



365
STEPS
TO PRACTICAL
SPIRITUALITY

A day-by-day guide to
finding health, contentment
and inner peace

DAVID LAWRENCE PRESTON

365 Steps to
Practical Spirituality

By the same author

365 Steps to Self-Confidence
365 Ways to Be Your Own Life Coach
In at the Deep End

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365 Steps To Practical Spirituality

*A day-to-day guide to finding health,
contentment and inner peace*

DAVID LAWRENCE PRESTON

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About the author

David Lawrence Preston is a leading authority in the area of personal and spiritual development based in the UK. He is a life coach, hypnotherapist and teacher. He is the author of *365 Steps to Self-Confidence*, *365 Ways to be your own Life Coach* and the e-novel, *In at the Deep End*. He is the creator of the internationally acclaimed Life Enrichment Programme, a comprehensive programme in twelve monthly parts covering everything you need to create a happy, healthy and fulfilling life.

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This book is dedicated to Carmen Lucia de Lara, a woman of immense courage and wisdom, Svaraj Ruth Schmidt whose friendship and inspiration have been a blessing for most of my adult life, and everyone else who has ever taught me anything of value.

Thank you

Grateful thanks to Judith Barton for reading through my manuscript and offering many helpful suggestions.

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1

Your first steps to practical spirituality

A creative intelligence flows through the universe which holds the key to living to your potential. You can feel it pulsating in every part of your being. Like the Sun, it constantly emits energy, and you can light up yourself and the world around you when you are plugged in and switched on. You are charged with spiritual energy which needs only to be released for you to create the kind of life you want to lead.

‘Spiritual’ means ‘non-physical’. Our ideas, intelligence, imagination, sense of humour, kindness, creativity and so on – all the qualities that make us who we are – are non-physical. We seek happiness, love, friendship and peace, and all of these are non-physical too. Our spirituality creates our world, because our lives are simply a reflection of whatever we hold in our minds.

‘Spirituality’ also relates to the meaning of life in all its splendour. Have you ever wondered who you are, why you’re here and where it leads? The only thing we know for sure is that we were born and one day we’re going to die. But do our lives matter? How do we fit into the overall scheme of things? Many philosophers have offered their views down the ages, each shedding a little light on the subject. We can learn from them all. My aim is to share some ideas that I have found to be helpful. Use those which appeal to you; the time may come when you are drawn to the others too. The Buddha offered the best advice over two thousand years ago:

Friends, do not be hasty to believe a thing even if everyone repeats it, or even if it is written in holy scripture or spoken by a revered teacher. Accept only those things which accord with your own

reason, things which the wise and virtuous support, and which in practice bring benefit and happiness.

How will you find out if an idea brings benefit and happiness? By applying it! Reading can take you only so far. *Doing* reaps incredible rewards.

Everything we need to build a happy and fulfilling experience for ourselves and become a force for good in the world already lies within us. Use it to create the kind of world you want for yourself, one filled with peace, health, prosperity and happiness for all. No words can express how you feel once you have awakened the infinite power of Spirit within and experienced the freedom it brings. To quote Paramahansa Yogananda, a twentieth-century spiritual teacher, ‘You realise that all along there was something tremendous within you, and you did not know it.’

We have within ourselves a great reservoir of wisdom, strength and peace waiting to be recognised and released. Once we are strong within ourselves, we find that outer circumstances begin to mirror the inner, and life starts to change for the better.

Ron Eager

1 Spirituality Goes Beyond Appearances

Definitions of ‘spirituality’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* run to several pages. This is largely because the word ‘spirit’ has many meanings. These include a sense of loyalty or cohesion (‘team spirit’), an emotional state (‘in high spirits’), a deeper sense of meaning (‘the spirit of the law’), certain chemicals (‘white spirit’) and, of course, strong alcoholic beverages (‘spirits’).

There are many interpretations of spirituality, and they all relate to things outside the realms of physical nature or matter. Spirituality goes beyond the appearance of things to their underlying principles or forces. Living spiritually doesn't necessarily mean following a particular religion, but it does infer understanding that the universe has some order and that the creative force behind it (whatever that may be) is intelligent and purposeful.

