early on the Path to help you get going. Spiritual experiences are not to be sought. If they come by themselves be grateful. Experiences, if from God, are a gift not a reward, and a humble attitude should be kept with respect to them.

God's immanent beauty, His fingerprint throughout creation, can truthfully be appreciated through the senses. But unusual psychic manifestations of sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, may or may not be from God.

On the one hand they may be, as when angelic visitors appear. But supernatural manifestations can also be generated by the dark side causing people to see figures and forms of persons, and hear words spoken by those they see.

The safest course is to flee from these occurrences if they stand by themselves. In other words, if they are simply physical manifestations that don't touch your spirit, leave them alone.

> "And it must be known that, although all these things may happen [only] to the bodily senses in the way of God, we must never rely upon them or accept them, but must always fly from them, without trying to ascertain whether they be good or evil; for, the more completely exterior and corporeal they are, the less certainly are they of God. For it is more proper and habitual to God to communicate Himself to the spirit." (Ascent of Mt. Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

True communication from God will also directly affect your spirit in addition to any physical manifestation.

> "Corporeal vision, or feeling in respect to any of the other senses, or any other communication of the most interior kind, if it be of God, produces its effect upon the spirit at the very moment when it appears or is felt." (Ascent of Mt. Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

As wonderful as spiritual experiences may be, they fall short of unitive experience.

> "Visions will be an obstacle to their advancement... since visions are an impediment to spiritual nakedness, poverty of spirit, and emptiness in faith; these are the requisites for union with God." (Collected Works of St John of the Cross)

Physical manifestations, which stand alone, should never be sought because if received they will ultimately diminish faith in spiritual matters. God may use them to reach a Soul mired in the Lower self but not to reach one operating in the Spiritual self. And the adversary is more than willing to use them.

Spiritual experiences point toward higher reality, to show us that it exists. They're encouragement to proceed with spiritual development. Goodness doesn't come from the experience itself but from the work you do that follows. Attachment to spiritual experiences is as wrong as other attachments.

Attributes of an Enlightened Soul

An enlightened Soul is transparent without a trace of ego or self. Enlightenment isn't a personal attribute, and possessing enlightenment is contradictory.

An enlightened Soul:

Loves and knows God.
Shows unconditional compassion and loving kindness.
Has deep inner peace and heightened spiritual awareness.
Isn't self centered, because there is no self, at least not one with ego.
Is calm, wise, and has experienced God directly.
Is humble and lacks need for validation.
Is unattached to things, thoughts, or outcomes.
Has integrity, and lives simply with deep inward joy.
Radiates calm, clarity, healing, and reveals transparently the presence of God.
Perceives interconnection with all life and the Divine running through it.
Acts from clear intuitive insight more than reasoning.
Exhibits patience, forbearance, forgiveness.
Is active in the world without being attached to the world.
Is perfected in and through Christ.
Is one with God's love.
Has felt the grace and mercy of God, and seeks to bring those gifts to all men.

Chapter 6 - Fruits of Spirituality

Dying to self, or death of the ego is extremely freeing. It's the death of your ego being the master: "I must be admired, right, in control, safe, and always satisfied." Your personality remains, but you become less defensive and possessive.

Happiness comes with recognizing that the ego is the restless surface of life and that deeper in your Soul you are grounded in God, love and true reality. The ego isn't the true you.

Following the path affords happiness in several ways.

Death of ego lessens the need for *self* protection.

Death of the ego reduces the need for *self* protection. Are you weary of protecting that image of self that your ego has constructed?

I must appear successful in order to feel good about *my self*.
People need to approve of *me*.
I have to win this argument to prove that *I* am right.
My life must unfold according to *my* plan.
I must always appear strong to others.
I must be secure in *my possessions*.

Defense of each of these requires constant effort. You can't let anything slip by or your ego might suffer. Every compliment you receive enhances your ego, while every criticism is a threat.

Death of ego relaxes this arrangement. Instead of doing things to show others, and to feel better about ourselves, we do things simply for doing the best we can, to enjoy doing them.

This, more than anything, is a change of mindset. In fact this change is one of the easier changes to be made on the path. And with it comes immediate relief.

You may still experience embarrassment, criticism and disappointment, but they no longer have to be perceived as ego threatening emergencies.

A person should always be mindful with people and try to be the best we can to cultivate good relationships, but when it comes right down to it and someone or society judges us we shouldn't care, because they likely can't see our true self.

Humility can be joyful. Being humble isn't about having a low opinion of yourself, it's becoming less preoccupied with yourself, and that is freeing.

Surrendering ego ends the exhausting illusion of total control

The ego seeks guaranteed outcomes. It tries to control the future, other people, and its own reputation. It has the illusion that managing or micro managing everything will yield results that will boost itself.

Surrendering the ego leads to acting responsibly without over controlling.

A relaxed stance recognizes that not everything in life can or should be controlled, and that results don't dictate your true worth.

A proactive, non passive life should be lived. Do what you can, but be ultimately free as you "Let go and Let God" as the saying goes.

Detachment makes pleasure possible but not necessary

Detachment allows you to enjoy things without demanding experiences from them.

Freely enjoy food, relationships, money, beauty, achievements, and comfort, but receive them as gifts rather than foundational requirements for your identity.

Detachment is recognizing good and expressing gratitude. Loss of the good thing doesn't damage the Soul, as many good things in life are temporary.

Enjoying pleasure is sweeter, because without attachment there is no fear of loss.

Presence interrupts commenting on past and future suffering

Immediate suffering may occur but the ego's dwelling on past suffering or worry about future suffering also does a lot of damage. The mind's commentary on pain amplifies and stretches out the actual pain.

Your friend may not be responding to you, and you have two choices. You can worry that the friendship is in jeopardy, that it won't come back, that you will be alone. Or you can live in the present, not worry about the future, and wait for the call that will tell you your friend has been sick.

You can't remove the fact, but can change the story that you maintain about what happened in the situation. Wisdom, patience, and a detached perspective will comfort you.

Minimizing ego makes room for caring

By minimizing ego the Soul has more room for loving and caring for others.

Emptying self makes attention available for others so you can:

Listen without formulating a rebuttal.
Serve without desiring praise.
Forgive more easily because the self wasn't there to be damaged.

Celebrate another person without comparing.
Witness another's weakness without contempt.

Compassion replaces comparison when the ego goes away

The ego lives life competitively. Who is better? Who is more attractive? Who has the most influence or deserves more attention? And interestingly, who is more spiritually advanced?

Created in the image of God and sharing common ground with God means we share common ground with others. Sharing common trials and vulnerabilities with fellow travelers helps us to have compassion for them. Love of God is inseparable from love of neighbor.

Diminished ego reduces envy and contempt. When ego based comparison weakens, another person’s success isn't threatening. Instead you can enjoy and complement it. A failure they suffer becomes an opportunity to support them.

Compassion and sharing leads to a meaningful life. Feeling part of, and positively contributing to the larger whole brings satisfaction and the ability to endure personal difficulty.

Forgiveness frees you

The ego encourages resentment because of its sense of superiority. "I would never have done something like that." Resentment is powerful as it is so destructive. It ties you to the level of the other person's fault and causes everything to be interpreted through the lens of the offense.

The ability to forgive is very much a gift, freeing you to rise above what happened. It does not necessarily mean reconciliation, trust, forgetting, or abandoning justice, but allows you to enjoy your life again.

You can see mortality clearly

The ego wants to imagine its permanence. It panics as it can't comprehend death.

A Soul freed from self concern sees death as a gift, and looks forward to resurrection and fellowship with God. Christian hope means that relationships, love, and identity aren't defeated by bodily decay.

Pondering mortality can clarify values, allowing life to be lived more fully with greater consideration of others.

Reflection on mortality discloses trivial ambitions and shows the importance of ordinary life, conversations, meals, sunlight, stars, friendship, reconciliation, and work done with joy.

Surrendering misidentification by self brings freedom from toil

The misidentifying self is a combination of achievements, failures, roles, possessions, social approval, wounds, fears, memories and others opinions. None of these are the real you. The ego is subject to damage if any of these fall short. The ego toils constantly in manufacturing situations to bolster self worth.

The real Spiritual self is oriented toward God and isn't bothered by anything occurring in the physical world or in the Lower self. It can relax.

Recognizing that you are fully known and loved by God generates a very lasting form of happiness.

Community involvement helps reinforce good habits

Healthy renunciation generally leads to increased relationships. You will become less defensive, more teachable, more able to apologize. You will become more involved in community where

you have the opportunity to share possessions, time, and attention and turn your energies to helping others.

Community provides correction against self-deception and help when you feel spiritually empty. It also provides a practical opportunity to serve, and in so doing protects you from turning detachment into emotional distance.

Finding deeper happiness

The path does not guarantee good health, financial success, pleasant relationships, freedom from grief, constant emotional peace or material prosperity.

Its promises are subtler and more profound. The Path changes what constitutes happiness, from -

Excitement to contentment.
Need to possess to gratitude.
Needing recognition to feeling beloved.
Need to exert control to trusting in God.
Tragedy into peace.
Comparison to compassion.
Protection of self to participation.
Avoidance of death to anticipatory presence.

