

How can you figure out what your particular spiritual aspects mixture should include?

The perfect mixture of sacred traits will allow you to determine the purpose of your life. It will give you the wisdom to understand all of the hows and the whys about life and your place within this world. It doesn't matter whether these ideals are based upon the traditions of your ancestors, new ideas adopted from other religions, or a combination of both. It doesn't matter if these notions are a scientific explanation, the result of word for word textual truth, a symbolic representation, a thought, a sound, or even an artistic rendition. It doesn't matter if you share your values with others through communal ceremony and ritual or if your way of life is practiced in private solitary situations. What is important is that these life explanations resonate as true within both your mind and your heart.

Of all of the four aspects, the spiritual portion is often the most lacking, but ironically the least explored. Even if you feel you have a good handle on your religious or scientific laws, be sure to take time to explore your ways of thinking. Be sure that you not only comprehend what your ideals are but also question why you accept these concepts and understand how these notions color the way you look at the world and ultimately determine your future aspirations. Above all, be sure that your qualities are right for you and are not just a recycled version of what you think you should be or what you think others expect you to be.

If you are like most people, you have a few basic ideals that you learned from your parents and have built upon as adults. Just as likely though, you may have never contemplated what you believe or why you believe it let alone actually examined how those ideals affect you as a person or

the attainment of your goals. Don't despair. Reading this book was a positive step in the right direction.

The first thing to look at in this process is your core philosophies. For the most part, your main ideals were taught to you from your parents. In other words, if you were brought up in a Catholic family (even if they have lapsed) many of the ideals of Catholicism will automatically be part of your values. For instance, you may have a very precise view of good or bad and you may feel it is necessary to have a religious middleman to explain the actions of God on a specific day of the week. Likewise, if you were brought up in a family that held traditional Native American life views (say Blackfoot for argument's sake) many of these ideals will automatically be part of your values. You may feel a strong individual connection with the earth and nature; you may have an understanding of a creator that you have direct connection to; and you may see spirituality as a part of every aspect of your life.

These facets will follow you into adult life in mysterious and invisible ways. Often, you may not even be aware of how deep these deeply ingrained attitudes really are. If you are from a Christian background (even if you've never attended church or read the bible), you may find yourself saying things like "It would be a sin not to...", "Thank God", or "Bless You" without even thinking. Moreover, some of these remnants may even persist if you converted to another religion or dramatically altered your way of life. Therefore, even if your family was not religious or you turned away from your traditional notions your core ideals will still affect you to some degree. Thus, it is vital to take a good look at these underlying concepts.

Exercise 2-1: There are several ways to examine your deeply ingrained ideals. First, think about and write down what you believe. Write anything that comes to mind. How the earth was created? Why humans were made? Where the first human was born/created? How do you determine what colour the sky is? Who determines what is good and what is bad? Why you were born? What you believe happens after you die? Who discovered words? What connection do humans have with other creatures? Also, write any questions that come to your mind.

Exercise 2-2: Think about your answers to these questions and determine how you came to these conclusions. Did you learn these answers from your parents, from some sort of religious practitioner, or from school? Are your answers the result of literal truth, scientific explanations, or some form of symbolic interpretation?

Exercise 2-3: Then, ask yourself if these answers sufficiently resolve these questions for you. Do these explanations sufficiently explain the whys and the hows or do these explanations leave you with unresolved issues? Do these answers feel true to you or do you just feel it is wrong to ask further questions? Does this information give you an understanding of who you are, who you should be, and how you should live your life or is the answer generic?

Simply put, embrace those notions that resonate with you on a personal level, those that leave you with a feeling of understanding, and those that lead you to more clarification about yourself and the world around you. Those explanations that leave you feeling unresolved are possibly indicators of areas that you need to focus on. These areas may require a deeper understanding of your ideals, may require new inter-

pretations, or may require a blending of your key beliefs with a few new ideas.

