

Ten Ingredients of a Contemporary Spirituality of Optimal Living

-Julius-Kei Kato PhD

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JKK's Website: <https://jkato.kingsfaculty.ca/>

[Premise 1] Spirituality

For our purposes here, spirituality will be understood in the following way: It is *the quest to live: not in morally-compromised ways but in integrity, not superficially but deeply, not in a self-centered way but for something bigger than one's self*. We can say, therefore, that spirituality is **the effort to live “deeper and bigger” with integrity**. In other words, it is a quest for integrity, depth, and transcendence.

Why are we using the term “spirituality”? | The quest mentioned above leads one to touch the “heart and core” of reality and existence. That core is something that cannot be measured empirically, hence, it belongs properly to the “spiritual” realm.

Some other important things to note about spirituality. First, spirituality (or cultivating your own spirituality) is *not* something supernatural or super-human, but deeply and fundamentally, a human trait (or a human activity) in the sense that it is what we humans are hardwired to seek and do. Second, its pursuit makes us more fully human. Therefore, spirituality is not optional; rather, it is a necessary human quest. Finally, spirituality is the heart and core of all religions but, as is common today, it does not have to be, strictly speaking, linked with organized religion in order to be authentic.

[Premise 2] Optimal Living: Showing Up as the Best Version of Yourself in the Here and Now

The foundation of spirituality as it will be proposed here is this conviction: *Human life--every aspect of it--is a spiritual quest*, a quest that is nevertheless rooted in ordinary life with all its ups and downs; with all its beautiful, ugly, and neutral factors. There is no need, therefore, to be afraid of "spiritual quests"! That means, the spiritual quest is *not* an elite activity that is beyond the reach of ordinary people like you and me. Rather, simply put, the spiritual quest consists in trying to live an "Optimal Life," which is nothing else than trying our very best to be *the best versions of ourselves, in service to something bigger than ourselves (that often means 'service to others' or 'dedication to a cause')*, wherever we are in life, from moment to moment. To that let me add the important word "mindfully." Therefore, my fuller description of optimal living is

this: *While being mindful of where we are and what we face in life, we try to be the best version of ourselves in every moment.*

An important caveat: Optimal living is *NOT* perfectionism. The former is healthy because it is firmly based on reality and takes account of our different limitations; the latter can be unwholesome because it tends to have unrealistic demands.

With the above premises in mind, I'd like to propose the following ingredients of a spirituality that, I hope, people today can adopt and put into practice, no matter whether they are religious or not. This kind of spirituality ultimately aims to help people to live fuller and more meaningful lives today (aka, "optimal living").

Here are simple descriptions of each ingredient with key quotes and suggested basic practices.

[1] Be Mindful! Be aware of and embrace REALITY here and now

Keep in mind: the present moment is the *only moment* that you actually have (to live). The past is already gone; the future is not yet here. It's important then that you live the present moment to the full. Otherwise, you will lose this precious moment forever. If you lose many "present moments," you are, in effect, "not living"! So then, what is the key to live fully here and now? It is **Mindfulness!** Be mindful then ... of the here and now, of yourself, of the world within you, of others, of the world around you and outside of you.

QUOTES

Mindfulness is the moment to moment non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of 'what is' in the here and now. (adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn)

When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, in the here and now, we gain more understanding, more acceptance, more forgiveness and love of self and others; our aspiration to relieve suffering grows; and we have more chances to touch joy and peace. We need the energy of mindfulness to recognize and be present with our habit energy so that we may prevent it from dominating us and stop its often destructive course. ~Thich Nhat Hanh in *Savor*

BASIC PRACTICE

Frequently go back to your "true home" (the "here and now") by mindfully focusing on your breath and what is happening within you and outside of you. This is the most basic mindfulness practice. Mindfulness can be maintained throughout the day and in all activities. Meditation is the concrete and formal practice of devoting a period of time to consciously practice mindfulness and other spiritual exercises to increase one's spirit of mindfulness.

Arguably the most important way to maintain a mindful awareness in life with lots of other benefits such as inner peace, ability to concentrate, resilience, etc., is having a MEDITATION practice. There are many ways to do this. My suggestion for beginners is B-Re-T-M-A. Short for: **Breath—Read or Recall—Think—Meditate—Act**. Read about that [HERE](#).

