

A W A K E N I N G
T O T H E
S A C R E D

Creating a Personal Spiritual Life

L A M A S U R Y A D A S

Awakening

to the
Sacred



*Creating a Spiritual Life
from Scratch*



LAMA SURYA DAS

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Praise for AWAKENING TO THE SACRED

Advance Praise . . .

“Awakening to the Sacred will bring great gifts into the lives of its readers. It is user-friendly—filled with beautiful teachings, gracious stories, dozens of practices, humorous takes and with practical ways to invite our hearts to awaken to the highest wisdom in every part of our lives.”

—Jack Kornfield, author of *A Path with Heart*

“Lama Surya Das offers a fresh and invigorating approach to the perennial quest which gives natural spirituality its rightful place at the center of things. It points to a way of being which does not depend on creed or belief, but on the centrality of one’s own experience, and it offers a helping hand and open heart to the beginner and seasoned spiritual traveler alike.”

—Mitchell Kapor, founder of the Lotus Foundation

“Awakening to the Sacred is a book of profound beginnings for the spiritual path. Written with tenderness and warmth, it invites all beings to begin the never ending process of their own spiritual unfolding, and is a wonderful companion on the way of the sacred in everyday life.”

—Ken Wilber, author of *The Eye of Spirit*
and *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*

“Awakening to the Sacred is a feast for the soul. Lama Surya Das gives us the benefit of nearly thirty years of seeking, practice, and study. His vision is our opportunity.”

—Mark Epstein, author of *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*

“Surya Das brings a reader the how and why, the tools and the inspiration, to live one’s life with spiritual practice as the priority. With clarity and humor, through stories and practice, this book welcomes those of all spiritual traditions to the process of becoming fully alive.”

—Sharon Salzberg, author of *A Heart As Wide As the World*,
and *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*

Books by Lama Surya Das

AWAKENING THE BUDDHA WITHIN
THE SNOW LION'S TURQUOISE MANE
NATURAL GREAT PERFECTION
(with Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche)

*This book is dedicated to
my dear Dharma friends and colleagues,
the best of companions on the Great Way*

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for
the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence
toward the people . . . re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss what insults your very soul, and
your very flesh shall become a great poem.

WALT WHITMAN

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May all peace, blessings, good fortune, and delight be theirs.

Introduction — Awakening to the Bigger Picture

Let none turn over books, or roam the stars in quest of God, who sees him not in man.

JOHANN KASPAR LAVATER, Swiss poet (1741–1801)

If you have picked up this book, then in all probability you are a seeker. My dictionary has a simple definition of a seeker as “one who seeks: a seeker of truth.” In practical terms, a seeker is a spiritual traveller or wayfarer, a pilgrim who has embarked on a quest to find and experience the sacred. Seekers are ubiquitous: They can be found in every nation; they can be part of any religious group or denomination. The search for truth and love—something beyond and bigger than ourselves—is the common element.

Seekers want to understand and explore themselves as well as the universe with all its mysteries, both known and unknowable. In their hearts, seekers believe that the universe makes sense and that their lives have meaning. They believe not only that truth exists, but that it can indeed be found, and experienced.

When I was young, and even more foolish than I am today, I believed that one had to travel far and wide in order to seek truth, divine reality, or whatever you call it. I believed that truth would most likely be found in the world’s so-called sacred places. Yet the fact is that truth is everywhere; it knows no religious, cultural, temporal, or ethnic bounds. Truth is the perfect circle. Its center is everywhere; its circumference stretches into infinite space. The land on which we stand is sacred, no matter where we stand.

The Tao Te Ching says:

Without going out of my door
I can know all things on earth.
Without looking out of my window
I can know the ways of heaven.

Each of us—you and me—stands at the center of his or her own truth. Throughout the ages, saints, sages, and holy men and women have all discovered the same thing—that truth is found by living truly. Awareness is the essential ingredient in a spiritual life. Seekers walk the spiritual path to enlightenment because they believe it will bring a true understanding of reality—an understanding of “what is” and how things work. The spiritual path is best walked step by step, very mindfully, with as much consciousness and commitment as one can summon.

