

Humanist Spirituality

Oxymoron or Authentic Path to Enlightenment?

A talk by Doug Muder to the Humanist Association of Massachusetts

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ABSTRACT: Is it possible to have an authentically Humanist spiritual practice? Such a practice must have a clearly stated goal, justify itself without theological or metaphysical speculation, and harmonize with the Humanist commitment to action in the world. This talk defines a humanistic goal for spiritual practice, states simple criteria for separating good spirituality from bad spirituality, and proposes Stoicism as the basis for a Humanist spiritual practice.

Oil and Water

Humanist spirituality. Do those two words mean anything? Do they go together at all? Should they?

Many Humanists say no – they don't go together, and they shouldn't. *Spirituality*, if it means anything at all to them, is self-indulgent naval-gazing. *Spirituality* is the cloistered medieval monks, praying and praising God and doing nothing to help anybody. *Humanism*, on the other hand, means being out in the world, working on real problems. The two are oil and water.

I often meet other Humanists who also say no, but they say it with regret. They experience spirituality and Humanism as the inner and outer poles of their being. They try to be good outwardly-focused Humanists – politically active, socially aware, working for justice. But it's not enough. They feel an inner hunger that their Humanism doesn't satisfy.

Believing that Humanism and spirituality don't mix, they look to feed that hunger far away from the Western humanist tradition – in Eastern or aboriginal religions. They practice Zen or yoga or join drumming circles.

Now they have a different problem. Instead of feeling empty, they feel divided. They think like Humanists, but they practice something else – something they can't always explain in a reasonable way to reasonable people, because their practice comes from a different culture that speaks a different language, and much of it is untranslatable.

Of course, they could take the religious terms as metaphors. *Reincarnation* isn't really about an afterlife, it means ... something else. Liberal Christians have been doing this for more than a hundred years: *God's heavenly kingdom* can be a metaphor for the perfect human society of the future. Liberal theologian Walter Wink interprets *angel* as the collective personality of a community. So there can be an Angel of France or an Angel of Exxon-Mobil. Right now, for example, I might be channeling the Angel of Humanism for you.

This metaphoric talk drives most Humanists nuts, because it seems like cheating. Metaphors aren't true, exactly, but you get to act as if they are. Who knows what may come through a loophole like that? Maybe all the superstition that Humanism has worked for centuries to overcome.

Today I want to raise a different possibility. What if *Humanist spirituality* isn't an oxymoron? What if Humanists who feel that inner hunger could feed it humanistically? What if we had an

authentically Humanist spiritual vocabulary that didn't have to be borrowed or transplanted or reinterpreted?

I'm going to claim today that the people who invented Humanism already had an advanced spiritual practice. The Greek schools of the Hellenistic era – the Cynics, Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics – were the original Humanists, and their spiritual practice was consistent with their Humanism. And while that practice may have gotten a little dusty over the centuries, it still works.

Clearing the Ground

Before supporting that claim, I need to clear away some misconceptions and stereotypes.

Quantum Mechanics is not Mystical

I wish I didn't have to lose time on this first misconception, but pop culture has made it inescapable: quantum mechanics. New Age authors like Deepak Chopra and movies like *What the Bleep Do We Know?* have popularized the idea that quantum mechanics unifies science with mysticism, and so is a ready-made Humanist spirituality.

We'll probably be hearing this for decades, because (although it isn't mystical) quantum mechanics is mysterious and counter-intuitive. In a minute a New-Ager can state three theories that would take you hours to refute properly – if you're up to the job at all, which I'm usually not.

But I can tell you this: Scientific and mathematical theories have played this role before. In Newton's day, the idea that experiments here on Earth could predict the motions of heavenly bodies was absolutely mind-blowing. It was as if Newton had lifted up a corner of the Universe and found the Creator's signature underneath. Intelligent design was a slam-dunk case for the next two centuries.

In the 19th century, non-Euclidean geometry was mind-blowing. And if you go way back, the discovery of irrational numbers so amazed the Pythagoreans that it became part of their mystery cult. When you got initiated, they'd draw the diagonal of a square and reveal the great secret that the square root of two is irrational.

These things pass. Today, the square root of two isn't particularly mystical. Eventually, quantum mechanics won't be either.

