

# Introduction

Besides the world's *religious traditions*, there are the world's *wisdom traditions*, traditions of spiritual teachings and investigation that enrich the teachings of certain foundational texts, and elaborate on these in bodies of exegesis. It is from the stock of teachings in its attendant wisdom tradition(s) that each of the world's most widespread and best known religions draws its spiritual foundations, and, in consequence, an education in the wisdom traditions is at once an education in the world's main religious traditions. In the next section of this introduction, I indicate reasons to think that such an education in world religion is essential for those who would understand the factors that shape their personal, ecological, social, and political lives. However, there is a more immediate reason for us to be interested in the wisdom traditions, namely, that they have much to teach us about *self-knowledge*, its practical value, the means to attain it, and its effects on our inner lives and our interactions with the world at large. As we consider the teachings of these traditions about self-knowledge, we should be alive to the practical applications of those teachings, illustrated, in the chapters below, with personal and historical examples.

To motivate the investigation to follow, let us consider, for a moment, how religion influences our own lives, whether or not we belong to a particular religious faith. In the United States, for example, 70 percent of the population belong to a specific Christian faith, 6 percent to a specific non-Christian faith, and, of those who belong to no specific faith, most report that religion is at least somewhat important in their personal lives.<sup>1</sup> Most of those who vote in the United States, as well as most who hold

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1. Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study," <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

public office, belong to a religious faith, and, on average, most of those we work with and live with do too. To the extent that the religious faith of these people bears on those of their actions that affect us, when we fail to understand that faith, we fail to understand those who help determine the personal, ecological, social, and political environments in which we reside. This, then, is a first, powerful reason to learn about the nature of religious faith: it enables us to understand the people who surround us and the forces that shape our lives.

Of course, some of us are familiar with religion from our own beliefs and practices, as well as those of our close relatives and friends, and all of us are afforded a perspective onto the religions of the world through mass culture, for example, through the news, through the entrance of religion into television, movies, and news media, and through the constant appearance of religion in our political elections. Close examination of the lens on religions that personal experience and mass culture supplies us, however, reveals a motivation to investigate world religion in an *academic* environment. If we restrict our sources of information about the world's religions to those that we happen upon in the course of our normal lives, sources rooted in the particular demographics of our immediate environment, we will fail to understand the cultures, motivations, and politics of other peoples, whether in or outside the United States. The chapters to follow aim, in part, to offer a broader perspective on world religion, one where Indigenous, Shamanism, Daoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, for example, do not appear as exotic, foreign, or arcane, but as troves of practical wisdom, based on spiritual teachings that share much in common with those at the roots of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. For a first investigation, I suggest that researching the religious demographics of other nations and of the world at large, and then compare these with the demographics of the United States, the demographics of one's own state, and the demographics found among one's immediate friends and relations. For a second investigation, I suggest attempting to find reports on the same news event from news outlets in nations with far different religious demographics, and attempt to assess whether there are important differences in reportage that might stem from differences in religious belief and practice between the nations. The central points I wish to make, and that people who complete these investigations should see for themselves, are that we need to understand world religion to understand the world we live in, and that the perspective on religion we can acquire through

cultural osmosis, so to speak, is limited. In our investigation of the wisdom traditions of the world, we can start to surpass these limitations.

## Summaries of Chapter Contents

### Chapter 1: In Union with Nature

The central themes of the book are set out in this initial chapter. Hindu, Daoist, Jewish, and Christian traditions are used to illustrate the immense value that the world's wisdom traditions place on self-knowledge and the practical means through which we can attain it. These traditions consider self-examination, contemplation, and mindfulness vital components of a fulfilled life, due to their service in the attainment and preservation of self-knowledge. I contrast this emphasis on the value of contemplative and mindful activities with the demands of a normal modern life, and use selections from the corpora of the wisdom traditions to point up the difference.

### Chapter 2: A Different Kind of Power

The spiritual quest for self-knowledge is seen, in most wisdom traditions, as a quest for oneness with the divine. This chapter discusses both conceptions of the divine in the wisdom traditions and various practical means these traditions have advocated for us to use in our own spiritual quests. Some of the diverse forms of yogic practice are described, and historical illustrations from the life of Mahatma Gandhi are used to illustrate central points. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the *ecological* teachings of the wisdom traditions, and a theme that recurs in them, that as we come to be better stewards of our inner environments, we come to be better stewards of the nonhuman world as well.