I firmly believe that we’ve all been touched by the sacred, no matter how fleetingly. We’ve known breakthroughs, epiphanies, and blessed times of grace, no matter how ephemeral. Often these vivid moments happen when we are children. People tell me that they remember times, albeit brief, when the smoky veils of illusion and delusion lifted, and they were literally able to “see the light.” Others have related childhood memories that include relationships with angels. Still others say they have had no such otherworldly encounters, yet they remember experiencing a sense of cosmic divine love, a magical universe of goodness, interconnectedness, and belonging so profound that it inspired them for a lifetime.

As adults, we also have brief glimpses of a more sacred reality. Sometimes we find it in nature—on a solitary walk in the woods or along a sandy beach. Sometimes it happens when we come into contact with a person whose spiritual energy is inspirational. Sometimes it happens when we attend a worship service, a meditation session, a spiritual retreat, or even something as secular as a fine concert. We come away transported, momentarily transformed by what we’ve seen and heard. We feel different—more grounded, genuinely real, and “alive,” as well as more connected to the divine. We feel as though we have finally come home. We want the feeling to continue, and we think to ourselves, I must do this more often. This is something that should be part of my life—all the time.

Like all things, these glorious seconds of illumination eventually vanish. And when they do, the lives and worlds we have constructed for ourselves come rushing back in like the relentless tide. Our habitual patterns return, and the sublime feelings evaporate. But we retain the memories of those moments that contained the essence of spirituality—true peace, love, freedom, and a sense of belonging. It makes sense that we want to revisit and re-create these spiritual memories. It makes sense that we want to move in and stay closer to the light.

I've spent most of my adult life in various Buddhist monasteries, as well as ashrams and retreat centers, so I feel as though I have a fairly good idea of what it means to want to lead a more centered and sacred life. And I know how challenging it can be to take the first committed steps on such a path. When I give lectures or readings, almost inevitably one or more members of the audience comes up afterward to tell me how much he or she wants to become more committed to spiritual values in his or her life. They usually tell me how difficult it is to find specific day-by-day ways to do so. Often they go so far as to ask me whether I think they have to leave their lives, their jobs, and their mates so that they can do more than merely pay lip service to their spiritual inclinations. Some even ask me to recommend specific sites in the Himalayas.

These people all want personal transformation and direct religious experience. Isn't that what we all want? Don't we all want enlightenment? As a new century begins, the question is not whether we here in the West want enlightenment, but rather how. How can we find spiritual transformation? How can we find a renewed sense of life, purpose, and meaning—here and now?

One of the greatest challenges that Western seekers face is finding ways to integrate spiritual values and pragmatic and practical practices into whatever they do. As seekers, we intuitively believe that the visible world we live in is part of a greater spiritual universe. We aspire to somehow experience a more palpable connection with that sacred universe. We sincerely believe that it is possible to become part of that universe by actualizing the divine light or spirit that is found within each of us.

Like me, most of the people who attend my lectures come from a religious tradition other than Buddhism—usually Christianity or Judaism, traditions that often stress service both to God and to humanity. Typically, these people are drawn by various Buddhist practices, such as meditation, because they want to bring more mindfulness and serenity into their lives. They are hoping that mindfulness, in turn, will help them become more compassionate, loving, and caring; they are hoping that mindfulness will help them find ways to serve and contribute; they are hoping that mindfulness will help them get rid of old patterns and habits that have proven to be unwise. These people want to be and act in more highly evolved conscious and wise ways. They want their lives to reflect more noble and inclusive aspirations and concerns. They want to live up to who and what they are. They want to fulfill their spiritual potential. They want their lives to have spiritual purpose.

In the early 1970s, I was fortunate enough to be present when the Dalai Lama was teaching at Bodhi Gaya, the town in northern India where the Buddha became enlightened. Tens of thousands of people came to hear the Dalai Lama speak. The majority of them were Tibetan and Himalayan, but there were also small clusters of Westerners, most of them like myself, hippies on the Overland Route from Turkey to the end of the road in Kathmandu, Nepal. When the Dalai Lama was finished, he asked if there were any questions, and one long-haired American guy stood to ask the Dalai Lama the following question: "What is the meaning of life?"

The Dalai Lama answered, "To be happy and to make others happy."