Let me tell you where I think quantum mechanics' mystical reputation comes from. Remember the science fiction movies where the hero defeats the giant computer by making it work on a paradox until it sprays sparks and blows up? If that actually worked, bad programmers would blow up the world twice a week, but there's a spiritual practice based on the same principle. You overstrain your rational faculties until they fritz out and you get popped into some non-rational state.

In the East, the Zen student meditates on a *koan*, an unsolvable conundrum like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" In the West, the Greek school of Skeptics constructed carefully balanced arguments for and against the same proposition, so that the student's mind was pulled simultaneously in opposite directions until something snapped. Zen describes the resulting state as "no mind" while the Skeptics called it "informed not-knowing."

Quantum mechanics is so paradoxical that it can work like a *koan*. Understanding it requires such mental effort that some students spontaneously have mystical experiences. And they naturally jump to the conclusion that quantum mechanics itself is mystical. But it isn't; it's just hard.

Mass Religion versus Spiritual Practice

A second misconception is that *religion* means *mass religion*. To most Humanists, *religion* is Billy Graham speaking in a crowded stadium, mobs of Muslim pilgrims trampling each other in Mecca, and so on. Mass religion is about getting your passport stamped so that you can go to Heaven. When Firesign Theatre has the priest come ashore in the New World and say to the Native Americans, “Domini, domini, domini, you’re all Catholics now” – that’s mass religion. That’s not what I want to talk about.

In addition to its big-box outlets, every religion has its spiritual practice — its narrow path, to which many are called but few are chosen. Spiritual practice is not about stamping your passport, it’s about mastering a religion. Like mastering a musical instrument, it requires years of solitary practice and one-on-one training.

And so, when I raise the question of Humanist spirituality, I’m not asking whether we can stamp passports. I’m asking whether we have a path to the top of the mountain. If someone wants to achieve spiritual mastery, can they do that as a Humanist? Or do they have to leave Humanism and learn a spiritual practice somewhere else?

East and West

I also need to break down two walls of stereotype that stand between American Humanists and spirituality. The first wall separates the rational West from the spiritual East.

“East is East and West is West,” wrote Kipling, “and never the twain shall meet.” That’s one of the great out-of-context quotes. Kipling’s poem is actually about an Englishman and an Afghan who transcend their differences and achieve friendship. Here’s a larger excerpt:

They have looked each other between the eyes, and there they found no fault.
They have taken the Oath of the Brother-in-Blood on leavened bread and salt:
They have taken the Oath of the Brother-in-Blood on fire and fresh-cut sod,
On the hilt and the haft of the Khyber knife, and the Wondrous Names of God.

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face tho' they come from the ends of the earth!

In fact, East and West have never been separate worlds. They’re just opposite ends of the Silk Road, and they met and blended for centuries in places like Gandhara, a silk road kingdom that existed in Afghanistan before the Muslim invasions. That blending hits you immediately when you look at Gandharan sculptures like the ones at the MFA. The scenes are Buddhist, but the style is Greek and the faces are European. It’s very striking.

Gandhara, it turns out, is where Buddhist sculpture began. The early Buddhists didn’t make representations of Buddha, just as Muslims don’t make images of Mohammed. But when Greeks came east and converted, they wanted something to look at. That raised a problem: How do you make the first statue of someone whose image hasn’t been preserved? And so the Gandharan

Buddhas are modeled on statues of Apollo. To this day Buddha retains a few Apollonian features: curly hair, a topknot, a toga, and a nimbus of light around his head.

Martin Palmer's book *The Jesus Sutras* describes the Taoist-Christian community that flourished in China until the 9th century. Palmer traces the Buddhist goddess Kwan Yin back to two sources: the male Bodhisattva of Compassion and the Virgin Mary.

Not all influence went West-to-East. Thomas McEvilley's book *The Shape of Ancient Thought* reconstructs a thousand-year relationship between Greece and India. To simplify a very complex and well-researched thesis, McEvilley postulates a "monism complex" that comes up from India, motivates the pre-Socratic Greeks to search for unifying principles, and inspires Greek mystical philosophers like Parmenides and the Pythagorean and Orphic mystery schools. These ideas develop rapidly during Greece's golden age, producing the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, and then the Hellenistic schools of Cynics, Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics – which in turn influence later Buddhist and Hindu philosophy.