### Chapter 3: Practical Methods

The idea that enlightenment is a state accessible rather than obscure is central to the practical aspects of the wisdom traditions. Here, I introduce the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path as a series of simple, practical dictates, meant to be enactable in the course of normal life. The chapter elaborates

conceptions of what it is to be enlightened, how the state of enlightenment relates to the state of union with the divine, and the distinction between sudden spiritual illumination and gradual development, as this appears in the wisdom traditions.

#### Chapter 4: Contemplation and Sustainability

Sustenance of an internal state, preservation of an internal state, is an essential aim of contemplative practice in the wisdom traditions. Buddhist and Christian texts are used to illustrate that there is no sharp divide, in these traditions, between inner and outer ecological awareness. The relationship between, on the one hand, such material applications of sustainability as soil, plant, animal, human, and habitat preservation, and, on the other, interior sustainability is embodied in the human being. Whatever the ethical or cultural expressions, the origins of contemplative sustainability are in the human activities of meditation and practical labor, prayer and action. In following teachings of care and nurturance, Buddhists and Christians may take vows of poverty and simplicity, care for the sick and needy, restrict themselves to a monastic diet, steward the land through gardening and farming, and express their commitment to these teachings culturally in scripture, painting, and architecture. Discussing these practices, I hope to illustrate that spiritual practice and inner investigation can be compatible with the activities of daily life, and, indeed, can be furthered through them.

#### Chapter 5: Mindfulness and Sustainability

This chapter explains additional dictates of the Eightfold Path, beginning with the fifth path, right behavior, and it uses recent exegetical work on the Eightfold Path—Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist description of the Five Precepts as the Five Mindfulness Trainings—to expand on those dictates. Connections to the other wisdom traditions, especially Hinduism, Christianity, and Daoism, are included.

#### Chapter 6: Wise Concentration

I discuss the function of meditative practice and the emphasis of the nearness of the divine in Islam. Daoist conceptions of the nature of the world, energy or qi, and Buddhist teachings on impermanence are a second

focus of the chapter. The elaboration of the Eightfold Path continues, with special attention paid to the nature of wise action, and the appearance of similar dictates in others of the wisdom traditions. Poetic works provide illustrations for central concepts.

### Chapter 7: Meditation and Prayer

Meditation is not just a means to calmness, as sometimes portrayed; it is a total transformation and birth into the spiritual state of union. If even “the Buddha still has to meditate,” how much more do we, with all our concerns for the future, and cargo from the past? How much more do we need to let go and let our mind take an extended breather for the sake of really living, what the Sufis call, the really Real. It is within the hub of the Dao, that we see clearly and are liberated to be a breathing, living being with the smallest of the small and the largest of the large. We are like a nucleus in the invisible body of the cosmos’ energy, a cell in the heart of God, the presence in the bursting lavender artichoke flower. No longer separate from any body, mineral, plant, or animal, we appreciate the moment and, like Meister Eckhart, understand that the highest form of prayer is, “Thank you.”

### Chapter 8: Consciousness

Before the religion of secularism, people globally spent time in relationship to the Unseen. That meant that life itself had a spiritual dimension, and, for some human beings, that transcendent consciousness permeated all aspects of their life. Transcendent consciousness, at least thus far, cannot be described or evaluated by the sciences, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama teaches: “There is more to human existence and to reality itself than current science can ever give us access to.”

However, by practicing presence and living a life of wisdom, we are at least as close as we can be to that mystery which is beyond life and death, in the words of Rumi:

I placed one foot on the wide plain  
of death, and some grand  
immensity sounded on the emptiness.  
I have felt nothing ever  
Like the wild wonder of that moment.