At the time I thought this was sort of a superficial answer. It seemed so simplistic. I was twenty-one and very much "into" reading philosophers and novelists like Schopenhauer, Dostoevski, Camus, and Vonnegut. It was that era. I probably still wanted to hear that the meaning of life was complex and understandable only to twenty-one-year-old intellectual elitists such as myself. I just didn't get the Dalai Lama's answer, "To be happy and to make others happy." What did that mean? And wasn't it

hedonistic as well, I wondered? In my confusion, happiness seemed like such an ordinary self-centered concern.

I pondered the Dalai Lama's words for a long time; I even wrote them down in the small notebook I always carried with me in those days. Years later I was reading over some ancient Tibetan texts, one of which summed up the purpose of the spiritual path in its entirety with two simple phrases: for the benefit of self and for the benefit of others. It was then that I realized that self-interest isn't always selfish. What the Dalai Lama had said was at one and the same time perfectly clear as well as totally profound.

It's been almost three decades since I stood in the all-day sun in the tiny village of Bodh Gaya in the middle of the desert to get my first glimpse of the compassionate Tibetan leader. Today I appreciate the wisdom of what the Dalai Lama said. I also more fully appreciate how difficult it is to act and think consistently in ways that make ourselves and others happy. Think of what it would mean if we were always able to be happy and to make others happy—truly happy and fulfilled, not just paying lip service to happiness and wearing a facile smile. If we were able to do that, we would be living without thoughts, words, or actions that make ourselves or anyone else unhappy. We would be able to stop being either hurtful or self-destructive. We would be living without internal contradictions or conflict. What an amazing goal! What amazing lives we would have! What amazing people we'd be! What amazing spirits we *are*.

Matters of the Spirit



Great men are they who see that spiritual is stronger than any material force, that thoughts rule the world.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Who is holy? What is sacred?

As spiritual wayfarers, what do we think about? What do we talk about? Divine Presence, God, spirit, soul, reality, truth, self-knowledge, mystical experience, inner peace, enlightenment. The spiritual life is concerned with issues such as these. And when we talk about our experiences of the divine, we don't all use the same vocabulary. Sometimes we use the same words and mean different things; sometimes we use different words and mean the same things.

We share an intuitive sense that we are on a journey and that we must search for real answers to our real questions. We do this even knowing that we may find out that the answer is that there is no ultimate answer; some things remain unknowable. And that answer may well be enough. Nonetheless, as seekers we choose to live out our questions. Infinity is open-ended. That's what Buddhists call "sunyata," or emptiness.

Whatever words we choose to use, spiritual matters concern themselves with the true bottom line with those things that really matter in the long run. As spiritual seekers, we think about how we can learn to love more deeply, know ourselves more truly, and connect with the divine more fully.

We think about those things that are beyond the self; we think about the intangible as well as the tangible; we think about the visible and the invisible; we think about touching the palpable sweetness of spirit; we think about how we can find ourselves in the whole, the bigger picture, the universe. "mandala."

Entering the Stream of Truth and Light

Lead us from darkness to the light;

lead us from illusion to wisdom

lead us from death to the deathlessness.

Lead us from conflict and suffering to harmony, peace, and happiness.

This prayer is from the Upanishads, the mystical Hindu scriptures, first written down sometime around 900 B.C. In many ways I think of these four lines as the universal seeker's prayer. Since the beginning of recorded time, the quest for truth, love, and the highest good has been associated with the quest for light.

As seekers, you and I search for illumination and guidance. We want understanding—not only of our immediate problems but also of the great mysteries of the universe. We want to be able to move from murky illusion and confusion to wisdom, certainty, and clarity. We want to go from delusion to truth; we want the promise that we will be able to escape the darkness of the soul's infernal region and make it to a place of infinite luminous peace, contentment, and divine unconditional love. We want to leave ignorance and unconscious as well as semiconscious behavior behind. We know that the antidote to ignorance isn't just more information. We know that our spiritual life depends on our being able to cultivate a higher consciousness—a mindful consciousness—as well as greater awareness. We know that our spiritual life depends on cultivating our own capacity to love.

There is an old Jewish saying: "God is closest to those with broken hearts." For most of us this is a true statement. At times of great sadness and personal crisis we feel more tenderhearted and closer to our soulful center. When we are most confused and buffeted about by the vagaries of life, we hunger intensely for spiritual guidance and wisdom. Hasn't that been true in your own life? As you seek to deepen your spirituality, you may be reacting to a pattern of ups and downs that has proven to be ultimately dissatisfying. You may feel inwardly empty and long for a deeper connection to meaning, purpose, and the sacred. You may feel spiritually hungry as well as alone.