Exercise 2-4: Another way to examine your entrenched thinking is to read the religious and sacred texts, stories, or myths of your religion; attend a ritual, service, or ceremony; or talk to practitioners, masters, or elders. Virtually every religion details how things are created, the general purpose of people, and outline basic values and morals. These facets are illustrated (usually in a very repetitious way) within written, oral, and ceremonial form. Therefore, at first, take a general overview of the philosophy repeated over and over again. At this point, don't get caught up in the little details and the nit-picky side of personal interpretation. Do, however, take note of things that resonate as true to you and those that really irk you or cause other dramatic emotions.

As in the previous exercise, those life views that you identify as resonating true or as holding personal meaning to you are important. It does not really matter if only one small word or action is right for you or if the whole system feels right. The important part of this exercise is to determine what is best for you.

With that said, the things that irk you, irritate you, or cause another personal emotional reaction are equally important. These notions may represent things that you know to be true deep in your heart but that you find too painful to openly admit to yourself. Often the hardest part of being happy is reconciling parts of yourself that you perceive as flaws and allowing yourself to be accepted and loved for who you really are.

Musings that cause emotional anxiety may also represent deep ways of thinking that you find hard to let go of for some reason, despite that they may be valid to your life circum-

stances. This situation is often true in areas associated with being branded as being bad or evil. Often, you may feel the need to punish yourself for these perceived wrongdoings.

Finally, these trouble areas may represent ideals that have been forced upon you by other individuals. Though there are definitively instances where people force their viewpoints upon others to take advantage of them or harm them in some way, most such actions are the result of well-meaning individuals. Again, individuals often feel comfortable and validated when others hold the same points of view as themselves. Therefore, people sometimes have a tendency to want those around them to agree with them completely, even if they have to “show you the error of your evil or illogical ways.” Moreover, it is really easy to forget that what makes you happy and what is truth to you isn’t necessarily the universal key to happiness or absolute truth.

Exercise 2-5: Once you have a basic framework of your ideals, start looking at the variation of thought within this traditional system. Look at the varying norms as taught by different practitioners and even how these philosophical variances have created new interpretations, sects, schools, or church divisions. What ideals are common to all these individuals? What values are different among these various interpretations?

Exercise 2-6: Next, ask yourself how you feel about these variations. Do you see these variations as statements saying the same thing but in a different way or do you see these differences as opposing viewpoints? Are these interpretations the result of some sort of formal or informal reform or simply the result of a different presentational style?

Exercise 2-7: Again, analyze your results. Do you find it easier to connect to methods that are scientific, full of detail,

resemble a story, state the message straightforwardly, or use imagery to illustrate the viewpoint? Do you find a particular interpretation, practitioner, or style of presentation more attractive than the others? Do any of these variations resonate within you or cause some sort of other strong feelings?

Be authentic with yourself and ask yourself what details (or lack of details) most represent what you believe and which values best represent your faith. You also need to be sure that these ideals actually enhance your life and that you are not merely adopting them to please someone else. Be sure to keep analyzing and questioning until you have a well thought out idea of what values actually fit into your life.

How can you go about changing or altering your current mixture of spiritual aspects?

In the previous section, you examined your core philosophies for appropriateness. Possibly, you realized that a number of your ideals reflected traditional notions. Other influences were gained through formal schooling and formal religious education. As you examined these values, you may have discovered that some of these interpretations resonated with and could directly relate to your life. You may also have found some values that needed to be modified or expressed in a slightly different way in order to be pertinent to your situation. Furthermore, you may have also recognized that some of your deeply ingrained ways of thinking may actually be inadequate to answer your unique life questions.

In this section, you are going to focus on changing or altering portions of your current belief system to create your own personal version of the truth. In order to do so, you need to not only figure out what exactly your religious and scientific precepts are, but also find a way to intermesh these interpretations into one consistent structure. This framework may have strong connections or affiliations with a single religion or culture, may consist of elements from a variety of faiths, or may be the result of completely novel interpretations. In any case, it is important to remember that this foundation may include religious dogma but may also include mythology, science, values, and morals.