Experience joy along the way

Putting your life in God's hands -

> "Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." (Ps 16:11)

And enjoying His creation and presence -

> "My idea of heaven became one of fields and meadows, sweet with flowers and songs and melodies unutterable, in which even the laughing gull and the waves on the shore would play their part." (The Long Loneliness - Dorothy Day)

> "This joy is also supernatural, is from a source beyond nature, is of the Holy Ghost, is of God in us. We are joyful in his joy. In the special presence in the Soul of the universal Spirit one has joy. When the Life that beats and breathes in the universe comes especially into the Soul one has joy. The Wise Man says, 'God giveth to a man that is good in his sight, wisdom, and knowledge, and joy.' The nearer to God the more the joy; its flush is of the heavenly fire; it is the emotion of a Soul in him." (Woodward Brown - Divine Indwelling)

Chapter 7 - Foundations of Spirituality

Nature of Existence & Theology

God the Father has two aspects. His transcendent aspect is uncreated and beyond all attributes. His immanent aspect creates in the material world and can be experienced personally by man.

AW Tozer claims both men and religions reveal themselves by how they characterize, or mischaracterize God.

> "Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is, and substitutes for the true God one made after its own likeness." (AW Tozer)

When we make God in the image of man we have a problem that runs deeper than the good a religion might otherwise do, as it reduces Him to the status of a creature, robbing him of many of His attributes.

God is Incomprehensible.

> "The incomprehensible and most high Nature of God transcends all creatures in heaven and on earth. For all that a creature can comprehend is of the creature; but God is above all creatures and within and without all creatures, and every created comprehension is too narrow to comprehend Him. But if a creature is to comprehend and to understand God, it must be caught up beyond itself into God, and comprehend God with God." (The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

The first quality of the Father is that He is eternal. God is called Father because all things are created by Him. He is always stable. He is brightness, too radiant to behold by natural eyes and cannot adequately be described by common words. We shouldn't think of the Creator in the same terms as we do His creations.

God's Transcendence

God exists beyond, above, and independent of the created world and its limitations. Above does not refer to physical distance but to quality and realm. God does not live in space, which is part of the material world. Most dimensions found in scripture are figurative as God is beyond names, concepts, images and distances.

God’s mode of being is fundamentally different from finite creatures; God is not composed of parts, changed by time, or confined by space.

God does not depend on anything outside Himself for existence; rather God is the cause of all being.

Transcendence emphasizes God’s otherness and separateness.

God's Immanence

Immanence, is God’s personal, transformative presence within the Soul and world, a presence normally experienced through the senses, but also more deeply in the upper region of the Soul through prayer and contemplation.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

> "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." (Gen 1:1-2)

God is still found in the world.

> "I am the Self, O Gudakesha, dwelling in the hearts of all beings. I verily am the beginning, the middle and also the end of all beings." (Ramannuja Gita Bhashya)

> "If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." (Psalm 139:7-10)
>
> "Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD." (Jer 23:24)

He is present within each of us. Knowledge of God is primarily experiential rather than intellectual. Direct encounter through contemplative prayer and ecstatic union depend on the immanence of God.

> "Remember how Saint Augustine tells us about his seeking God in many places and eventually finding Him within himself. Do you suppose it is of little importance that a Soul which is often distracted should come to understand this truth and to find that, in order to speak to its Eternal Father and to take its delight in Him, it has no need to go to Heaven or to speak in a loud voice? However quietly we speak, He is so near that He will hear us." (The Way of Perfection - St. Teresa)

God reveals Himself through beauty in His creation - the night sky, towering clouds, rainbows, snow capped mountains, colorful creatures, meadows, and flowers. He created us with senses in part so we can behold the majesty of His works. Immanence however does not mean God is identical with creation. God indwells and pervades but remains distinct, preserving His transcendent nature while being close to us.

Immanence is God's direct interaction in the world. The most important interaction is the indwelling of the spirit in the human Soul, enabling man to participate in Divine life.

Why does God Create, and the Nature of the Soul

God creates because, to quote the trite phrase, God is love, and that love expresses itself by creating others. Creating Souls enables loving relationships beyond God’s internal life, beings who can relate to Him and to one another.

Christianity generally states that the Soul is created by God at the same time as the body, although Plotinus, Origen and Henry More taught the pre-existence of Souls. Eastern traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism) and some Jewish mystics, believe that the Soul is created and exists prior to incarnation.

The Soul is explicitly created with intellect and will, allowing it the freedom to embrace or turn away from God. The Divine life is manifest in the Soul as it responds to, and mirrors, God’s love and wisdom.

Individual Souls are created by God, inheriting some of His attributes. The Soul descends from a high spiritual state into the material world and while here only occasionally catches glimpses of the spiritual realms.

> "When a man is conceived, when a human nature comes into being as an individual concrete subsisting thing, a life, a person, then God's image is minted into the world." (Thomas Merton The Seven Story Mountain)

Although the Soul shares some common ground with God, the majority of it is separate from God because love requires at least two entities. This separation allows response and reciprocity

between the soul and God, and allows the Soul to learn compassion, patience and selfless giving. Suffering, conflict, and loss that arise in the material world promote growth, purification, detachment, and interior transformation.

To grow, the Soul must be separated from God just as a child is separated from his parents. God's desire is that we become co-creators (in a local sense) with Him. Creation is enjoyed both in success and failure, in making beautiful things or bad. This ability to create on earth comes from the latitude to choose, and that requires separation from God. Separation occurs at physical birth, where the Soul is introduced to the world. Ego is born sometime after, allowing man to act for himself. Man experiences and grows by exercising creative power.

Our soul will feel the imprint of God as we become like Christ in our desires and actions.

Jesus Christ

Knowledge of God has grown through human history. Anciently God was experienced through his immanence in the world, through His grace, or energies (Orthodox). Ancients felt His benevolence as He provided plants, animals, soil, and rain. They saw beauty of the natural world. Because God was mostly experienced impersonally through lightning, thunder, hail and earthquakes He was regarded as harsh in some situations but in others as compassionate and benevolent.

With a non-Abrahamic background Lao Tzu (600 B.C.E.) perceived aspects of the Divine reality, later revealed personally in Christ.

> "The Great Tao [God] clothes and feeds all things,
> Yet does not claim them as its own.
> All things return to it,
> Yet it claims no leadership over them."
> The Tao does not show greatness,
> And is therefore truly great.
> It does not contend, and yet it overcomes." Tao Teh Ching

Note the impersonal language used to describe the Tao. Lao Tzu perceived the Divine through its nature and activity, rather than describing a personal relationship with God.

Abraham, Moses, and Jacob encountered God through personal relationships in which God communicated with them and made covenants.

Lastly, in Jesus Christ, the eternal Logos took on a human nature.

The word Christ can have two applications. First, Christ as a title means the Anointed One.

Second, Christ as the divine Logos is the eternal Word of God, the Divine person through whom creation comes into being. In this sense Christ is the divine presence who can be manifest within human consciousness.

Jesus is the historical person in whom the eternal Logos, Christ, became incarnate. The two names are closely interconnected and often used interchangeably, although they emphasize different aspects of the Divine.

Everything changed when Jesus was born. When Christ took on a tabernacle of flesh he was self-less, poor, humble, reserved, and loving. He had no political power or worldly authority and took upon Himself the role of servant.

> "But made himself of no reputation (died to self), and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (Phil 2:7-8)

Most importantly He was personal, becoming the essential bridge between God and man.

The ancients could experience God's activity and presence in the world, but through Jesus men could encounter the Divine as a human being, someone with whom they could personally identify and relate.

Besides our need for the love and companionship of our Savior, the following explains in practical terms why he, as God-man, is needed. An example from Chemistry class -

Soap helps oil and grease disperse in water. Water, symbolic of the spiritual world is a polar molecule. Grease and oil are nonpolar molecules symbolic of the material world.

Normally oil and water won't mix. That's our condition, without some help our human nature is mostly incompatible with the spirit world. Soap molecules are amphiphilic having two distinct polarity regions, polar on one end, and nonpolar on the other end allowing one end of a soap molecule to attach to a water molecule, while the other end attaches to the nonpolar oil molecule. Thus soap provides an intermediary that allows the otherwise incompatible substances to interact and remain bound together.

In an analogous way, Christ has two natures, Divine and human (material). Because of this He's able to bind the Divine with the human (material) world. He does this not just on an individual level but for all of creation. But, just as with soap, we need to "apply" Christ in our lives in order to bind with the spiritual.

> "This union is a mutual participation in the qualities and mode of existence of each other, a mutual perichoresis, or inter penetration, that unites God and the human being without destroying their identity. This penetration takes place on behalf of the whole of creation through an act of mutual love, sustained by God's grace and the freely responding human will." (Christian Mystics - King)

Christ as instructor and mediator -

> "Like Clement, Origen conceived of the purpose of Christian life as the *immediate* knowledge of God by the believer... for God sent his divine Logos, his Son, as a mediator to instruct humans in the knowledge of divine matters." (Mystics of the Christian Tradition - Fanning)

Christ's sacrifice is the transformative event that makes continual healing and inward union possible.

> "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:4-5)

And, through Him the world will be healed. Christ's sacrifice accomplishes something for humanity that humanity cannot accomplish for itself. He is the bridge between man and God, and shelter as we work out our salvation.

> "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation

> (propitiatory *shelter**) for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:1-2) * More literal Concordant Version

Christ's sacrifice is the transformative event that makes healing and inward union possible. Christ's dying on the cross was His ultimate act of dying to self and totally submitting to God. His surrender demonstrate the spiritual path that humanity must follow. The imagery of Him dying on the cross serves to remind us of the importance of dying to self, just as his resurrection is the victory over death that provides hope for salvation.