Some of you may feel discouraged because you believe that you have already "given way to much." Or perhaps you feel as though you can't "give" or don't know how to "give" what life requires; some of you may actually freeze up when it comes to giving or receiving love or spiritual gifts. Many of you have come to see that you are responsible for your own fate, your own experience, your own karma. You want to help create a better world for others as well as yourself.

Difficulties and disappointments often help us find and strengthen our spiritual resolve. At the moment, life's confusions have aided you by making you wise enough to know that you don't have all the answers. This awareness—this sliver of light—has made you conscious of the possibility of some form of inner radiance, clarity, or light. You can almost see the light—hear it, feel it. You want to be able to know it and be(come) it. This glimmer of awareness represents an epiphany or minor enlightenment.

The joys and sorrows of your human life are presenting you with a tremendous opportunity. Taking the spiritual path to enlightenment implies some unconscious if not explicit belief in the possibility of deliverance, self-mastery, and transcendence. Others before you have plunged into the sea of spirit and bliss; others have found what they were seeking while drinking deeply of the immortal, elixir-like waters of enlightenment. Why should any of us spend our lives as onlookers at the seaside, nervously wading in the shallows? Life has a lot more to offer than that. Others have found freedom, satisfaction, and liberation. You can do it too. We can all do it. Together. The time has come to stride in and begin swimming in the deeper waters. Surf's up!

Cultivating Awareness of the Light Within

The heart and mind can find peace and harmony by contemplating the transcendental nature of the true self as supreme and fulgent light.

From the Yoga Sutra of PATANJALI, second century B.C.

Patanjali is often called the father of yoga because he was the first person to codify and write down yogic practices. In this meditation instruction, he is telling us to let go of all distracting sights, smells, and sounds and meditate on our spiritual nature, our luminous true self. He is telling us to look inside and experience the radiance within.

All cultures, peoples, and religious groups through all times have talked about the phenomena of light in the context of the religious or mystical experience. Those who have seen visions of holy beings typically see them surrounded by white light. People have always described going to the light, finding the light, being called by the light, dissolving in the light. We read about light in The Egyptian Book of the Dead as well as The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Men, women, and children who have had classic near-death experiences vividly describe arriving in a place of white light; they speak of themselves and others as being bathed in white light.

Prior to being described as the light of any religion, light was just light. Light is a part of the primary source material. Later, as the history of mankind developed, the concept of light became institutionalized; it was then interpreted according to cultural and religious beliefs. Pure light then became light of God, light of truth, light of Buddha, light of Jesus, cosmic light, and ocean of light depending upon where you were born and what you were taught. Light, however, is the constant. It is a fundamental energy.

The New Testament, referring to John the Baptist, reads: “He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light that all might believe through him.” Later Jesus says, “Put your trust in the light which you have it so that you may become sons of light.” God appeared to Moses out of the firelight of the burning bush. When Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord, according to the Old Testament, he said: “I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him.”

British mystic George Fox, who founded the Quaker religion, used the term “inner light” to describe our ability to personally experience God within ourselves. He himself had such an experience, which left him with the lifelong conviction that everyone can hear God’s voice directly without mediation by priests or church ritual. This is the central tenet of the Society of Friends.

According to Buddhism, all beings are imbued with a spark of inner divine light. In describing our original Buddha-nature, we use phrases such as innate luminosity, primordial radiance, the unobscured clear natural mind, and the clear light of reality. Zen masters call this original-nature or your-face-before-your-parents-were-born. The Jewish mystics use similar words when they speak of the inner spark or the spark of God. The Koran, referring to man, talks about the little candle flame burning in its niche in the wall of God’s temple.

In one of the most famous examples of religious transformation, St. Paul found God on the road to Damascus. Those who were travelling with Paul could not hear God, but they all saw the light. The New Testament quotes Paul, “And when I could not see because of the brightness of the light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me.”

Almost inevitably a spiritual search becomes a search for divine or sacred light. By cultivating our sacred core, we search for this light in ourselves as well as in the divine. This light is not always immediately visible. It’s as though we are digging deep into the earth. At first we find earth on top of a rock on top of shale, but if we were able to keep going, eventually we would hit the earth’s luminous molten core. This same concept applies to the clear, luminous light that resides in each of us. This

our primordial nature, pure energy or spirit, without beginning or end; it is the fundamental ground being.