## Chapter 9: Falling in Love

For Judaism and Islam, love is central to an individual changing from ego to Witness. In the Hebrew Scriptures, for example, Hosea 11:4 states, “I will lead them with the cords of compassion, / with the bands of love, / to them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.” The images of parent to child are common in the three Abrahamic traditions. In Islam, the very first surah (verse) in the Qur’an is, in fact, “In the name of God (Allah), the compassionate, the merciful.” Many mystics after experiencing union with God and the consciousness transparent in all living beings call the actuality of continued awareness of presence “falling in love.” Additionally, there are mystics of the deepest philosophical depth and theological understanding, who describe their experiences as *neti, neti*, not this, not that. Saint John of the Cross, with his timeless poetry in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, declares, “*Nada, nada.*” We see therefore, for some, there is no accurate description, just luminous emptiness, *śūnyatā*, as Mahayana Buddhism has elaborated through scriptures, poetry, and Dharma talks based on the enlightenment experience.

## Chapter 10: Make Oneness Your Home

People can become mindful with no religious belief system, and look to the effects psychologically and pragmatically in their lives. Our human prehistorical shamanism and the history of religions contain realities worthy of mindfulness pathways in our erudition. We have the liberty in the twenty-first century to choose from the spectrum of belief systems, and there exist on that spectrum philosophies that integrate the sciences, meditational and light experiences.

Eastern Christian iconography depicts the Transfiguration, Jesus, with a different kind of power, at the center of reality, giving us a glimpse into his actual nature on Mount Tabor as all light-energy, as the way-shower. It is a resurrectional emphasis, helping the devout to gaze and move in the realm of transformative power.

Light and resurrectional mysticism is pervasive in Hinduism, and Tibetan Buddhism has a long history of Lama’s who achieve the “rainbow body,” disappearing and becoming light at the moment of death. The point is that our identity as human beings in these traditions is in Being itself. We are the invisible, and traditions before the advent of empirical science had no difficulty in believing literally in the resurrection of that energy

and light closer to the invisible than the visible on the electromagnetic spectrum.

### Chapter 11: The Many Realities of Consciousness: Spiritual, Intellectual, Aesthetic

We can enrich our understanding through Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century Benedictine nun whose teachings intellectually, artistically, and scientifically describe the many realities of consciousness. We examine the Hindu tradition's Sat-Chit-Ananda, in Sanskrit, translated into English as Truth-Consciousness-Bliss. Truth is God ontologically; therefore as Mahatma Gandhi described, God is the Truth and to be conscious (chit) of the truth, is to be conscious of all human beings as equal and all sentient life as worthy of reverence. To fight injustice is a way to become closer to being itself: *Tat Tvam Asi*. That Thou Art, written in the Upanisads, deepens an understanding of Hildegard's teachings. If the entire world is a Thou, how can one hurt another being? *Tat Tvam Asi* is almost a mathematical formula in a karmic cosmology: if I am that Thou, I cannot harm without harming myself. This is the foundation of *ahimsa*, literally, in Sanskrit, not to kill, which grounded not only Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience, but the global legacy he began and humans have witnessed in the lives of Desmond Tutu, Wangari Maathai, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez, to name a few.

For Hildegard, the life we have on earth is a blissful celebration of *viriditas*, the greening power of the Spirit. She understood the ways of nature by observing the connections we empirically comprehend today through science. To reiterate, Hildegard does not separate the inner ecology of spiritual evolution from the macrocosm of the divine revealed in creation. In Hindu tradition, as one progresses spiritually, one becomes the divine; spiritual evolution is a physical-psychological process as well, culminating in consciousness being aware of consciousness in every being, everywhere: "The Whole has become one's very self. . . . This Immense Being has no limit or boundary and is a single mass of perception."

### Chapter 12: Mindfulness as Sustainability

Sustainability as mindfulness has been implicit in spirituality since people began to wonder about our place and why we are existentially in the cosmos. Sustainability that is reasonable, still asks much of us in terms

of changing, but the rewards are immediately evident. Mindfulness gives us the ability to appreciate the present moments of life, at play with time and space.

Daoism's philosophy of sustaining one's qi helps the environment. There really is no lack of effect in how mindfulness helps the environment. How we steward ourselves through thoughtful and practical consideration, leads to cultivating and sustaining our own gardens; sharing the bounty with pleasure. Certainly, our family of sentience, our community of living wealth and multiplicity, would be grateful, simply for the ability to live the potentiality of their common and glorious lives on our shared polychromatic planet. The bountiful fruits of our globe as a garden of delights.