[#2] Constantly Aim for ‘Better’! Move One Step at a Time from ‘Negative’ to ‘Positive’

KEYWORDS: Onward, *Avanti*, *Ippo-Zenshin* (一步前進)

Let's constantly try to move from - (**minus**) to + (**plus**) in our lives. In ingredient #1, we are encouraged to be mindful of and embrace one's reality, fully, without judgment, in the here and now. That is foundational. Now, in ingredient #2, we acknowledge that no one is perfect, that there is always room for improvement. This is why we constantly try to improve. Concretely, that refers to: moving *from* “minus” factors, such as: morally-compromised, harmful, negative, distracted, superficial frames of mind (those are minus factors) ... *to* ... "plus" factors, such as: moral/ethical, mindful, deeper, life-affirming (or optimistic) frames of mind. Ingredient #2 is a further step beyond ingredient #1.

QUOTES

“Habits of thinking need not be forever. One of the most significant findings in psychology ... is that individuals can choose the way they think.” ~Martin Seligman in *Learned Optimism*

“But we can change. No one need ever feel resigned and say, 'There is nothing I can do.' There is everything we can do. That is the purpose and the power of that persistent upward force within us: if we turn inward we can remake ourselves completely, modeling ourselves in the image of the loftiest spiritual ideal we can conceive.” ~ Eknath Easwaran in *Conquest of Mind*

BASIC PRACTICE

Be aware that from moment to moment in our lives, we have a choice: either go forward or step backward. (Brian Johnson in *Arete*). A move forward can be called a "+1". Then, act on that and increase those +1 choices.

[#3] Know your Purpose!

Do you have a purpose in your life, for your life? Have at least one big, noble purpose that you're passionate about! "Purpose" is a "big idea" about the path you're supposed to be walking on, the big purpose that you feel you're called to be doing in your life (aka, your "vocation" or "calling"), the big thing you're supposed to achieve with the one life that is given you. In short, this is what you're supposed to be focusing the best of your energy and your quality time on.

In many cases, your specific “big purpose” may not yet be clear to you in the present moment, especially if you’re young. It often becomes clearer as you walk the path of life, learning through trial and error. Nevertheless, you can always adopt a *general* “big purpose” such as the following: Achieving the best version of yourself (optimal state) ... for your own self, for others, for the world!

This is something the ancient Greeks called *arete* (ἀρετή) or excellence. The Japanese concept of *Ikigai* (生き甲斐) can also come in handy to understand this. *Ikigai* is simply “a reason for living.” Explained simply, your *ikigai* is what makes you get out of bed and start your day with zest.

QUOTE

The ultimate game is: showing up consistently as that best, most heroic version of yourself"
~Brian Johnson in *Arete*

BASIC PRACTICE

If you have a big, all-consuming passion in life, recall that every single day, regularly and intentionally. Make all your smaller goals align with it (ingredient #4).

[#4] Have Goals Aligned with Your Purpose

Commit yourself to achieving realistic and practice-able/actionable goals here and now, one step at a time (*ippo-ippo* [Japanese], "step-by-step") --goals that align with your purpose,

We use 'Purpose' here as a big idea, a grand reason for living. 'Goals' are smaller things that you're aiming for *now, today*, at this particular moment in your life. Ideally, these goals should be aligned with your big purpose.

QUOTE

In any given moment we have a choice: We can step forward into growth or we can step back into safety. (adapted from Abraham Maslow)

BASIC PRACTICE

Everyday, recall, and examine your short-term concrete goals. Renew your commitment to achieve them. How are you achieving these "baby steps" or "+1" steps? Do they align with your big purpose in life?