In Tibetan Buddhism this clear light is called “Rigpa” or Ground Luminosity. The Tibetan Book of the Dead teaches that at the time of death Ground Luminosity—innate Buddha-nature—naturally dawns for everyone. As all of our negative emotions and worldly concerns fall away, this natural mirror is left, free of the darkness of ignorance; in this way the luminous nature of *being* surfaces and shines out.

Tibetan meditators are trained to be able to recognize this luminosity when it occurs at the moment of death, for this is one shining moment when the possibility of liberation occurs. But the possibility of liberation also occurs at every moment of life. All we have to do is let go of the extraneous and recognize and follow the natural light of awareness and truth.

In nature, of course, light is essential for growth. Watch your houseplants and see how they turn toward the light for nourishment. In the same way, as seekers, we turn to divine light for nourishment because of a natural spiritual tropism. We can begin to train in divine light meditation by closing our eyes and looking into our own inner radiance. Anybody can do this. Close your eyes, press lightly on your eyeballs, and see the shimmering black light. Peer into that, and you’ll discover that it’s not a dark beyond your eyelids as you might think.

In his fine book *The Healing Power of Mind*, Tibetan teacher Tulku Thondup Rinpoche says:

“Meditations on light can be used to heal specific problems, or they can help generally to make us feel more open and spacious. As we meditate on light, we can imagine the light as expanding beyond our bodies and shining forth without end. We can see the whole world as touched, suffused, and transformed into pure and peaceful light. If we meditate on light in a very open way, we realize that light is infinite, without borders or the limits of time and space.”

Another way to train in inner light meditation is by practicing a simple candle-flame meditation. To do this:

Light a candle in a darkened room.

Move about two feet away from it and sit down, facing the candle flame.

Get comfortable.

Then begin breathing in and out quietly through your nostrils.

Let your body relax. Let your breath relax.

Just concentrate on the candle flame.

Watch it for several minutes.

Don’t think about anything in particular. Let your thoughts go; let them settle.

Watch the flame. Let your mind go into it.

Suddenly blow out the candle and close your eyes.

See the image that forms on the inside of your eyelids.

Meditate on that light.

Yet another simple way to become conscious of inner light is by closing your eyes and focusing on the point on your forehead that is located between your eyebrows and up about an inch. This is called your “third eye.” In kundalini yoga this is known as the forehead “chakra,” one of the seven essential energy points, or chakras, in the human body.

Become more aware of the light in the center of your forehead in the following way:

Get comfortable, close your eyes, and focus on the forehead chakra. Find the point of light and for a few minutes concentrate on that. This light is part of your own natural healing energy system. To

doing this in a darkened room.

~~For a moment, let go of your worldly concerns. These are the preoccupations that can limit your vision. Let the forehead chakra open up, and experience a more spacious, open sense of who you are. Relax. Don't get nervous about finding either a new place in the universe or a new sense of what is important. Don't be afraid to find your own inner light.~~

Thoughts About God

Every day people are straying away from the church and going *back to God*.

LENNY BRUCE

God requires no synagogue—except in the heart.

HASIDIC SAYING

God has no religion.

MAHATMA GANDHI

The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.

XENOPHANES

If triangles had a god, he would have three sides.

CHARLES DE MONTESQUIEU

Nirvana is another word for God.

THICH NHAT HANH

The Kotzker Rabbi once asked several of his disciples: “Where *does God exist?*” “Everywhere,” the surprised disciples replied with alacrity. “No,” said the wise Rebbe. “God exists only where man lets him in.”

HASIDIC TALES

God and Buddha, in Form and Essence

The truth is, God talks to everybody.

NEALE DONALD WALSCH, *Conversations with God*

There is probably no other word more open to interpretation, misinterpretation, debate, and argument than the word “God.” That’s why talk of religion, along with politics, is so often verboten at holiday gatherings in America. It’s just too thorny to risk alienating your family and friends.

To at least some degree, your concept about who or what God is or isn’t depends on what you were taught, and how you reacted to those teachings. Here in the West, the vast majority of us grew up with a cultural connection to the Judeo-Christian traditions and the God these religions espoused. And what did God look like? Probably an older white guy with a long beard, seated above or astride the clouds. Or maybe he was a dead ringer for George Burns.