Given this slow but continuous stirring, you would not expect East and West to be polar opposites, and in fact they aren't. The West has its indigenous strains of mysticism and meditation, and there is much for a Humanist to admire in the teachings of Buddha and Confucius. Kipling was closer to the truth when he said: "there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth."

Athens and Jerusalem

A second wall of stereotype stands between Athens and Jerusalem. Many Humanists from Christian families like to disentangle our intellectual roots from Christianity. We chart Humanism's genealogy from Athens to pagan Rome to the Renaissance to the European Enlightenment. Christianity develops on the other side of the wall: from Jerusalem to Catholic Rome to the Dark Ages and the Protestant Reformation. Science is on our side of the wall, spirituality on their side. Even in Europe, *our* scientists (like Galileo) were persecuted by *their* popes.

I don't think I need to explain this to Jewish Humanists, but this wall doesn't stand up to scrutiny from either side. The Jewish and Islamic influence on science goes without saying, and Christianity owes as much to Athens as to Jerusalem. Much of the Christian theory of the soul and the afterlife comes from Plato. And some roots of Christian mysticism go back to Greek sources like Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus.

Many of the founders of European science were *more* mystical than the religious establishment. Newton worried about persecution more for his alchemy than for his physics. Giordano Bruno was burned for his theology, not his science. And an inescapable figure in Western Humanist history is the Renaissance mage, men who provided the models for fictional characters like Prospero and Faust.

Stating the Problem

Now that we've cleared the ground, we need to state the problem. What good does a spiritual practice do in real life?

Humanism's Unique Constraints

Most traditions can skip this question. Muslims pray five times a day, for example, because God demands it. Any earthly benefit is just a bonus. To make things even harder, the Humanist an-

swer can't depend on any unsupported metaphysical assumptions. The purpose can't be to go to Heaven or to get right with God or to ensure a favorable reincarnation.

Some Eastern teachers address this question in a circular way: Just start the practice, and after you've done it for a while you'll see the point. Apparently, right now, you are so unenlightened that they can't even tell you how unenlightened you are. Or they explain the purpose of the practice in untranslatable terms. We're going to cleanse your *chakras* or release your *karma* or awaken your *kundalini*. What does any of that mean? Well, you'll understand after it happens.

Now, pedagogically they may be right. Maybe spirituality is easier to learn if you just get started and worry about explanations later. But "try it and you'll see" can't be the right answer for a Humanist practice. It's a leap of faith, and sometimes those leaps take you into a vicious cycle. From the inside, even a drug addict's worldview makes sense – try the drug long enough, and you'll get it. And if you jump into one of those ideologies where the Leader is always right, you can easily verify it later – just ask the Leader.

We don't do leaps of faith. And so, an authentic Humanist spirituality needs to explain why you, a Humanist, in whatever unenlightened state you may find yourself, should be interested in spiritual practice. What problem does it solve here and now?

The Hellenistic schools had an answer. They claimed to be training people to be happy independent of circumstances. That's quite a claim. Most people's happiness turns on circumstance like a weathervane in the wind. You're happy when the Red Sox beat the Yankees and miserable when the Yankees beat the Red Sox. Or vice versa. But, starting with Diogenes, the Hellenistic philosophers taught that (with the proper training) your sense of well-being can become invincible.

Now, *invincible happiness* is still a little too vague (and we'll try to sharpen it in a minute), but it's definitely a step in the right direction. You can understand this goal before you start. And unlike the claim that God demands it or that otherwise you'll reincarnate as a pig, it is at least somewhat testable. As you get into the practice, your happiness either becomes more reliable or it doesn't.

But is it a goal worth aspiring to? If the world goes to Hell in a handbasket, but you're happy – is that good? We need to study this.

Connection and Liberation

To study it, we need some criteria for judgment. I'd like to propose two themes that seem to me to cut across virtually all religions and spiritual practices: connection and liberation.