Spirituality is highly practical. It is about finding meaning and purpose in an apparently imperfect world then using what we learn to create happy, healthy, prosperous and fulfilling lives for ourselves and others. It is not, as we shall see, a special thing to be found in out-of-the-way places – it is Life itself, flowing, ever-present and abundant.

2 The Material World Is Not Ultimate Reality

Spirituality is founded on an appreciation that the world we detect through our five senses is not the ultimate reality. Objects that appear to be solid are not as solid as we think they are.

One of the first to understand this was the Greek philosopher Plato. He realised that everything we perceive through our senses is merely an expression of universal ideas or 'Forms'. These are independent entities which exist *whether or not we are aware of them and able to grasp them with the mind*. Love, for example, exists in the universe as an idea; we only become aware of it when it enters our experience. Even then, my experience of love may be different from yours. Meanwhile, the *idea* of love itself remains constant, permanent and unchanging, as do other universal ideas such as wisdom, justice, honesty, beauty and so on.

For more than two thousand years, Plato's theory was just that – a theory – and could not be proved one way or the other. Then at the beginning of the twentieth century it was verified by scientists when quantum physicists

discovered a ‘substance’ or ‘energy’ out of which all physical things are formed. In other words, the universe is not solid at all. It is made of energy – and so are you!

3 Shadows on a Wall

Plato devised a metaphor to explain how our limited view of reality governs how we think and act. He likened us to prisoners chained to the wall of a cave, unable to turn their heads. Behind them is a fire burning brightly, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised path. Along the pathway walk puppeteers holding puppets that cast shadows on the wall. The prisoners are unable to see the puppets. All they see are shadows; all they hear are echoes made by objects they cannot see. They mistake the shadows for reality, knowing nothing of their real cause, and only when they are released can they can turn their heads and realise their error.

The great spiritual teachers taught us not to judge by appearances and to seek what is real, not what merely looks real. There is a reality that lies outside space and time, beyond our comprehension. We can explore ideas until we discover something that feels real to us, but we would be mistaken if we thought that our perceptions were ever complete.

Are you content in the cave? Do you want to see more? Experience more? Do you accept that you cannot know everything? To be satisfied with not knowing is a profound act of spiritual awareness.

4 Awe and Wonder

Do you ever reflect on the mystery of life? Do you experience an overwhelming sense of awe when you contemplate this incredible planet and the universe in which we live?

Next time you see a striking sunset, a rainbow or a beautiful Moon, pause for a few minutes and just look. Ask yourself, ‘What exactly am I looking at? How did this come to be?’

Contemplate an open flower or a tree. Where did it come from? Why is it there? Why do I perceive it as I do?

Watch a star twinkling in the night sky. Its light has taken millions of years to get here. The star probably no longer exists, but you have no way of knowing. You are looking back in time!

Look at your skin through a microscope. What do you see? How did it get there? Why is it as it is?

Why do the beautiful things in this world – the trees, birds, flowers, rivers, oceans, animals, clouds – come into existence? Why do they grow, reproduce, break down and regenerate? We don’t know, and that’s OK. Spiritual seekers are comfortable with the notion that we live in a profoundly mysterious universe and that it is not for us to understand everything.

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the power of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.

Albert Einstein

5 Spirituality and Religion

Many people are leaving the traditional religions because they cannot relate to the dogma and ritual that characterises them. Spirituality is not concerned with theology, but with life.

To be valid, a spiritual truth must be true for everyone, everywhere and for all time. It must apply equally to people living in the Arabian Desert, the Arctic wilderness, the Himalayas and a modern Western industrial society; in the fifth century BC, tenth century and the twenty-first AD; men, women and children; those who have passed on and those yet to be born. Individual religions seldom satisfy these criteria. Some are even restricted to a particular race or genealogy.

Religion and spirituality are not the same. A religion is a formalised set of beliefs. It lays down what its followers accept as true and how they should behave, insisting on compliance and reproaching those who transgress. Any religion which controls, divides and excludes cannot, in my opinion, be truly spiritual.