[#5] "Just Do It!" | Practice, Act on, & Live out Your Purpose and Goals

We don't just think the thought or talk the talk. The most important thing is to walk the walk! Spirituality should translate into ACTION, PRACTICE! As the Nike slogan says, "Just Do It!" Theory is just the beginning. The spiritual quest must necessarily go from theory to practice ... and hopefully even on to MASTERY (which is an accumulation of practice based on sound theory). We strive to be *not only* "librarians of the mind *but especially* warriors of the mind"! (Brian Johnson)

QUOTES

"Religion [spirituality] is a practical discipline ... [but] we turned it onto a head trip. But it's like dancing, or swimming, or driving, which you can't learn by texts. You have to get into the car and learn how to manipulate the vehicle." ~Karen Armstrong (in "Big Think Interview")

“That which transforms your life is what you practice. And what you practice constitutes your personal laws of life—not what you merely believe in, but what you practice ... Your philosophy may give you a temporary state of euphoria, but if you want to be anchored in reality, it takes practice, practice, practice. We are not here to be euphoric but to get free. Rudimentary spirituality is theory; advanced spirituality is practice.” ~Michael Beckwith in *Spiritual Liberation*

BASIC PRACTICE

When some words of wisdom strike you in a particular way, ask yourself: How do I put this gem of wisdom into practice?

[#6] Acquire Resilience and Courage | Developing “Emotional Stamina” or “Anti-Fragile Confidence”

One of the truest things that can be said about human existence is this: "Life is difficult." Because that is universally true; because no matter who we are or where we are located, we are bound to encounter suffering and challenges in life, one essential virtue we have to acquire as a priority is **courage** (or, as it is classically called, **fortitude**, one of the so-called cardinal virtues). Without this, we will not attain the purpose for which we are alive. Moreover, we have to be diligent, patient, and persistent in our efforts to live an optimal life. (See Easwaran, *Passage Meditation*)

QUOTES

"Life is difficult" M. Scott Peck in *The Road Less Travelled*

"We'll move from being Fragile to Resilient to ANTIFRAGILE such that the more life kicks us around, the stronger we get." Brian Johnson in *Areté*

BASIC PRACTICE

No matter what you feel and especially when you don't feel like it, stick to your commitment to be the best you can be at every given moment. This is what it means to be "reliable." And only reliable and consistent people can change the world.

[#7] Maintain and Treasure (Your) Energy

Energy is the force that moves us to continue living and to do things. It is the proverbial "drive" that makes us "get up in the morning" to face our day. Described more universally, it is the force that is behind life itself, and everything we do in life. Energy is the important source that makes everything in the universe function. This is why we have to treasure this energy. That means, taking care that we have enough of it, better yet, that we have an abundance of it in order to fulfill our purpose and attain our goals. Spiritual-Wisdom traditions teach that there is an invisible animating energy that is behind everything, and they've linked it with the Ultimate or the Divine (e.g. "the Spirit", "Ki/Chi", "Prana", etc.).

Concretely speaking, our energy depends on five fundamental areas of life: Breathing, Eating, Sleeping, Moving, Focusing. These can be called "the five fundamentals." Let us acquire the right theory about how to perform and maintain these fundamentals properly in order to be able to have a good level of energy flow in our lives.

QUOTE

If your ENERGY is sub-optimal because of poor lifestyle choices, you're going to have a really hard time showing up powerfully in either your Work or your Love.

Brian Johnson in *Areté*

BASIC PRACTICE

Every bite of food either increases or decreases my odds of spending a few more years with my wife and two young children. Half an hour of exercise in the morning makes for better interactions all day. Then a sound night of sleep gives me energy to tackle the next day. I am a more active parent, a better spouse, and more engaged in my work when I eat, move, and sleep well.” ~ Tom Rath in *Eat Move Sleep*

[#8] Have Meaningful Relationships and Work

A meaningful human life comes down to the quality of one's work and love (Sigmund Freud). We can rephrase “love” to “relationships.” In order to live an optimal life, your work and your relationships should be meaningful and life-giving. Living a good life therefore means in practice: making one's relationships and work “work” (pun intended)! The spiritual-wisdom traditions teach in different ways that all things are interconnected with everything else. By default, we think we are separate from one another and from everything else. That, the spiritual-wisdom traditions point out, is actually an illusion we have to overcome to see the beautiful interconnected nature of reality.

QUOTES

“Love and work... work and love, that's all there is... love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness” ~Sigmund Freud

“Our happiness is completely and utterly intertwined with other people: family and friends and neighbors ... Happiness is not a noun or verb. It’s a conjunction.” ~Eric Weiner in *The Geography of Bliss*

BASIC PRACTICE

Be aware of your relationships and work and how important they are for you to live a meaningful life. Make healthy decisions in order to have your best energy levels for your relationships and work.