Connection is a positive sense of identification with something bigger than yourself, usually something that contains you. *Bigger* can be at almost any scale. Maybe you feel connected to your family. Maybe you belong to a church community or identify with a group like this one. You could connect with a political movement, a philosophy, a nation, the progress of humanity, the biosphere of the planet, or the well-being of all living things. Many Humanists get a sense of connection from the night sky. For some reason it just feels good to recognize that there's a Universe out there.

Some connections are better than others. You may have a close-knit group of friends who bring out the best in you and support you in times of need. Or maybe you belong to a cult that

abuses you for the benefit of its leader. Either will satisfy your need for connection. Like good connections, bad connections come in all sizes. You may be in a bad marriage, belong to an abusive family, work for an unethical business, participate in a dysfunctional religion, identify with a destructive ideology, or be a citizen of an evil country. Your connection to humanity itself may be bad if it makes you cruel to other species or indifferent to rest of the biosphere.

Liberation is the awareness of possibilities and potentials, combined with a sense of choice and efficacy. "I can make things happen." Liberation is about energy, creativity, inspiration. Liberation is that feeling you get when you break a pattern you weren't previously aware of. You don't have to grumble quietly when you're stuck in traffic; you can turn up the radio and sing loud. Liberation is when you look at the doodle in the margins of your notes and think for the first time, "I could get some art supplies and make a real drawing out of that."

At first glance connection and liberation seem like opposites. Connection might mean strengthening your personal relationships and getting more involved in your community, while liberation might tell you to leave a small-minded community or break free from relationships that hold you back.

But this zero-sum view is too simplistic, because connection and liberation can be allies as well as competitors. Sometimes you need to liberate yourself from bad connections before you can make good connections. And disconnected, alienated people are the ones most likely to lose their freedom to predatory groups and dysfunctional relationships.

Connection and liberation alike are threatened by the addictions and aberrations that prevent you from functioning as a person at all. Failure to liberate yourself from alcoholism or compulsive gambling may ruin your connection to your family or community.

Even the experiences of connection and liberation can combine in a state that the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called *flow*. In the East, it's called *Buddha mind* or *unity with the Tao*. In a state of flow, you are simultaneously as connected as you need to be and as free as you need to be. You feel no lack in either direction.

Good and Bad Spirituality

Now we're in a position describe good spirituality, and how it differs from bad spirituality. *Good spirituality serves both connection and liberation*. Bad spirituality sacrifices one to the other. The sacrifice can go in either direction. A cult satisfies your connection needs by robbing you of all your independence. A self-indulgent spiritual path liberates you personally by letting the world go hang – your self-expression or pleasure or power are the only considerations, and it doesn't matter who else gets hurt.

Us-and-them worldviews like Nazism are a particularly insidious form of bad spirituality. Here the sacrifice happens in both directions. Among Us, you sacrifice your independence to the group. But you also sacrifice your sense of connection to Them, and so you are free to fulfill any cruel whim if They are the victims.

If that's bad spirituality, what does good spirituality look like? On the mass religion level, it doesn't just exhort you to be more committed or more free. It provides a sense of connection to other people and to issues larger than yourself, and while you will have to sacrifice some of your independence, the price shouldn't be too high. In return you can expect some support in breaking free from addictions, bad habits, and bad connections. A good mass religion doesn't divide the

World into the Saved and the Damned. If it has a God, He is a God of Mercy who loves *all* people, and not just the people who love Him back.

A good spiritual practice does more than just offer you ready-made connections and liberations. Instead, it trains you to evaluate your connections and the influence they have on you. What about your habits, your desires, and your ideas – do they serve you or do you serve them? A good practice subjects itself to particularly intense criticism and reflection. Is it working? Are you gaining insight? Are you growing both in commitment and in independence?

Most of all, a good spiritual practice teaches you the mechanics of connection and liberation: How are your commitments and identifications created or destroyed, strengthened or weakened?

Enlightenment

Let's think about where we are. We've stated a goal for spiritual practice: To master the process of connection and liberation, so that (rather than sacrificing one for the other), we achieve a state that is simultaneously connected and liberated.

That goal is entirely humanistic: It does not depend on any theology, afterlife, spirit world, undefined term, scripture, institutional authority, or circular appeal to the practice itself.