Small pockets in southern India are predominantly Christian. The Jesus depicted in their art does not have light skin or hair. He looks Indian—a lot like the Indian god Krishna in fact, with dark hair and eyes. This is what Joseph Campbell called the God with the myriad faces. Or as Muslims say, Allah has a thousand names.

Despite all this talk of God, many of us in this multicolored, pluralistic, multinational world we live in have either forgotten, or were never taught, the common origins of the concept of the one God. I know that I have spoken with many Western friends who know an amazing amount about Asian languages and religions, yet didn’t seem to realize that the Christian God of the New Testament, Yahweh, the Jewish God of the Old Testament; and Allah, the Islamic God of the Koran, are one and the same—or that all three of these “Western” religions evolved from the same source.

As young people here in the West, no matter what our religious affiliation or how we imagined God to be, we all heard a great deal about him—at home, in schools, as well as in places of worship. We went to movies that talked about and sometimes even showed God speaking down from the heavens. In our cities and towns, we regularly walked past churches and temples and heard the songs and prayers behind the closed doors. On Sundays, Christmas, and Easter we turned on television sets and saw cardinals and bishops, and sometimes even the pope, talking about God. During Hanukkah, Yom Kippur, and Passover, we heard about the relationship between the Jewish people and the God of the Old Testament, Jehovah or Yahweh.

A great many of us learned how to pray to God as children. Some of us grew up feeling very connected to the God we prayed to; others had no such attachment; still others remember being afraid of God and his wrath and judgment. It didn’t always seem to be a very pretty picture. In short, we were all familiar with the concept of God, whether or not we ascribed to it.

In my family, for example, my father followed the religious traditions of Judaism. My mother, like many of her generation, was less religious and appeared more connected to the Jewish culture than to the religion. I remember my grandmother, however, telling me never to spell out the word “God” because that would be using the name in vain; I would, she said, be tempting God’s wrath. “G-d,” she assured me, was the correct way to go. Later, I got into trouble on my grammar school papers and reports because I tried to insist on the spelling I had learned at home.

In Buddhist countries such as Tibet one hears little or no reference to the word “God,” and yet one hears a great deal about the same concepts that Western religions associate with a belief in a divine presence: infinite wholeness and all-inclusive completeness; sanctuary, refuge, and protection; being at one with oneself and the universe; compassion; unconditional, deathless, divine love.

Buddhism, of course, is not a theistic religion. In theory, Buddhism does not deal with theology, or

God as creator or eternal being. Yet the Asian belief system is inhabited with countless gods (small “g”) and goddesses, meditational deities, protectors, dakinis, and unseen spirits and forces. These are not, however, to be confused with what Westerners think of as God.

Buddha was not a god, and he claimed no special familial connection to any god. During his lifetime, the Buddha was asked whether or not God existed. On this question, the Buddha remained silent. In fact, the Buddha said that he didn't think intellectual speculation on the existence of God was particularly helpful. He did not assert or deny God; he simply left theology to the Brahmin and Hindu philosophers of his time.

The Buddha's teachings were concerned with finding the nirvanic peace and freedom of enlightenment, the end to all forms of suffering and delusion. He saw these goals as being determined by the cause and effect of individual behavior without divine intervention.

Some say that Buddha was an atheist; most consider that Buddha was not atheistic, but agnostic. There is at least one classical reference to Buddha talking about God. This is found in a small obscure “sutra,” or Buddhist scripture. In it, the Buddha is speaking to a Brahmin sect in the south of India about the path to enlightenment. As Hindus, Brahmins, of course, believe in God with a capital “G,” as well as many less powerful deities or gods. Over the centuries there has been much discussion and debate over why the Buddha would talk about God. The explanation often given is that one of Buddha's great gifts was his ability to speak to each individual in ways that he or she could understand. Thus when he spoke to the Brahmins, he used words that they would readily understand.

Around the world, there are countless different ideas and concepts of God. For some people God is a name ascribed to the Ultimate, the Creator, Absolute Cosmic Consciousness, or Divine Mind. Some people see God as transcendent spirit or energy. Some people speak of God as the personification of truth and love. Some people say God is Reality. Some people only think of God as being “out there” somewhere beyond our human comprehension; others see God as being only “in here” in the deeper parts of the human spirit or soul.