Christ will dwell within you. This is an actual spiritual relationship and allows you to participate on a progressive basis in Divine life.

> "Those who are privileged to become children of God and to have Christ shining forth within them are guided by varied and differing qualities of the Spirit, and are cherished by grace in the secret places of the heart. The seeming joys of the world are not to be compared with the experience of divine grace in the Soul." (Philokalia Volume 3)

Many have experienced the risen Lord. While contemporaries continue to experience Jesus, these visits carry somewhat less weight than historically documented mystical accounts. A sweet smell, sometimes called the heavenly fragrance, odor of sanctity, or fragrance of Christ can accompany His spiritual presence but has also been reported during His physical visits.

> "Eve began to feel that God was not aware of her need, and she wondered if he was real, or if she was only fooling herself about his existence. She remembers extending her hand in a moment of desperate prayer and saying to God, 'If I could only touch you, if I could only touch your hand.' She opened her eyes, and was startled to see Jesus in front of her. Her words were: 'He was on his knees holding both my hands with the most compassionate, warm eyes that I had ever seen, with strength behind them.' The look on his face extended warmth and compassion toward her and let her know that he understood her desperation." (Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today)

> "In Poland the mystical life of Sister Faustina Kowalska (1905–38) is almost a return to the fourteenth century, for she lived almost constantly in the presence of God and communicated freely with Jesus Christ, who not only revealed to her her great mission in life but also guided her in her daily life. Like Catherine of Siena, she was given the invisible stigmata and she, too, was led to the religious life at a very early age." (Mystics of the Christian Tradition)

> “One day…I was praying before the Blessed Sacrament, when I felt myself wholly penetrated with that Divine Presence, but to such a degree that I lost all thought of myself and of the place where I was, and abandoned myself to this Divine Spirit, yielding up my heart to the power of His Love. He made me repose for a long time upon His Sacred Breast, where He disclosed to me the marvels of His Love and the inexplicable secrets of His Sacred Heart, which so far He had concealed from me.” (St Margaret Mary Alacoque)

> "[The soul] is conscious of what may be described as a certain fragrance, as if within its inmost depths were a brazier sprinkled with sweet perfumes." (The Interior Castle - St Teresa of Avila)

The Holy Spirit

The third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost is critical to our connection with the Divine. He is the communicator and enabler of God's works within us.

> "He who finds and possesses this supernal treasure of the Spirit can accomplish all righteous acts and works prescribed by the commandments... For no one, however he tries, can truly cultivate spiritual fruits before participating in the Holy Spirit... [He should fervently beseech] Christ that he may acquire this heavenly treasure; for in it and through it he can accomplish, as was said, every righteous act in purity and perfectly, without toil or distress." (Philokalia Vol 3)

The foremost benefit of working on the Lower self and following the spiritual path is that it removes obstacles, allowing an increased awareness of, and companionship with, the Holy Spirit. It's through the Spirit, the still small voice, that God initially communicates with man. As we improve, the Spirit becomes more and more a part of our inner life.

Teacher and Witness

John Owen discusses the Holy Spirit in detail in his book "Communion with God", describing some of His attributes. The Spirit teaches, and brings into remembrance spiritual principles and scripture. The Spirit glorifies Christ. The Holy Spirit sheds God's love on us.

> "What it indicates is that the Comforter gives a sweet and plentiful evidence and persuasion of the love of God to us. It is such that the Soul is taken, delighted, and satiated with it. This is his work, and he does it effectually." (Communion with God - John Owen)

It's worth pondering that Jesus's teachings had relatively little effect on the disciples' hearts while He was physically with them. Following His departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit, however, those same teachings burst with significance. When it was time for the Spirit's dispensation, He brought fire into men's hearts, and continues to do so. The Holy Spirit is thereby glorified.

> "His work to the end of the world is to bring the promises of Christ to our minds and hearts. He gives us their comfort, joy, and sweetness, far beyond what the disciples experienced when Christ spoke the promises to them in person. Their gracious influence was being restrained, so that the dispensation of the Spirit might be glorified." (Communion with God - John Owen)

The Spirit illuminates and also reveals.

> "Again, I feel that by the visitation of the Holy Spirit I have gained purpose of Soul, steadfastness of thought, keenness of heart, together with an ineffable joy and transport of mind, and in the exuberance of spiritual feelings I have perceived by a sudden illumination from the Lord an abounding revelation of most holy ideas which were formerly altogether hidden from me." (The Conferences of John Cassian)

Perception of the Holy Spirit depends partly on the person's spiritual receptivity and responsiveness.

> "God’s indwelling is hidden behind second causes. His real presence with his own may be easily overlooked; depends, in the perception of it, upon spiritual delicacy, sensitiveness,

> faith... The Spirit’s work within is usually gentle and delicate; is made only in the responsive and sympathetic Soul, as we make precious communications only to those who value them." (The Divine Indwelling - Edmond Brown)

It's a gradual and fulfilling process.

> "The Soul that is faithful in the exercise of love and adherence to God above described, is astonished to feel Him gradually taking possession of their whole being... The Soul feels an unusual serenity gradually being diffused throughout all its faculties; and silence now wholly constitutes its prayer; whilst God communicates an intuitive love, which is the beginning of ineffable blessedness." (Short and Easy Method of Prayer - Madam Guyon)

> "I was once asked why good folk feel so happy with God and are so zealous to serve Him. I replied by saying it was because they had tasted God, and it would be strange indeed if the Soul that had once tasted and tried God could stomach anything else." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

Salvation

Christian traditions have varying views on how salvation is secured, and what is meant by it. Being saved is often associated with this passage:

> "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works" (Eph 2:8-9)

Regarding this Huxley said:

> "To the danger that faith in the doctrine of justification by faith may serve as an excuse for and even an invitation to sin must be added another danger, namely, that the faith which is supposed to save may be faith in propositions not merely unverifiable... [but] entirely at variance with the findings of those who have fulfilled the conditions of spiritual insight into the Nature of Things." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

Does faith in Christ alone guarantee salvation?

> "Modern, man-made versions of Christian doctrine give the impression that, in order to be 'saved,' it is necessary only to come to the wedding feast; but this is not true. Salvation is not automatic. Christ's invitation to the wedding feast is free, and the gift of Grace is free, but we must be made fit to enter in and receive it." (Christ the Eternal Tao)

> "Let them remember that they are not Disciples of Christ, till they have like him offered their whole body and Soul as a reasonable and lively Sacrifice unto God... till they are so born again as not to commit Sin, so full of an heavenly Spirit, as to have overcome the World... Nothing less than this great Change of Heart and Mind can give anyone any Assurance, that he is truly turned to God... let us not think our Condition safe, because we are of this or that Church or Communion, or because we are strict Observers of the external Offices of Religion." (The Works of the Reverend William Law)

> "No other path other than that of repentance leads to salvation." (Philokalia)

You can't have the type of faith that justifies without the internal changes that accompany it.

> "And we absolutely deny that we can be justified by that faith which can be alone; that is, without a principle of spiritual life and universal obedience." (The Doctrine of Justification - John Owen)

What must we do and be to be saved?

> "For salvation is the privilege of pure and passionless Souls. A man by himself working and toiling at freedom from passion achieves nothing. But if he plainly shows himself very desirous and earnest about this, he attains it by the addition of the power of God. For God conspires with willing Souls. But if they abandon their eagerness, the spirit which is bestowed by God is also restrained." (Fathers of the Second Century - Clement of Alexandria)

> "As has been said, in all things we ought to renounce our own will so as to attain the goal God has set for us and to pursue whatever He wishes. Unless we do this we can never be saved." (Philokalia)

The story of Adam and Eve is figurative and has a deeper meaning. Sentencing all of humanity for a singular act of disobedience doesn't reflect the justice, fairness and mercy of a loving God. So what's really going on?

The original "sin" is inherent in our nature and spread out over all of Adams children, it wasn't just a singular event. It was the development (or recognition) of individual self and ego apart from God, which increasingly followed a course away from God. We developed selfishness, and this (lower) self / ego is the primary enemy to God.

Salvation reverses this. We reunite with God as we detach from the snares of the world and the self's ego dies.

> "We must be saved above all from that abyss of confusion and absurdity which is our own worldly self... The mysterious inner self must be delivered." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Merton)

Salvation is God living in you as part of your true self, the kingdom of God is within you. The real importance of Christ's crucifixion is the path He showed us, that of selflessness and death of self.

> "There is no salvation of Soul nor hope of everlasting life but in the cross. Take up your cross, therefore, and follow Jesus, and you shall enter eternal life. He Himself opened the way before you in carrying His cross, and upon it He died for you, that you, too, might take up your cross and long to die upon it. If you die with Him, you shall also live with Him, and if you share His suffering, you shall also share His glory." (Imitation of Christ - Kempis)

> "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life [self, ego] for my sake shall find it." (Matt 16:25)

Heaven

In common usage the word heaven implies a place physically above us in the sky. In religion and spirituality however it has a different meaning, basically a 'place' where we spiritually

associate with God, and 'things' in the domain of God. Heaven contrasts sharply with Earth which is the domain of physicality and ego.

Does God live in heaven? God created heaven, and as God is fundamentally beyond all created things including heaven, God's essential being is not contained in heaven. Heaven is a state of union with God, rather than a separate thing that confines God.