What's more, I believe that this statement of the goal does not debase or trivialize spirituality. This is not a word game, where we steal a term from some other tradition and redefine it in an unrecognizable way. I believe that a teacher from another spiritual tradition could recognize this goal. He may like his tradition's description better, and he may doubt that we can achieve such a goal without the practices of his order or the blessing of his deity, but I believe he would see that we are pointing (in our own benighted way) at the same thing he is pointing at.

I believe, in other words, that a person who masters the process of connection and liberation, who masters his habits and desires and ideas, who feels connected to others at all levels from the personal to the universal, and who lives with the sense of freedom that comes from knowing that all his connections and commitments are blessed and validated by his own will – that person deserves to be called *enlightened*, in any tradition.

Self-evaluation

Now that we've defined *enlightenment*, I picture some of you running through the kind of mental checklist you might find in a self-help magazine: *Are You Enlightened? Take Our Quiz*.

“Am I addicted to anything? Drugs? Alcohol? Gambling? Nope. Check.

“Is my life dominated by obsessive habits? Nope. Check.

“Out of control sexual desires? ... Not *really* out of control. I'll say Check.

“Anything else I need to be liberated from? Abusive spouse? Mind-controlling cult? Don't think so. Check.

“Connections to other people. Have I got friends? Sure. Political commitments? No problem. Good feelings about humanity? Well, there's that one guy, but I don't think that counts. Check.

“Hey, what do you know? I'm enlightened! So I guess you can keep all that meditation and introspection and other spiritual practice stuff. I mean, maybe it's OK for people who need that kind of thing, but it would just be a waste of time for me.”

Hold that thought. We'll get back to you.

The Hellenistic Schools

Now that we've stated our criteria, we can criticize Diogenes' goal of invincible happiness more precisely: It's individualistic; it seems weak on the connection side. So as we examine the practices of the Greek schools, we need to keep that objection in mind: Can these practices serve connection as well as liberation?

The Birthplace of Western Humanism

One reason to hope for a positive answer is that the Cynics, Epicureans, Sceptics, and Stoics are the parents of Western Humanism. What we might call the Humanist complex of ideas – the primacy of reason, rejection of the afterlife as a motivation, human well-being as a defining characteristic of the Good, cosmopolitanism, and the equality of all people – first came together in these Hellenistic schools.

But before we can do these schools justice, we need to get past the names. Today *cynic*, *epicurean*, *skeptic*, and *stoic* are all English words, and the connotations are not entirely positive. Fortunately, they're also not accurate. Let's go through them one-by-one.

Cynics

We might think of the Cynics as the original counterculture. Anti-materialists and nonconformists, they challenged the status-seeking culture of their day with an outrageous, radically simple lifestyle.

We have lost most of the writing of the first cynic, Diogenes, but we know a lot of stories about him. Quite possibly he coined the word *cosmopolitan*. And one of his sayings was, "Reason or the hangman's rope."

Like a performance artist, Diogenes changed people by shocking them. Plato once described him as "Socrates gone mad." He achieved freedom by minimizing his own needs. He slept in a trough or tub, because it was simpler than owning a house. Once while drinking from a stream, Diogenes saw a boy scoop up water with his hands. He reacted by smashing his own cup and saying, "What a fool I've been, lugging around this useless object."

Diogenes could stop people in their tracks by turning a concept inside-out. In one story, pirates capture Diogenes and try to sell him into slavery. Just before the bidding starts, the auctioneer asks Diogenes if he has any special talents that could command a higher price. "I'm a good master," Diogenes replies. "Go see if anyone out there wants to buy a master for himself."

Epicureans

Epicurus took Diogenes' goal of invincible happiness one step further. In addition to liberation from social convention, Epicurus sought liberation from desire.

He identified two types of desire: satiable and insatiable. Hunger, for example, is satiable – you eat, and then you're not hungry any more. But the desires for wealth and fame and power are insatiable – no matter how much you get, you want more.

Unhappiness, Epicurus taught, comes from insatiable desires. And since animals do not race around trying to be famous, piling up wealth and power, or yearning for immortality, insatiable desires must not come from our animal nature. Epicurus decided they come from false beliefs, so he designed a spiritual practice to root out illusions and self-deceptions.