One of my Zen teachers, Sasaki Roshi, once gave me the following Zen riddle, or “koan”: “How do you realize God while driving a car?” If he were in his native Japan, my teacher might have said, “How do you realize Buddha while chopping wood?” Yet in California, which is where we were at the time, this great Zen master thought it made perfect sense, when teaching a Westerner, to substitute God and car for Buddha and wood. He had no problem with the word “God,” because the primary riddle, or koan, had to do with the concept of realization. The form was different, but the essential riddle of life remains: How can we practice penetrating spirituality no matter what we do?

Some Hindu devotees say God and guru are one and that by worshiping the guru, one worships God. In Hinduism, one can even worship God by worshiping one's mate. Thus we see Shiva and Shakti, Ram and Sita, Krishna and Radha, all archetypical images personifying an androgynous God in a male and female, polarity— Mr. and Mrs. God, as it were.

I'm sure you have a belief of some kind. Everybody does. Even unbelievers have a belief. Nobody talks more about God than atheists and agnostics do. You may want to define what you believe, or you may prefer leaving it completely amorphous. You may be happiest thinking of God as a significantly larger than life male, female, or androgynous entity; or you may feel closer to the view of God as Divine Presence. I don't think we, as spiritual seekers today, need to be bound by any formal formulation of God. At the very fundamental level, the light is always there even in the darkness, for even shadows are filled with light.

If you look closely at the large colorful Tibetan mandalas, in the center you will see a representation of the Buddha. This is to remind people of the essence that is contained within the form. Form and essence/emptiness are inseparable.

On Form and Essence in Your Own

Spiritual Practice

Whenever I lead or attend a retreat in this country, I am struck by the very different spiritual backgrounds of the participants. Some were raised as Roman Catholics; some were raised as Protestants; some were raised as Jews—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Some came from strictly observant families that were fundamentalist in their attitude; others attended church, temple, or synagogue once or twice a year at most. And these categories all contain subcategories and variations.

Whatever your own background might be, if you search it, you might well find religious and spiritual practices that had meaning for you. You might have loved singing at midnight services. You might have loved lighting candles for the Sabbath. You might have loved the feeling of being part of a spiritual congregation or group. You might have always been drawn to gospel music and spiritual music. You might have loved Gregorian chanting, incense, or Russian icons.

Here, in today's post-denominational West, many of us are trying to create a new and refreshed spirituality. That does not mean, however, that we have to toss out the old. As you try to create your own spiritual life from scratch, think about the spare parts and tools that you already possess. You may already own a whole chest full of spiritual tools that fit your hands exactly. Check them out to see whether they can be part of your life.

Are there prayers that you already know by heart? Are there hymns and songs that speak to you as strongly now as they did when you were a child? Do you want to fast and pray for Yom Kippur? Do you want to go to church and be part of Good Friday and Easter? Don't hide from these impulses. No matter what your religious history, love is love; atonement is atonement; prayer is prayer; spiritual renewal is spiritual renewal.

Some people argue with this approach, calling it "mix and match" spirituality, dismissing it as being too "New Age." Some of these critics worry that this is a religion-lite approach and will almost by definition end up being watered down, too easy, and convenient. I disagree. So many of us grew up in families, towns, and neighborhoods that can be described as "mix and match" that a spirituality that combines elements of several traditions makes sense. It feels authentic and true to who we are. This is, after all, America—the great melting pot. Critics are often people who are threatened by change. A new spirituality that reflects the Western experience does not necessarily mean that serious practices and values will be left out or sacrificed because they appear too difficult.

Janine, a forty-five-year-old playwright, says that her parents were originally Greek Orthodox, but when the family moved to a small midwestern town, there was no Greek Orthodox church. So her mother attended services at the local Methodist church, while her father became a Catholic. The reason given at the time was that her mother felt the Roman Catholic mass was "too formal" and her father found the Methodist service too "loose."

As a child, Janine went to mass with her father, but she attended Methodist Sunday school. At twenty, she married someone who was Jewish. She and her husband agreed that they would raise their children as Quakers because the couple was strongly drawn to a philosophy that emphasized peace. Now that the children are grown and she is divorced, Janine finds that she frequently attends Greek Orthodox or Catholic mass. Sometimes she experiences a deep hunger for the ritual. However, at this point in her life she says that she would never consider becoming more deeply involved with either religion. She doesn't agree with the Catholic church's attitude toward women, and, as a divorced person, she isn't even sure what her status would be.