> "Heaven is untouched by time and place. Corporeal things have no place there, and whoever is able to read the scriptures aright is well aware that heaven contains no place." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

> "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21)

> "God has no place more His own than a pure heart and a pure Soul. There the Father begets His Son, just as He begets him in eternity." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

Three heavens:

> "St. Paul was carried off into the third heaven. Observe which are the three heavens. The first is detachment from all bodily things, the second is estrangement from all imagery, and the third is a bare understanding in God without intermediary." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

This is remarkably close to steps of mortification and contemplation, where the Soul detaches from the lower sensual self, then through contemplation ceases imagining God through images, and in the final step achieves personal apprehension of God.

Knowledge of heaven must be approached through contemplation, other than that it's mere speculation.

The single most significant thing that will keep one out of heaven is "self" in all of it's negative expressions.

> "In a word, the difference between heaven and hell is, that hell is full of nothing but self-love and propriety; whereas there is not the least degree of either in heaven, nor anything but the fulfilling of God's will and seeking of His glory." (Holy Wisdom or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation - Baker)

Hell

There's a general fear of winding up in this, but is it really a place?

Christian mystics generally don't write much about hell's characteristics. Rather than being a place, they view hell as an existential state of the Soul's separation from God. The Soul experiences pain as it realizes it's distance from God. Suffering "in hell" results from the Soul's rejection of God's love rather than God inflicting torment. God's love is primary, and hell results from rejecting that love.

Views vary regarding the ability of a Soul to repent and escape hell. Some mystics leave the possibility open, including some Orthodox who allow for post-mortem repentance emphasizing God's mercy.

Catholic's and Protestants generally believe the state of the Soul is fixed at death, that the Soul's orientation is permanently fixed toward or away from God, and isn't something that can be changed.

After death the Soul exists in a different mode. The dynamics that enabled growth in time such as experience, sacrament and community are absent, so growth and repentance are no longer available in the same way. Repentance requires humility, self-knowledge, and a turning-toward God, and these depend on relationships and opportunity to love others. Also, if the Soul is hardened, repentance isn't possible, according to many traditions.

> “For Love possesses heaven, and dwells in itself, which is dwelling in heaven; but that which is called I, this vile self-hood possesses the world and worldly things; and dwells also in itself, which is dwelling in hell, because this is the very root of hell itself. " (The Way to Christ - Boehme)
>
> "For the more a man followeth after his own self-will and self-will groweth in him, the farther off is he from God, the true Good, for nothing burneth in hell but self-will." (Theologia Germanica)

Hell is likely not a place, but a state of mind/Soul. The state of our Soul depends largely on how well we practiced mortification, death of self, and love of God.

Resurrection

Qualifications for resurrection -

> "Some people are half raised up: they practice one virtue but not another... we find some people who rise with Christ for good and all; but he must be very wise who experiences a true resurrection with Christ... All that pertains to us must make the ascent. There are three signs of our having fully risen. The first is if we 'seek the things that are above.' The second is if we savor the things above. The third is if we have distaste for the 'things that are on earth.' " (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)
>
> "The resurrection of the Soul - its return to God through obedience to the divine commandments - is followed by the body's resurrection and its reunion with the Soul. And for those who experience it the consequence of this resurrection will be true incorruption and eternal life with God." (Philokalia - St Gregory Palamas)

You will receive a new spiritual body of light.

> "The spiritual body, formed probably of elements analogous to those of light,... That glorious body which we are to put on, will subsist no doubt by the energy alone of its principles, and of the profound mechanism of its construction. It is probable, that this ethereal body will not be subject to the action of gravity, as the gross bodies are which we are acquainted with. It will obey with an astonishing facility all the volitions of the Soul, and we shall transport ourselves from one world to another, with a celerity perhaps equal to that of light. Under this glorious economy we shall exercise all our faculties without fatigue." (Conjectures Concerning the Nature of Future Happiness - John Wesley Conjectures)

Chapter 8 - Mysticism

Christian Mysticism

Some may be put off by the word mysticism but mysticism is beautiful and essential to man knowing God.

> "It is true that mysticism has to do with mystery; and that is why the term is popularly held in disrepute. But the mysteries with which mysticism chiefly has to do are neither numerous nor fantastic: they are God, and the Soul, and Revelation; the last being the making known of the One to the other: and, beyond this, Christian mysticism views the Eternal as approached through Jesus Christ, the Door." (The Inner Way - John Tauler)

Mysticism is defined herein as the spiritual pursuit of direct awareness of, and communion with, God. It is beyond intellectual knowledge or theory, and is not dependent on outward religious observance. It's the inward path within the soul toward an encounter with Divine reality.

The mystic state is that of experiencing unitive knowledge of God, in which direct spiritual knowledge is received. This unitive experience is the ultimate indwelling of God spoken of in the scriptures.

Others define mysticism more loosely, but the intent here is to focus only on the infused (by grace of God) contemplative state in which direct contact with God occurs because it's through those experiences that mankind has gained insight into the "mind" of God.

Elements of mysticism can be found within many religious traditions but Christian Mysticism represents the highest spiritual path because it combines inner experience with the necessity of Christ being the bridge between spirit and man.

> "For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will *dwell in them*, and *walk in them*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (2 Cor 6:16)

> "Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20)

The insights gained by mystics form a significant foundation of spirituality that underlies most major religious traditions.

> "From being regarded, whether critically or favorably, as a byway of religion, it is now more and more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man." (Mysticism - A Study - Underhill)

Mysticism is not based on New Age Spirituality, it is very far from that. Experiences in Christian Mysticism date back to the 1st century with John and Paul, followed by the Desert Fathers, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) and many others.

Mysticism is not a religion to be followed. It is decentralized with no hierarchical structure and no need for authority. Although it's historically been practiced by members of Christian faiths it does not depend on any particular religious association.

Everything in Christian Mysticism is about improving extending your relationship with God and Jesus.

History of Mysticism

Knowing God is knowing ultimate truth.

> "Great mystics, such as Plotinus, write to let us know that they have actually known the ultimate Truth, experienced it, 'seen' It, with a subtle sight that is directed inward; and that we too following upon them, attending to their directions, we too may obtain that direct knowing of whence we came, and who we truly are." (Plotinus: The Origin of Western Mysticism S. Abhayananda)

Mystics are found both inside and outside Christianity. From the Christian perspective presented here, however, the mystical traditions outside Christianity miss crucial aspects related to Christ's work.

In his eBook "The Greatest Achievement in Life" R.D. Krumpos identifies 17 mystics in Judaism, 20 in Christianity, 19 in Islam, 12 in Hinduism, and 20 in Buddhism. Most of these had their experiences between the 3rd and 16th century, however some had their experiences earlier. Old testament prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, and Elijah had mystical experiences.

Vedic practitioners (1200-600 BCE) identified Brahman (Ultimate Reality or ground of being), Ātman, etc.

> "The wise one [i.e. the Soul, the atman, the self] is not born, nor dies. This one has not come from anywhere, has not become anyone. Unborn, constant, eternal, primeval, this one is not slain when the body is slain." (112 Upanishads Sanskrit Text)

> "Higher than the senses are the objects of sense. Higher than the objects of sense is the mind (manas); and higher than the mind is the intellect (buddhi). Higher than the intellect is the Great Self (Atman)." (Upanishads)

Buddhism, Jainism, and the various Hindu traditions subsequently developed their own forms of mysticism.

Mystic experiences weren't commonly reported in Old Testament times. Ancient Israelite religion prioritized prophetic, legal, and communal worship forms. Indian culture fostered discussion and writing about inward experience.

There were Jewish Mystics however.

> "The period of Merkabah mysticism is quite extended. It may be said to begin in the century before the turn of the eras, and it continued until the tenth century of this era. Merkabah mysticism, then, covers approximately a millennium." (Understanding Jewish Mysticism)

In the West, the classical Greco-Roman world (500 BCE to 500 CE) emphasized rational philosophy (Platonism, Stoicism) and public religion. However, Neoplatonists such as Plotinus placed particular emphasis on personal experiential union with the divine.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (late 5th - early 6th century) describes both dying to self and contemplation, and ultimately that there won't be a distinction between God and the higher part of our soul.

> "This relationship must now be transcended by a process leading to ecstasy. The human spirit must seek to go forth out of itself (i. e. out of its created being) into the Uncreated Object of its contemplation and so to be utterly merged. So it ceases to desire even its own being in itself. Casting selfhood away, it strives to gain its true being and selfhood by losing them in the Super-Essence. Laying its intellectual activity to rest it obtains, by a higher spiritual activity, a momentary glimpse into the depths of the Super-Essence, and perceives that There the distinction between “Me” and “Thee” is not." (On the Divine Names - Dionysius)

The Desert Fathers were early Orthodox Christian Mystics in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. They practiced lives of poverty, discipline, and self-denial as followers of Christ.

> "If I had not destroyed myself completely, I should not have been able to rebuild and shape myself again." (Sayings of the Desert Fathers)

> "For when the Soul arrives at the perfection of the spirit, perfectly cleansed from passion, and united and mingled with the Spirit Paraclete (Holy Spirit) by that unspeakable communion, and is permitted to become spirit itself in mixture with the Spirit, then it is made all light, all eye, all spirit, all joy, all rest, all gladness, all love, all compassion, all goodness and loving-kindness." (Fifty Spiritual Homilies - Macarius of Egypt)

Monasticism, which had developed in the third and fourth centuries, became increasingly established in the West during the Early Middle Ages (6th–9th centuries). Any apparent historical gaps in the history of mysticism mostly reflect cultural patterns.