In his criticism of the desire for immortality, Epicurus may have been the first person to connect the dots in the vicious cycle of institutional religion: Fear of death leads to superstitions about the afterlife and the gods, which then empower the priests, who complete the cycle by scaring their followers about death and the afterlife.

The modern sense of the word *epicurean* comes from Epicurus' strategy for dealing with satiable desires – to satisfy them as efficiently as possible, so that they don't dominate your life. People gorge themselves, Epicurus believed, because they don't know what they're hungry for, and so they keep eating blindly until they get it. But a true Epicurean, understanding his desires, knows exactly what he wants to eat, eats it, and then stops. "Send me a little pot of cheese," Epicurus wrote to a friend, "so that I can have a luxurious feast whenever I like."

Skeptics

The Skeptics sought liberation not just from conventions and desires, but also from beliefs and ideas. They were the first people in the West to truly understand bias, the ways that your beliefs color your perceptions and even make you blind. We don't see what's in front of us because we think we already know.

Bias is easy to see – in *other* people. You can try, for example, to introduce a fundamentalist to a nice young gay couple who want to get married. But he can't see them, because he already knows what they are: an abomination against the Lord.

It's much harder to recognize your own biases, even though everyone has them. The astronomer Arthur Eddington described scientific bias with this analogy: "Some men went fishing with a net. And on examining their catch, they determined that there was a minimum size to the fish in the sea."

In popular language, a *skeptic* is someone who doesn't believe anything. But Skeptical training produces something a little different: a person who holds his ideas lightly. A Skeptic treats ideas like tools; he uses them and then sets them down. He never confuses the fish in his net with the fish in the sea.

Stoics

From my point of view, it all comes together in the Stoics. The Stoics adapted practices from the other schools and assembled for the first time the full Humanist complex of ideas. Many of their views wouldn't become popular until the European Enlightenment: They opposed slavery, they educated women, they envisioned a world community without war.

The center of Stoic practice is regular and rigorous self-examination – *mindfulness*, in today's terms. The Stoic keeps close watch on his thoughts, feelings, and desires, always raising the questions: How is this serving me? Is this how I want my mind to be? The Stoic masters his mind by thousands of small corrections. Like the Cynic, he does not require wealth or social approval. Like the Epicurean, he masters desire. Like the Skeptic, he watches for the traps of bias and rigid ideas.

What About Connection?

That all sounds very liberating, but what about connection? Is invincible happiness just another way to sacrifice connection for liberation? It's tempting to brush off this question with a general

observation: If you think disconnected people are happy, you obviously don't know many of them. But there are two specific reasons to make this charge against the Greeks: Many of the Hellenistic philosophers were anti-political, and all the schools cast a critical eye on human relationships. Let's address those points.

First politics. While all the schools denounced the imperial politics of the day for its flattery and pandering, the Stoics did get involved in the world and tried to make it better. The Stoic philosopher Seneca lost his life in a plot overthrow Nero. And Marcus Aurelius, whose book *Meditations* is one of the classics of Stoicism, was as politically involved as you can get – he was emperor.

On a personal level, the Stoics are often misread as advocating coldness: Stay distant from people so that your happiness won't be damaged when they leave you or die. Epictetus seems to saying just that when tells us to enjoy life “like a traveler enjoys an inn.”

I didn't really understand that line until about ten years ago. My wife (who's sitting in the back row) spent almost a year in rigorous treatment for cancer. We didn't know whether she would live. That sounds like a horrible situation, but in fact it was one of the best years of our lives. I've since heard other cancer survivors make a similar claim. How is such a thing possible? We lived that year without the denial of death, without the illusion of immortality. Each day might be the best day we had left together, and so we lived it with intensity and appreciation.

We were living like travelers at an inn.

The Stoic way is without denial, not without love or appreciation. All things end. The Stoic understands this and enjoys them now, while they're here. Look around. This may be the best day you have left. Don't miss it.

Stoicism as a Spiritual Path

When we strip the stereotypes and misperceptions away from Stoicism, I believe it provides an authentic Humanist spirituality. It serves both liberation and connection. It is consistent with the political and cultural ideals of Humanism (many of which it invented). And its goals and practices can be understood without reference to any theological or metaphysical speculations.