Lately Janine has started a meditation practice; she also takes yoga class three times a week and

beginning to understand the spiritual dimensions of these practices. In the meantime, she continues to volunteer with fellow Quakers at a shelter for women. Janine describes herself as deeply committed to a spiritual way of life, but she doesn't see any reason why she should be bound by the confines of any one religious group.

Many of us, like Janine, have backgrounds that include elements of various religions. Some of us had little in the way of spiritual training; some of us don't have such great memories of the religious institutions of our childhood; some of us have married people of another faith; and some of us are products of these marriages.

In the West there is also another large category of seeker: men and women who are strongly drawn to the spiritual experience even though they feel disconnected from the religions into which they were born. People like this sometimes develop a Buddhist practice and discover to their amazement that the spiritual experience brings them closer to the religions of their childhood or, indeed, to all spiritual practice. In some ways, this was my experience.

As I often say, I'm Jewish on my parents' side. Born in Brooklyn, the name I was given was Jeffrey Miller. After my birth, my family moved to Long Island where I had a typical childhood playing Little League and going to YMCA camps, where I was formally introduced to Christianity when I attended Sunday services outdoors under towering pine trees. Otherwise my upbringing was culturally Jewish. I learned enough Hebrew to be bar mitzvahed at thirteen and accompanied my parents to the temple for religious holidays.

In college I encountered philosophy as well as theology, and began to explore my spiritual side. Soon after graduation I travelled to India. In India, I began to explore all of the religions of the East. My first guru, Neem Karoli Baba, gave me a new name—Surya Das, which is translated as “disciple of the light”; I lived in an ashram and studied meditation with the great Vipassana teacher, Goenka. I lived in Japan for a year, studying Zen, and I lived in Korea where I studied Zen with a Korean Zen master. Most of the 1970s and 1980s, however, I spent in Tibetan monasteries. I was trained as a lama in my teachers' monasteries in Nepal, Sikkim, India, and southern France. I am an American lama in an ancient Tibetan Buddhist tradition. But of course I am also a Jewish American spiritual activist. In our highly mobile society today, we are all hyphenates—hybrids of one sort or another.

As Westerners, we live in a multicultural world. By definition, our spiritual tastes are going to be eclectic. It doesn't make sense to deny our experience or our feelings. This more open approach to matters of the spirit doesn't weaken either our commitment to a peaceful, compassionate way of life or our resolve to act ethically and appropriately. Moving from the outer forms and institutions of religion to the more essential principles of spirituality is a good and significant option.

In all truly sacred traditions there is an essential resolve to cherish life and treat others ethically and kindly. All these traditions encourage us to be open to divine presence, both within and without, and tell us “to practice what we preach” without hypocrisy or sleight of hand. For many, this message is of essential importance no matter who is carrying it.

In her book, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*, my friend the Vipassana meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein talks about attending a week-long course taught by the Dalai Lama. At the end of the week, the Dalai Lama told the participants that later in the day he would offer the Green Tara Initiation as part of the closing. The Green Tara is a female Tibetan deity who embodies loving protection and compassion. When the Dalai Lama offers this initiation, it is a special blessing meant to help the recipients awaken the compassion in their own hearts.

Sylvia says that when the Dalai Lama made this announcement, one of the participants raised his hand to ask a question. As a practicing Catholic, he was concerned whether or not he should be part of this initiation. At first the Dalai Lama said that he thought it would be all right, but if the participant

was uncomfortable with any element in the ceremony, he simply shouldn't do it.

Later, as the Dalai Lama was preparing to perform the empowerment initiation, Sylvia writes, "The Dalai Lama, in a conversational tone, said, 'I've been thinking further about the question of doing the initiation if you belong to another spiritual tradition. I think you can do it.' He gave a list of reasons explaining slowly and carefully, saying essentially that 'compassion is compassion' and 'a blessing is a blessing.'"

I think it's important that this remain a theme in our spiritual growth. So try to let go of any knee-jerk responses of antagonism toward spiritual practices that seem different, alien, or foreign. The thing to remember as you create your own daily practice is that compassion is compassion, a blessing is a blessing, and a good heart is a good heart.

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