As discussed in the previous section, a good portion of your life views are embedded or entrenched ideals taught formally and informally through your parents, in school, and in formal religious institutions. For the most part, you may have learnt and adopted these notions with very little questioning and almost no thought about whether these elements

actually answered your questions about life, whether these systems could help you decide who you should be, and how you should interpret the world around you. Thus, as for most people, your first stage of discovery into your life doctrine has already occurred and was for the most part a very passive experience.

Commonly, when you first start to actively examine your ideals, you may tend to look outside of your traditional religion. Often this examination may have taken on a very rebellious character, perhaps through a violent break with your religion and cultural philosophies. Frequently, this break occurs at adolescence when you are in the midst of defining yourself. Simply put, sometimes it is easier to start from scratch than to have to deal with all of your embedded belief baggage. At least initially this statement may be true.

Despite the rebellious nature of this first active examination step, there are a few common consistencies in the directions of this task. You may have looked to science for answers. You were probably first introduced to science in school. Therefore, it may have seemed a logical next step (some sort of natural growth away from childhood notions) to examine these concepts taught in school. Your later investigations into science may have taken the form of further formal education or reading textbooks on scientific topics.

Basic science and hypothesis testing may provide all of the answers you needed to define your inner self. However, you may have to supplement this information with more advanced study into objectivism philosophy and atheist belief systems. Alternately, you may have to look elsewhere for some or all of your answers.

Around the same time as you started to look to science for answers, you may have also started to look at the past for in-

formation pertaining to your life views. This may have taken the form of examination into ancient religions or spiritualities; new age or revived occult beliefs; and metaphysical philosophies. In these first examinations into these notions, you may have focused on the mystical or magical portions of these faiths. You may have viewed this primary investigation as playing at these abilities without any real understanding of the ideals behind these systems. If you felt some sort of initial connection during these primary investigations, you may want to look deeper into these interpretations through participation in ceremonies and rituals, reading of texts and related contemporary literature, looking to masters and teachers for more formal education on the subjects, and either solitary or communal practice of some or all of these associated ideals. This type of investigation may allow you to discern which elements to take from these religions.

It may seem that these interpretations are in direct conflict with scientific ideals. Perhaps in some ways, these are direct opposites. Ancient and New Age literature both often use symbols, imagery, and myths to explain the world. Science uses details, formulas, and written documentation to explain the world. Nonetheless, both doctrines are merely interpretations of the workings of this world and how these interpretations resonate with you as an individual depends upon your own version of truth. These seemingly opposite values can even be used in conjunction to fill in the answers that the other system does not cover. This is illustrated in Gnostic doctrine, particularly in regards to alchemy¹.

¹ See Hall, L. (1997). "Alchemy and Science" (Godless Science) at <http://www.godless.org/sci/alchemy.html> and also

Wolf, F. (2000). *Mind into Matter: A New Alchemy of Science and Spirit*. Needham, MA: Moment Point Press.

Since this first active step into the examination of your values may have been rebellious in nature, at some point you may want to take another look at the main properties of your philosophy. Basically, at some point you may realize that you have embedded ideals from your parents, like it or not. Eventually, you will have to have to examine these notions to fully comprehend your values.

It is at this point that you may start to read the texts, go to religious services, and begin to talk to people about your traditional religion. At first, you may look at the overlying doctrine. Later, you may start to compare the details and the variations of these interpretations. Again, it is important that you look at the ideals that you hold as main values and then determine which interpretations resonate within you and which notions need to be modified or understood in another way.

If you were raised in the Western world, your life views likely come from formalized Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Though these religions do vary in many of their key doctrines, these faiths all share the belief in a single omnipotent God (as opposed to a pantheon of gods and goddesses), all have formalized and standardized worship ceremonies, all have written dogma (often cited as absolute word by word truth), and all have standardized rules of conduct. Therefore, interpretation within these religions tends to be extremely rigid, detailing only one inflexible way to interpret the world. Variations of understanding on life viewpoints or differences in the way material is presented is often cause for division into different sects, schools of thought, or even definition as entirely different religions. Thus, generally speaking religious belief in the western world is in an extremely formal structure.