Prominent later Christian Mystics include St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and St. John of the Cross (1542-1591). Each wrote about their soul's union with God.

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582):

> "This supreme state of ecstasy never lasts long, but although it ceases, it leaves the will so inebriated, and the mind so transported out of itself that for a day, or sometimes for several days, such a person is incapable of attending to anything but what excites the will to the love of God... the supreme delight of the spirit is to realize its nearness to God. During the actual moment of divine union the Soul feels nothing, all its powers being entirely lost." (The Interior Castle - St. Teresa of Avila)

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591):

> "Then the Soul enters on the contemplative life, passing through those ways and straits of love which are described in the course of the canticle, till we come to the thirteenth, beginning with 'Turn them away, O my Beloved!' This is the moment of the spiritual betrothal; and then the Soul advances by the unitive way, the recipient of many and very great communications, jewels and gifts from the Bridegroom as to one betrothed, and grows into perfect love." (A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul - St John of the Cross)

William Law (1686-1761) was a Church of England priest and mystic:

> "As a Soul sinks down in humility, meekness, patience, and resignation to God, it proves that it consents to the death of self as utterly sinful and impotent, and sets its hope on Christ alone. No one can thus persevere in the path of humiliation and self-emptying without knowing that there is deliverance, and sooner or later experiencing that the life of Christ does triumph over the life of self and takes its place." (Dying to Self - William Law)

The book "Christian Mystics" by Ursula King portrays many Christian mystics in their historical settings. It's a great book and a very easy read, readily available both new and used. For a much deeper perspective read Evelyn Underhill's books on Mysticism which are reasonable to purchase and available as free PDF's.

The Divine Ground

God is the whole Divine reality as personally known by humans, the great creator and sustainer of life. We can relate to God, offer devotion to Him, love Him, and be loved by Him. We offer prayer to Him and receive His grace.

The Divine Ground is what we have in common with God at the highest part of our Soul. It's the intersection between God and the Soul where we can ultimately unite with God.

Most mystics taught the principle of shared Divine ground in one way or another.

Gregory of Nyssa taught a theology stressing union with God through likeness and participation in the divine life. John of the Cross taught of an interior ground where the Soul is transformed by union with God. Hildegard of Bingen taught an indwelling Divine presence. Jacob Boehme discussed the Divine ground and inner birth of the Divine in the Soul. Various metaphors and vocabularies were used.

Meister Eckhart was, according to tradition, "the man from whom God hid nothing." Eckhart wrote extensively on the nature of God and the human Soul. He taught the existence of an innermost Divine quality in the Soul, which he designated the Ground of the Soul.

Meister Eckhart speaks of the higher part of the soul as containing the Soul's 'ground', an inner immutable spark, that is one with God. It is beyond images, concepts, normal prayer, and thought. It exists out of time, and can be reached only through contemplation. It is the immortal innermost Self, purified of ego.

> “The Soul must be turned inward to its ground, for in the ground the Soul is one with God.” (Meister Eckhart, Sermon 17).

God and the Divine Ground existed above and prior to all created things. We each share, to a small degree this common Divine Ground with God.

Regardless of how a particular mystic perceived the ground, it's on that ground that the full experience with God occurs. Mystical birth is the realization that the Soul’s ground participates in, and can be united with God, in the Divine ground.

Mysticism, where it is, and isn't found.

Forms of mysticism occur both within and outside of religion.

> "It is not uncommon for investigators who were originally neutral about mysticism to become convinced of its reality as other than a merely subjective state... In other words, there is a mysticism ('spirituality') both within and outside of religious traditions... Spirituality is more closely identified with mystical experience, whereas religion is more closely identified with a specific religious interpretation of this experience." (The Psychology of Religion - Hood, Hill, Spilka)

Mystic experience can occur within any religion or sect, however as we moved away from spirituality in general it become less prevalent.

> "This practice is the heart of religion... It is the special property of no group or sect, but is a universal obligation and privilege. Roman Catholics have treasured this practice, but have overlaid the authority of the Light Within by a heavy weight of ecclesiastical authority. Protestant emphasis, beginning so nobly in the early Luther, has grown externally nationalistic, humanistic, and service minded." (The Light Within - Thomas Kelly)

A practical reason for why it's seldom found, especially in Protestant religions.

> "A church filled with charismatic mystics necessarily invited the risk of the reception of conflicting revelations. Hence Paul, standing on his own authority that was derived from his mystical encounters with Jesus, forbade the members of his churches to believe any revelations other than those that he had taught. Thus mysticism in an organization leads to a crisis of authority." (Mystics of the Christian Tradition)

The term mysticism is used herein in a fairly restricted sense, to those who have thoroughly practiced the work of inner purification and self renunciation followed by receiving unitive knowledge. Few do that. In a broader more hopeful sense, many experience God directly, often in very profound ways.

Mysticism as a topic is gaining tremendous acceptance in both religion and academia. You can find several dozen well written papers on it by searching in https://www.academia.edu/.

Characteristics of the Mystic State

The mystical state is not a paranormal state. The paranormal is of the Lower self, mysticism is of the higher Spiritual self and is directly connected to God.

Mysticism is practical, not theoretical, and is an entirely personal spiritual experience.

The mystical state is one of being united with God in the highest part of our Soul.

The mystical state is ineffable, meaning that it defies expression. Thus, it must be directly experienced. The state is one of feeling rather than intellect and knowledge of it can't be imparted or transferred to others.

Mystical states offer insight into depths of truth unavailable to discursive intellect. They comprise illuminations and revelations, full of significance and importance though they can't be described. They come with a sense of authority. Visions by ancient patriarchs were seen in (prophetic) mystic states.

Mystical states cannot be sustained. Generally they last for less than an hour or two.

The mystic state is a definite psychological experience. Mystical states are remembered by the recipient between occurrences and result in a sustained sense of oneness with the Divine which then dominates the person's thought.

Presumably if you are blessed with experiencing union your Soul has previously been tried and tested, with ego lost or tamped down. Without this it would be easy to identify with the state, romanticize it, and neglect more mundane responsibilities.

> "The mystic lives in emptiness, in freedom, as if he had no longer a limited and exclusive 'self' that distinguished him from God and other men. He has, therefore, died with Christ and

> entered into the 'risen life' promised to the true sons of God." (New Seeds of Contemplation - Merton)

It's entirely possible for an individual to have a pseudo mystic experience, which should always be tested. The true mystic state is set apart by the preparation leading up to it, and the consistency between it and what other mystics have experienced. One way to tell a true mystic experience from a false one is to look at the character of the person having it. The true unitive mystical experience will only come to one with little or no ego, one of good moral character.

Prophetic vs. Contemplative Mysticism

Some, including the following author draw a distinction between two types of mysticism. While Ezekiel and Isaiah did not seek or receive Divine unity through contemplation they certainly experienced transcendent reality.

> "Ezekiel’s vision (like Isaiah's) is not, however, a [contemplative] mystic vision. It is nothing that the prophet has sought. It is nothing he has built up to by intellectual preparation and spiritual discipline. Rather, it is God Who has seized the prophet and overwhelmed him with His majesty. Furthermore, there is no ‘‘unification” of the prophet with God and no secret knowledge conveyed. Rather, the prophet has felt humbled, and the communication he has received is an ethical message for the people, a preachment... He has been allowed a quick look at some members of the heavenly hosts. The heavens have, indeed, been opened for him, for a short time." (Understanding Jewish Mysticism)

Addendum 1 - Religion East and West

Religion is the door through which people can *begin* their spiritual path towards God. Religion is good to the extent that it points people in the way, bad when by itself it satiates a person's hunger for the Divine. There is a spiritual world in which God and angels exist, and also the material created world.

Religions, brick and mortar churches, icons and ordinances exist in the material world of form only. Any intermediary human or organization between God and man exists in the material world with access through the mind and senses, the Lower self. Reaching God is an inward process, helped initially by outward entities, but ultimately inward through the inner higher Spiritual self.

The Chinese Taoist master and scholar Liu Yiming (b. 1737) in "Awakening to the Tao" wrote regarding not only religion, but spirituality:

> "There are seventy-two schools of material alchemy, and three thousand six hundred aberrant practices. Since the blind lead the blind, they lose the right road; they block students and lead them into a pen."

Liu Yiming went on to say that it's not only the teachers and schools that are the problem, but the student himself, as pure motivation is essential:

> "The reason the spiritual treasure does not appear to seekers is that they themselves will not allow it to do so... what a pity that false people spend their lives madly in sidetracks."

There's a fundamental difference between how truly eastern religions (such as Buddhism and Hinduism, not Orthodox) and western religions view approaching God. Eastern religions generally see the experience as an inward journey through meditation, contemplation, and prayer (and they omit Christ).

Western religions approach God through outward expressions of attending church and performing ordinances, viewing Christ as central. Eastern religions can have outward ceremonies, and western Christians can individually have inward experiences. Eastern Orthodox and Catholicism have characteristics of both with a strong history of inward experience.

Every human Soul is capable of achieving a profoundly deep connection with God. Aldous Huxley pulled it together in his book The Perennial Philosophy. Huxley surveyed the worlds religions and identified their common thread. For a Christian the tread includes increased indwelling of the Spirit leading to a very deep experience with God.