All *bona fide* religions began with a search for truth, but the living message of spirituality that they purport to offer has often been lost. I believe the founders of our great religions, all of whom were inspired by the best of intentions, would be distraught if they knew what is now taught and practised in their name. In a spiritually enlightened world there would be no need for separate religions, as John Lennon said in his song, 'Imagine'.

Even so, all the major religions have much to teach us. When we study them in detail, we find that their common ground far outweighs their differences. Ninety per cent of their teachings are the same; wars have been fought over the other 10%, so let's focus on the 90%! No one religion has exclusive rights to the truth. Look for points of agreement, put differences aside and seek truth wherever you can find it. Welcome the many different paths that are open to you.

6 Where Are You?

In his best-selling book *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, M. Scott Peck pointed out that we are not all at the same place in terms of our spiritual growth. He spelt out four stages on the spiritual journey. If you had to choose the one which most accurately describes you, which would it be?

Stage One

Stage One people have little or no interest in spirituality. They appear to have few moral principles, live chaotic lives and are frequently found in prisons or on the street. Some, however, rise to positions of power, including some politicians, business leaders, etc.

Stage One people occasionally become painfully aware of their situation. Some weather it and some self-destruct. Some convert to Stage Two. When this happens, it can be sudden, for example a dramatic religious conversion.

*Is this the first book of this type you have read?
Have you previously rejected the very idea of
spirituality? If so, it's possible that you are
ready to move on from Stage One.*

Stage Two

Stage Two people look to authority and are dependent on an organisation for their governance. This could be the military, a business organisation, public institution or religious body. According to Peck, the majority of traditional religious believers fall into this category. They rely on its teachings and rituals for stability and to deliver them from uncertainty.

Sooner or later some Stage Two people (often the young) question the need for an organisation with rigid structures, rituals and superstitions and begin to move to Stage Three.

Are you a person who respects authority and likes rules? Do you look outside yourself for leadership and control? If so, you're probably at Stage Two.

Stage Three

These people dislike authority and feel no need to look to an organisation for direction. Some are agnostics or atheists; some are drawn to other philosophies. They are truth seekers and (according to Peck) usually ahead of Stage Two in their spirituality without being religious in the usual sense of the word. They are often involved causes working for peace and justice.

Stage Three people often regard Stage Two people as brainwashed and gullible, while Stage Two people feel threatened by them because of their lack of respect for conventional beliefs. A typical Stage Three statement was made by Kylie Minogue (the pop singer): 'God is either a universal energy outside of us or a life force within us. Or both.' (Note the ambiguity!)

As they develop, they begin to glimpse a bigger picture and may even begin to take an interest in some of the mythology that engaged their Stage Two elders. At this point, they begin to move towards Stage Four.

Have you turned your back on organised religion yet have a sense that there must be more to life than you're currently experiencing if only you could find it? If so, you're probably at Stage Three.

Stage Four

Stage Four individuals believe in the underlying connectedness between things. They are comfortable with the mystery of life and seek to explore it more deeply. They are inspired by the great religions, but not bound to them.

At first sight, Stage Two and Stage Four people appear opposites, yet they have much in common. They know the same passages of scripture but interpret them differently. Stage Three people are baffled by Stage Four. On the one hand, they aspire to their awareness and spirituality while being puzzled about their interest in those old myths and legends.

Peck acknowledged that people do not always fall neatly into categories and that there is some overlap. For instance, Stage Three or Four people may turn to the church at times of celebration or stress, drawing strength and/or comfort from its rituals. They are also to be seen on religious premises when rites of passage take place – what clerics call ‘hatching, matching and dispatching’.

If you have a deep sense of your own spirituality and the oneness of all things, you are probably at Stage Four (and have little need for this book)!

7 Beware the Weird and Wacky

Many wacky ideas have hit the book stalls and television screens over the past few years. According to recent surveys, about half of us believe in tarot cards, mediums and palmistry, and sales of crystals, incense, replica angels, pendulums and similar objects are at an all-time high. Books on Atlantis, giant lizards in human form, crystal skulls, crop circles, UFOs and unicorns circling the earth preparing to come to our rescue sell by the million and are taken seriously by a few – but they are not what spirituality is about.