[#9] Have This Lifelong Aim: To become a Hero-Sage by acquiring and practicing WISDOM everyday, over a lifetime.

Wisdom is (1) deep understanding of, and (2) practical skills in the most important issues of life, especially the ones that touch our deepest and "biggest" (highest, optimal, transcendent) aspirations. (-adapted from Roger Walsh) Becoming a hero means, first of all, changing one's self. Only an internally changed (and enlightened) person can change the world around them for the better.

So far we have not explicitly underlined the importance of service. Let us make it clear now: Serving others and the world is the highest form of self-transcendence which, it should be recalled, is the goal of all spirituality. To this let us add: *The way up (self-transcendence) is down* (cultivating depth as a human). At the end of the day, it is awakened and mature persons who can do the most effective kind of service to make the world a better place.

QUOTES

The wisdom of all great philosophers is less like a guidebook you held in your hand and more like a sword or a tool you can wield--wisdom that is ready at hand and could be used to meet life's inevitable challenges. (adapted from Brian Johnson, in *Areté*)

“If the rose adorns itself, it adorns the garden.” ~Rudolf Steiner (If you work at becoming a beautiful person with integrity, you will make the world a better place.)

BASIC PRACTICE

Recall often that the purpose of life is to become a Hero-Sage! That is someone who possesses the wisdom and practical skills to heroically live a meaningful life in service to a purpose greater than one's self (a sage). Moreover, this person continually betters themselves and in so doing makes the world around them a better place (a hero)!

[#10] En* Theos (literally "In God") | God / Spirit / The Greater Power

For most of human history, most people and cultures have acknowledged a bigger and larger dimension of reality. This is a realm that goes beyond (“transcends”) what we can know with our senses. This is in line with what the Little Prince (in the popular tale) expressed as "What is essential is invisible to the eye." This bigger dimension of existence has been named and described by humans in the past using expressions such as "the spiritual dimension", "God", the Greater Reality, a Greater Power or Force, "Big Mind-Big Heart", etc. Today, it is sometimes even referred to as "the Universe." (as in, "the Universe made us meet here"). This spiritual dimension *cannot* be empirically demonstrated by conventional scientific methods but spiritual practitioners in every age and in every culture have claimed to have "experienced" it in a real way.

Openness to this spiritual dimension—many wise persons think—is a wholesome attitude. It is part of—what I call in fancy terms—"epistemological humility," a humble, trusting attitude that admits that *I/we do not know* everything. It follows then that we can still reasonably trust that there is something greater, that all things are encompassed within a greater spiritual dimension, and that the heart of this spiritual dimension is gracious, compassionate, and seeks justice & peace. That is how I describe faith. In the West, this ‘Greater Something’ has often been called “God.”

Moreover, if you engage consistently in spiritual practices (such as what has been mentioned above), chances are, you yourself will have a "spiritual experience" down the road. And with such an "awakening," you will actually be able to more experientially trust that this Greater Reality (or however you want to call it) exists and is active.

QUOTE

“Having faith in the human spirit is what drives us to survive and transcend. It makes life worth living, and it gives meaning to our life. Without such hope and optimism—synonyms for what I am calling faith—the mind can easily slip into depression or despair. Faith is embedded in our neurons and in our genes, and it is one of the most important principles to honor in our lives. Some people put their faith in God, while others put it into science, relationships, or work. But wherever you choose to place your faith, you must still confront a deeper question: What is your

ultimate purpose and dream? What do you truly desire in your life—not only for yourself, but for the world as well? And how will you begin to make that desire a reality? Having hope and faith are essential, but something more is needed: the skill and discipline to organize your brain in ways that will successfully motivate your life. Our meditation studies have provided a few basic tools that can help you achieve those goals, and if you apply them to your life, not only will you find a little more happiness, you'll bring a little more peace into the world.”

~ Andrew Newberg, M.D. & Mark Robert Waldman in *How God Changes Your Brain*

BASIC PRACTICE

Recall from time to time that you are part of a bigger reality that includes various dimensions: physical-inanimate things but also biological, sentient-conscious ("nous" or mind-related), and, ultimately, also "spiritual" entities. This puts everything into better perspective. (Below is a helpful image to situate our place as humans in the various dimensions of reality.)