Duality and Non-Duality (Oneness)

There is a concept called Oneness, adherents to which believe that we are God. It's an overly simplified and mostly incorrect concept. We are not God, and we don't have God in His entirety inside us. But we do have within us a common ground with God, while maintaining our individuality as Souls, and that's the basic difference.

Christianity, because of Christ, offers us eternal life as an distinct individual, oneness doctrine has us being reabsorbed into God. Christ is essential for the salvation of the world and individuals. Oneness doesn't require Him.

At the moment of birth we enter the world of duality, where we recognize our separateness. Yet the Soul feels a connection with, and a longing for God, and wants to be united.

Where can that union take place? Jesus said "behold, the kingdom of God is within you."

> "Now though the Scripture nowhere gives this Direction in these very Words, yet, since it is said in Scripture, that God dwelleth not in Temples made with Hands, but in the Temple of our Hearts, since the Kingdom of God is said to be within us... it is directly telling us that we are to turn inwards, if we would turn to, and find God." (The Works of the Reverend William Law)

Addendum 2 - Christianity

Most Christian congregations are warm and engaging. Handshakes between members and visitors are common. Doctrine is straight out of the bible, according to each denominations interpretation. I appreciated a Bible Baptist church whose policy is to help the hearing impaired by providing signing at each service. Services were traditional with beautiful music and hymns. The Lutheran liturgy is also enjoyable.

Having a religion is important for most people as it offers hope for salvation and social connection.

Most spiritually oriented Christian religions encourage people to reach towards God via scripture reading, prayer, and service. Religions are beneficial, and membership in a religion is good as they provide opportunity for compassion and service.

What follows are some of my notes on Protestantism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy.

The Bible

It's true that things have been left out of the bible (including the apocrypha), but it's not true that the bible is inaccurate for the most part. Tens of thousands of early copies exist having very little difference from the originals. Modern versions of the bible (including for the most part the KJV) are precise, and accurately translate the initial texts. Also recommended are the NASB1995, and for the most original text, Codex Sinaiticus. The “Concordant Version” of the Old and New Testaments are good.

Issues within Christianity

Here are some topics / issues within Christianity.

The Old Testament

> The Old Testament is a formidable challenge for many. Christian Mystics for the most part downplayed it, for the simple reason that the anger and wrath portrayed doesn't agree with the pure love that all mystics have felt in unity with God. Many chose to interpret passages symbolically or allegorically, seeing wars, enemies, and punishments as spiritual struggles within the soul. God is beyond human emotions so to interpret these things literally makes little sense. Many OT passages pointed to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, which metaphysically also represents our dying to self. Scripture is God's word, but also deeply represents the norms of the culture in which it was framed, and the level of development of people at the time.
>
> "The Old Testament is an icon of outward bodily asceticism. The Holy Gospel, or New Testament, is an icon of attentiveness, that is, of purity of heart. For the Old Testament did not perfect or fulfill the relationship of the inner self to God - 'the law made no one perfect', as the Apostle says (Heb. 7:19) - it simply forbade bodily sins." (Philokalia)
>
> William Law's character Theogenes spoke to Theophilus: "We find it impossible to think of God as subject to Wrath, or capable of being inflamed by the Weakness, and Folly, and Irregularity of the Creature. We find ourselves incapable of thinking any otherwise of God,

than as the one only Good, or, as you express it, an eternal immutable Will to all Goodness." (The Spirit of Love - William Law)

Sola Scriptura

Sola Scriptura (solo in Greek = “only”). There are five solae in the Protestant Reformation: Sola Scriptura: “Scripture alone,” Sola fide: “faith alone,” Sola gratia: “grace alone,” Sola Christo: “Christ alone,” and Soli Deo gloria: “to the glory of God alone.” Sola Scriptura is the view shared by most Protestants, that the Bible is the sole infallible authority for Christian faith and practice. They reject any Divine authority based on sacred tradition. It means that a Christian is solely responsible for determining God's word by his own interpretation of the bible. In practice however interpretation of scripture is done by leaders of the local church and individual deviation from established interpretation leads to being distanced by the congregation.

"Protestant pastors have long realized (in fact, Luther and Calvin realized it) that, although they must preach the doctrine of private judgment to ensure their own right to preach, they must prohibit the exercise of this right in practice for others." (James Akin, The Practical Problems of Sola Scriptura 1996).

While the bible is accurate, the interpretation of it varies widely. Protestantism has allowed the church to be divided into hundreds of denominations according to local interpretation of scripture. Protestants are free to come to different and sometimes erroneous conclusions. Attempts are made to justify contradictory positions by use of scripture. This is not to say that the doctrines of Catholicism and Orthodoxy are free from error, but they are mostly consistent within those religions.

Original Sin

While most denominations believe the doctrine of Original Sin, some do not. This is generally a small issue unless you're an infant.

Faith vs. the Mosaic Law

In Galatians 3, Paul discusses justification through faith in Christ vs. attempting to be perfect with respect to the Mosaic law.

Faith vs. Works

There are different types of works. In Galatians 3 Paul contrasts faith in Christ with following the Mosaic law "For as many are of the works of the law are under the curse, for it is written 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law'." Following the entirety of the law is impossible so those works come to naught as far as securing salvation.

The second type of works are those that well meaning people do for others through charity or which otherwise improve the spiritual / religious landscape. Christians stress faith but also acknowledge these works are a fruit of faith.

The third type of works are those done internally. It can hardly be disputed that work done on improving the inner man is essential for spirituality. Catholics and Orthodox emphasize this type of work.

Rapture

Pre-tribulation rapture, post-tribulation rapture, or no rapture is a favorite point of discussion among Christians.

Preterism

A minor Christian view that many prophetic Bible passages were fulfilled in the first century, rather than predicting distant future events.

Baptism and the Holy Ghost / Holy Spirit

Is baptism a saving ordinance (sacrament), or does it just signify a person's conversion through faith that has already occurred?

Most Christian churches baptize using the Trinitarian formula ("I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"), even though these verses in the New Testament are non Trinitarian:

> "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38)
>
> ".. only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:16)
>
> "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?" (Rom 6:3)
>
> "And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord " (Acts 10:48)
>
> "When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.' (Acts 19:5)

Traditional Christian churches believe that baptisms done in another church are acceptable as long as the Trinitarian formula was used (interesting considering the above) and the person believed in the Trinity.

The End Times

Does end time scripture like Revelations apply to the earth as a whole, or to each individual, or to both?

Being “Saved”

Many Christians believe that a person has to have a “saved” experience, a particular moment where they confessed their sins and were “saved.” If a person can't pinpoint that experience his validity as a Christian is questioned. One Christian flatly told me that if I couldn't identify my saved experience I would spend eternity burning in hell. There is also John Calvin's doctrine of "Once Saved Always Saved."

Christ and Paul

Jesus and Paul were both Jewish, Paul was also a Pharisee. Both had apocalyptic views, suggesting the end would come soon, within their generation. Both felt that scrupulous

observance of the finer points of Jewish Law was unnecessary, but that love of one's neighbor and faith were essential.

Jesus primarily taught the Jews, although his message was for all. Jesus taught that faith should be in the goodness of God and that one must follow His teachings and the basic principles of the Jewish Law.

Paul extended his version of the gospel to the entire world. Paul taught that following the Jewish Law wasn't needed, instead that one must believe solely in the death, resurrection and blood of Jesus, and that salvation comes only to those who die with Christ by being baptized.

The Christianity that we know today in it's essence and structure is mostly Paul's teachings.

The Atonement, Transformative or Transactional?

From a transformative standpoint Jesus showed us the way whereby we too can transcend the mortal plane, the atonement being viewed at a deeper level with Jesus dying to self and giving Himself fully over to the Father. Jesus taught individual transformation.

Paul preached a transactional atonement for individuals, a Penal Substitutionary transaction where Jesus paid the price for our sins.

In the first case, we like Jesus, need to do our own work, in the second case Jesus did it for us. Which makes more sense from a spiritual growth standpoint for individuals?

Regardless of how you look at it, Jesus Christ is the essential bridge between God the Father and man. He enlivened the world and made God personal to us.

Pre-existence

No major Christian religion believes in the concept of pre-existence, and a belief in it isn't required for following the path, nor does belief in it conflict with the path. The book "When Souls Had Wings" attempts to address the subject.

Saving the Soul

As far as ability to "save", Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox differ in authority, ordinances, priesthood and doctrine. Each tradition offers the follower a start at spirituality. Catholics regard their church as the "only true church" and disallow ordinances from others except perhaps Orthodox. Protestants are more lenient, especially since they generally don't believe in "saving ordinances," instead emphasizing being saved by faith in Christ.

Protestantism vs. Catholicism and Orthodoxy

There's a huge divide between Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox with quite a bit of arguing back and forth on the heresies of the others. All three make good points.

Protestantism

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century marked the separation by Protestants from the Catholic church. Protests against Catholicism began with Martin Luther calling for debate on indulgences. The printing press accelerated broadcast of discontent. With the exception of Catholics and Eastern Orthodox most every Christian church falls under Protestantism.

Protestantism emerged in the 16th century when Martin Luther and others protested practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

Protestants believe that the Bible alone (as different individuals or groups interpret it) is the ultimate authority and reject the "church tradition" of Catholicism.

Protestantism is decentralized and varies widely by denomination. Protestants reject hierarchical church structures. Leadership is often based on education. They view the Pope as a religious leader without authority over them.

Faith alone salvation comes entirely through faith in Jesus Christ, not through works or sacraments. Grace is given freely by God rather than earned.

Mary is respected but not venerated. They do not pray to her or saints, viewing these practices as idolatry.

Protestants generally have two "sacraments", baptism and communion (the Lord's Supper). Sacraments do not convey grace in themselves but are outward signs of inward grace.

They view communion as a symbolic act commemorating Christ's sacrifice, some believing it to have a spiritual component. Bread and wine remain bread and wine.

Baptists view baptism as an outward declaration of already existing personal faith. It does not itself confer salvation. Belief and faith must precede baptism and salvation is through faith alone.

For adult believers, baptism by immersion is required. Infants are not baptized as they can not yet profess faith. Baptists believe the Holy Spirit is received by the person at the moment of personal faith (the "saved" moment). No formal laying on of hands is required.

Methodists believe that baptism is grace that both signifies and participates in the believer's salvation, personal faith remaining essential. Infants are baptized as a sign of God's grace, while adults affirm their own faith. The Holy Spirit is imparted during the baptismal sacrament for infants and adults. Adults may later receive a subsequent confirmation with the minister praying and laying on hands.

Lutherans believe that baptism creates and strengthens faith. They have a confirmation service in which the pastor prays and may lay hands on the person asking the Holy Spirit to strengthen faith.

Calvinists believe it's a sign and seal of the covenant and points to the believer's union with Christ through personal faith. Infants are baptized as a sign of the covenant, with the expectation they will later profess faith.

Protestants affirm the priesthood of all believers, that all Christians have direct access to God and do not need a priest as an intermediary. Pastors are their teachers and leaders and offer personal counsel.

Protestants view icons and images as potential distractions from worship of God and not objects of veneration.

Protestants generally reject the doctrine of purgatory, at death people either go to heaven or hell.

Protestants believe humanity is wholly affected by sin and that man is fundamentally a sinner inheriting his sinful nature from Adam and Eve. Sins are a matter of individual conscience and brings guilt. Unrepented sin results in eternal separation from God.

For Protestants, repenting of sin is an inward process not requiring confession to the pastor. Acceptance of and faith in Christ's atonement and following the commandments are necessary for salvation ("salvage"). The sinner may get help or counsel from a pastor but he's not required to do so.

Ultimately, because He love us, God forgives the repentant sinner because He wants the Soul to progress and reunite with Him. Mercy before justice, if asked for, and whenever possible. The person perceives this forgiveness as love, with a tremendous weight being lifted off the shoulders.

Forgiveness is received by trusting Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection as the basis for pardon and justification by faith. Sincere contrition and confession of sin to God are required along with turning away from the sin. Personal prayer and partaking of communion are part of the process. A Christian pastor will pray for and with the person, offer counsel, and may pronounce God's forgiveness liturgically, understood to be God's pardon received by faith, not of the pastor's own power.

Church tradition isn't important for Protestants unless it is grounded in scripture, and most Protestant denominations allow clergy to marry.

Protestants practice confession directly to God and do not require confession to a priest. They believe forgiveness of sins comes directly through faith in Christ.

Protestants study the early Christian councils for historical and theological value only. They inherited the Catholic Filioque belief that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

Protestants view all vocations and marriage as equally valid callings from God.

Worship varies widely by denomination, most emphasize preaching and Bible study in both traditional and contemporary services. Music, prayer, and communion are important but secondary to the sermon.

Catholicism

The Catholic Church traces its lineage directly to the apostolic church through Rome, claiming unbroken succession from St. Peter.

It accepts sacred scripture and sacred tradition as authoritative sources of revelation. The Pope, as the successor of St. Peter, holds supreme teaching authority (magisterium) in the Church. The Bible is interpreted within the framework tradition and current teaching.

Catholicism has a hierarchical structure with the Pope at the head,. The Pope is considered the vicar of Christ on earth and has supreme authority over doctrine and discipline. followed by cardinals, bishops, and priests. The Pope is considered infallible when speaking on matters of faith and doctrine.

Salvation comes through faith in Christ combined with good works and participation in the sacraments. Grace is mediated through the Church and its seven sacraments.

Mary is venerated as the Mother of God and is believed to have been conceived without sin (Immaculate Conception) and taken bodily into heaven (Assumption). Catholics ask Mary to intercede with God on their behalf.

The seven sacraments recognized by Catholics are: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. Sacraments are believed to convey grace in themselves and are essential channels through which God's grace flows to believers.

Catholics believe in transubstantiation, that the bread and wine are literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ, though they retain the appearance of bread and wine. This is considered a miraculous change.

Catholics view baptism as a sacrament that confers saving grace. Through baptism the believer is incorporated into the body of Christ, original sin is remitted, and the Holy Spirit is received. Adult baptism is generally by pouring water over the head or by single immersion.

Infant baptism by pouring makes the infant a member of the Church regardless of later professing faith. Immediately after baptism, the priest prays the "prayer of confirmation" by laying on of hands and anointing with holy oil.

Catholics maintain a hierarchical priesthood with ordained priests who serve as intermediaries between God and the people. Priests are celibate and are believed to benefit from apostolic succession.

Catholics use religious art and statues in churches and homes as aids to devotion, but are not in themselves worshiped. Veneration is directed to the person or saint depicted, not the image itself.

Catholics de-emphasized the following passage in Deuteronomy: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."

Catholics believe in purgatory—a state of purification after death where Souls are cleansed of venial sins and the effects of sin before entering heaven. Prayers and masses for the dead are believed to help Souls in purgatory.

Catholics believe in original sin, the inherited loss of original holiness. Beyond that, sins committed by men and women fall into two categories. Mortal sin, or sin of a grave matter, involves full knowledge and deliberate consent and severs communion with God. Venial sin involves lesser offenses that compromise the relationship with God. Mortal sins are a judicial matter within Catholicism requiring intervention by a priest.

In Catholicism the priest acts as a mediator, in the person of Christ. In that role he offers absolution within the sacrament of reconciliation. In this process, the priest can forgive a mortal sin which otherwise would doom the person to eternal damnation.

Catholicism requires contrition, sincere sorrow for having offended God, conversion of the heart by turning away from sin and toward God, and performing penance (prayer, almsgiving, fasting) assigned by the priest in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Catholics highly value Sacred Tradition as equal to Scripture in authority. Tradition includes the teachings of the Church Fathers and papal pronouncements.

The Catholic Church requires celibacy for priests, viewing it as a spiritual discipline that allows priests to be fully devoted to their ministry.

Catholics practice sacramental confession (reconciliation) with a priest, who has the authority to absolve sins in Christ's name. Regular confession is encouraged, especially before receiving Communion.

Catholics recognize ecumenical councils and their decisions are binding on the faithful.

Catholics affirm the Filioque clause as part of doctrine which means that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, emphasizing the unity and equality of the three persons of the Trinity.

Catholicism has a strong monastic tradition with orders such as Benedictines, Franciscans, and Dominicans. Monasticism is viewed as a higher calling, though all vocations in life are considered holy. Monks and nuns play an important role in the Church's spiritual and intellectual life.

Catholic worship centers on the Mass (Eucharist), which follows a set liturgical structure. Mass is highly formal and ritualistic, with specific prayers, readings, and ceremonies. Incense, vestments, and sacred music are integral to worship.

Not asking for Mary’s intercession does not make someone less of a good Catholic. Marian devotion (praying to Mary, asking her intercession) is a recommended Catholic practice but not a requirement for salvation or being a faithful Catholic.

The Church teaches Mary’s role as model and intercessor, and encourages Marian devotion as a means to grow closer to Christ — but devotion is voluntary. Priests and spiritual directors typically respect different devotional practices and encourage what helps a person grow in holiness.

Eastern Orthodox

Orthodoxy claims apostolic succession through the Eastern patriarchs and developed distinctly in the Byzantine and Orthodox Christian world.

The Orthodox church emphasizes the authority of the early Church Fathers, particularly from the first seven ecumenical councils. It rejects papal supremacy but respects the role of bishops and ecumenical councils. Authority is not centralized as it is in Catholicism.

Leadership is decentralized with leadership shared among patriarchs in Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, with no single leader equivalent to the Pope. Decisions are made through ecumenical councils and consensus among bishops.

Bishops are highly respected as successors of the apostles. Rome's claim to universal jurisdiction is rejected, the split with Rome occurred in 1054 over papal authority claims.

Salvation is understood as deification, becoming united with God and sharing in His divine life. Orthodoxy emphasizes the role of grace and the sacraments (mysteries) but also personal transformation and sanctification. Salvation is seen as a process of spiritual growth and union with God. The sacraments are termed mysteries in Orthodoxy because they point to something infinitely greater than what humans can readily understand.

Mary is highly honored and venerated as the Mother of God, but not worshiped. Saints are venerated and their intercession is sought, but worship is reserved for God alone. Icons of Mary and saints are central to Orthodox worship and spiritual practice.

Eastern Orthodox recognize seven mysteries (sacraments): Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. Mysteries convey grace. They are means of encountering the divine and experiencing God's presence.

Eastern Orthodox believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist but do not define the mechanism of change as precisely as Catholics do. They use the term "metabole" (change) rather than transubstantiation. The Eucharist is central to Orthodox worship and is received frequently by the faithful.

Orthodox baptism is similar to Catholicism however water immersion is required, and is done three times (trine) once for each part of the prayer. This late practice in Orthodox fits the Trinitarian formula.

Eastern Orthodox maintain apostolic succession and an ordained priesthood, deacons, priests, and bishops, but the priesthood is seen as a ministry rather than an overriding authority.

Members of the Orthodox church place great theological and spiritual significance on icons, which are windows to the divine and aids to prayer. Venerating icons (showing them reverence through bowing, kissing, incense) is an essential part of Orthodox worship and spirituality, and is thus sacramental.

Eastern Orthodox do not believe in purgatory but in a state of purification and growth after death. They pray for the dead and believe prayers can help departed Souls, but the afterlife is less defined than in Catholicism.

Orthodox do not believe in original sin except for an inherited propensity and wounded nature. Humans are created in the image of God and that image is the basis of communion. Sin is a spiritual sickness that impairs the ability to commune with God. Sin is rooted in disordered desires and self centered-ness. Sin affects both the individual and the world.

For Orthodox, sin is not a judicial matter, however the priest can offer counsel. The goal is healing through repentance and restoration, not punishment. The Eucharist and other sacraments assist the healing process.

Eastern Orthodox deeply respect the tradition of the early church, particularly the teachings of the Church Fathers and the decisions of the seven ecumenical councils. Tradition is understood as the living experience and teaching of the Church throughout history, inseparable from scripture.

Orthodox priests can marry before ordination, and most parish priests are married. Bishops are normally celibate. Marriage is viewed as a holy sacrament.

Eastern Orthodox practice confession (penance) with a priest, but it is understood as spiritual guidance and healing rather than a pronouncement of absolution as it is with Catholics.

Eastern Orthodox recognize the first seven ecumenical councils (up to 787 CE) as fully authoritative and binding.

Eastern Orthodox believe the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (without Filioque), with the Son's role understood as one through whom the Spirit is sent, but not as an originating source.

Eastern Orthodox monasticism is deeply valued. Monks and nuns are highly respected, and monasteries are centers of spiritual life, theological learning, and prayer. Monasticism is seen as a way of pursuing theosis (union with God).

Eastern Orthodox worship is highly liturgical and sacramental, centered on the Divine Liturgy (Eucharist). Worship is characterized by rich symbolism, icons, incense, chanting, and ancient

liturgical forms. The liturgy is understood as a foretaste of heaven. Worship emphasizes beauty, mystery, and the transcendence of God.

Eastern Orthodox eschatology affirms the Second Coming, resurrection, and final judgment but focus is on living in relationship with God and the hope of theosis (union with God) both in this life and the life to come.

Suggested Reading

In order:

The Perennial Philosophy - Huxley, essential and easy to read

https://archive.org/download/perennialphilosp035505mbp/perennialphilosp035505mbp.pdf

New Seeds of Contemplation - Thomas Merton

https://maryourhelp.org/e-books/catholic-ebooks/catholic-ebooks2.html

Mysticism: A Study in Nature.. Evelyn Underhill
https://ccel.org/ccel/u/underhill/mysticism/cache/mysticism.pdf

or

Essentials of Mysticism - Evelyn Underhill, large comprehensive book, well worth getting

https://ccel.org/ccel/u/underhill/essentials/cache/essentials.pdf

or

Practical Mysticism - Evelyn Underhill, excellent, sometimes combined with above

https://ccel.org/ccel/u/underhill/practical/cache/practical.pdf

Christian Mystics - Ursula King, discusses lives of mystics. Inexpensive used on eBay

Christ the Eternal Tao - Hieromonk Damascene - second half of book is great

The Divine Within - Huxley

https://huxleyarchive.org/Non-fiction/BOOKS/The%20Divine%20Within.pdf

The Greatest Achievement in Life - Five Traditions of Mysticism (online PDF)

https://archive.org/download/TheGreatestAchievementInLife/gail2012.pdf

The Imitation of Christ - Thomas Kempis

http://www.catholicplanet.com/ebooks/Imitation-of-Christ.pdf

The Life of St. Teresa of Avila - Account of a very human mystic. Inexpensive on Amazon. Online copies marginal quality.

Dozens of articles on Mysticism, search at: http://www.academia.edu

Bibliography

This listing is heavily Orthodox and Catholic weighted, not because of bias, but because the majority of Christian Mystics were from those traditions.

Eastern Orthodox had monastic traditions that institutionalized contemplative prayer, and mortification. They passed contemplative methods down through centuries.

Catholic religious orders had structured prayer, scholarship, spiritual directors, covenants and monasteries that enabled consistent practice and devotion.

Protestant traditions had little structure and unfortunately produced few mystics.

Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck

Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross

Cloud of Unknowing - Anon

**** Christ the Eternal Tao - Hieromonk Damascene

**** Christian Mystics - Ursula King

** Concordant Literal New Testament - Concordant Publishing (also OT)

Dark Night of the Soul - St. John of the Cross

Dionysius the Areopagite - On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology - C. E. Colt

Divine Indwelling - Woodward Brown

Dying To Self - William Law

**** Essentials of Mysticism - Evelyn Underhill

Evagrius Ponticus (Early Church Fathers)

Fathers of the Desert VOL-I & II

* Four Witnesses - Rod Bennett

I Am That - Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

* Inner Christianity - Richard Smoley

Introduction to Carmelite Spirituality of the Cloister - Carmelite Monks

Introduction to the Devout Life - St. Francis de Sales

John Owen on the Holy Sprit - Pneumatologia

John Merton - A variety of books available

***** King James Version of the Bible

Life of St. Teresa of Jesus, of The Order of Our Lady of Carmel - St. Teresa of Avila

Life and Works of St. Bernard

New Seeds of Contemplation - Thomas Merton

*** Meister Eckhart's Sermons - Johannes Eckhart

* Meeting the Masters - William Wildblood

Nature and Grace - Thomas Aquinas

Pensees - Blase Pascal

*** Practical Mysticism - Evelyn Underhill

Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Spiritual Canticle - St John of the Cross

St. Bernard of Clairvaux - On Loving God

The Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross - Carmelite Monks

*** The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart

The Complete Works of Saint Augustine

The Complete Works of Origen

The Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius

The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena

The Divine Indwelling - William Law

*** The Divine Within - Huxley

** The Long Loneliness - Dorothy Day

The Essential Plotinus

The Experience of God Vol 1 - Dumitru Staniloae

*** The Greatest Achievement in Life - Five Traditions of Mysticism

** The Imitation of Christ - Thomas Kempis

*** The Interior Castle - St. Teresa - Carmelite Monks

The Journal of George Fox

** The Life of St. Teresa of Avila - Carmelite Monks

The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus, of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel

The Light Within - Thomas Kelly

**** The Perennial Philosophy - Huxley

**** The Psychology of Religion - Hood, Hill, Spilka (Chapter 11)

The Selected Mystical Writings of William Law

The Six Enneads - Plotinus

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

The Way of Perfection - St. Teresa - Carmelite Monks

Treatise on the Love of God - St. Francis de Sales

When Souls had Wings - Givens

A note on Sources

I've been researching this material for several years using physical books and PDF's.

In late 2025 Artificial Intelligence became available via chat interfaces on the web. I began using it for further research and came up with wonderful quotes, a few of which I cited in early versions of this paper.

At the beginning of 2026 as this work progressed I began looking at the original source material, generally in PDF's of old books. I couldn't find any of the AI supposedly quoted material in the original works. The concepts AI gave were correct however, and consistent with books I'd read over time, and it did provide good leads on people I needed to research further.

Trying to find exact writing of the original authors is difficult primarily because most wrote in a different language, and translations aren't exact. But for most there are fairly well established translations which can be obtained in PDF form. AI's mistakes however weren't due to translation problems. The quotes it gave just didn't exist anywhere. AI simply synthesized everything and pretended.

AI goes through a two stage process. The first stage is called embedding, using a large language model to evaluate the source documents based on what you're looking for to produce the intermediate form. In the second stage the data from the intermediate form is used to synthesize an answer that will be pleasing to the user. In other words the concepts are there but the original actual quotes have not been carried through. Both steps are combined in what you see with a chat on the web, a synthesized result accurately representing the original, yet not containing any of the original.

In the Spring of 2026 I finally gave up trying to track things down with web based AI and installed local AI (Llama-Index) on my main computer. In a standard installation this suffers from much the same problems as web based but I modified the code to enable extraction of the original unmodified text from the documents without going to the synthesis step. The best thing about this is that PDF's in a folder are searched for the "concepts" expressed in the prompt string, not words or phrases. This is called semantic search.

In this paper, using concepts that were validated across many physical as well as PDF books, I've summarized what I believe to be the truest spiritual path. Ultimately spirituality is an individual pursuit, so I trust that you'll do your own research. Hopefully this is a good and true start, but you need to verify that. And then, like me, after so much book learning, you'll move on to actually practicing this, actually *being* it.

Tools

In 2026, the following tools are available on Windows 10/11. The vast majority of the books listed in the bibliography are available as PDF's on the web. The following tool enables quickly searching through a folder of PDF's and is highly recommended:

> DocFetcher. Easy to configure. Indexes text in all files withing a folder, and sub folders, including PDF's. https://sourceforge.net/projects/docfetcher/

My all time favorite windows tool is "Everything". Once installed it will index every file on your computer and provide almost instant searches of file names. I have over 5 million files on my system and it works great:

> "Everything." https://www.voidtools.com/downloads/

I've yet to find a really good PDF reader that allows underlining, but the following works fairly well:

Okular PDF reader
https://okular.kde.org/download/