Now the downside: If you ask me for the phone number of a Stoic teacher or meditation group, I don't know one. You can learn a lot from books, but at the moment you probably can't plug into a practicing Stoic community. For now, you still have to learn techniques and get community support from Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, or some other non-Western or non-Humanist group.

But with that Stoic foundation, you aren't learning to be a Buddhist, you're a Humanist learning some techniques from a Buddhist. There is no division between your reason and your spirituality, or between your outer life and your inner life. You can learn one trick here and another there without feeling lost or fragmented, because your Humanism makes room for your spiritual practice.

Spiritual Practice

Let's get back to all the *enlightened* people in the room. Why would you need a spiritual practice?

Here's a simple exercise you can try sometime on your own: Start taking long, slow breathes and count them until you get to 30. That's it. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

Here's what usually happens: You take the first breath, count one, and think: "No problem." Then you take another and count two. By three, you're bored. Being bored, you realize you're also hungry, and you wonder what's for dinner tonight. Dinner reminds you that you had an argument at dinner last night, and you wonder if that's going to come up again. Probably not, but ... was that five or six?

After you fail at this exercise a few times – and just about everybody does – something dawns on you: Your thoughts have a life of their own. Maybe your brain takes an occasional suggestion from you, but you are *not* in charge here. And maybe you should be.

So what's my point? Sitting in this comfortable room, it's hard to believe you need to go into training to win your freedom. Freedom from what? You don't feel enslaved or controlled. You do what you want to do. You think what you want to think.

Or at least you think you think what you want to think.

Earlier we talked about circular worldviews, like the one where the Leader is always right. People living in those cults will tell you they're perfectly free. And they believe it – because the Leader told them they're perfectly free, and he's always right. Well, replace the Leader with your own Ego, and it all works in exactly the same circular way. Better, even, because the most effective deception is self-deception.

That's how addiction works, isn't it? Nobody goes out thinking, "I'm going to be an alcoholic tonight." No, no. You think: "I *like* to drink. It's *fun*." People living in the gutter still think drinking is one of the good things in life.

Now, you're probably not doing anything that dramatically self-destructive. But no one is born with an immunity to self-deception. And how *would* you know?

During the Nineties I was surprised to discover that I had a CNN addiction. That sounds like a joke, but it isn't. It had a serious effect on my life. Whenever I had a spare mental cycle, I thought about whatever story CNN was hyping that week: the Microsoft antitrust trial, the Clinton impeachment. I kept turning on the TV. "Maybe there's something new. Maybe there's something new." I didn't think I was out of control. I just thought I was curious.

I hit bottom during a walk in the woods one beautiful spring day. I went out because I needed to think, but I couldn't think. Instead, I had a vicious argument in my head with the people who wanted to keep Elian Gonzales from going back to Cuba. Here I was in a beautiful place on a beautiful day, making myself miserable about something that had nothing to do with my life. And five minutes before that, if you had asked me, I would have said I was doing this because I wanted to.

In spite of all my dabbling in this religion and that one, I didn't really understand spiritual practice until that moment. I didn't need it to climb some supernatural ladder of success. I needed it because I was not master of my own mind. So I took all the techniques I had picked up from the Buddhists and the pagans and the kabbalists, and I applied them to a practice of Stoic mindfulness. Many times a day I stopped myself cold and asked: "What am I doing? What am I thinking? How does any of this serve the purposes of my life?"

At first, I often had to confess that I had no idea. Whatever I was doing and thinking wasn't making me happy and it wasn't helping anybody else. So why? I didn't know. It was humbling and embarrassing, but with a thousand little corrections I gradually got better.

And so, this is what I want to say to all of you who made it through the checklist and decided you were enlightened: Just as every computer needs a virus-detection program, everyone needs an organized practice for rooting out self-deception. Because self-deception is a universal human trait. And we live in culture full of people working to take advantage of that trait.

That's why I say that even you, a Humanist, need a spiritual practice. Fortunately, you don't need to leave Humanism to find one.

Recommended Reading

R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, ed., *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Berkeley CA: The University of California Press 1996)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins 1990)

Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus*. Translation by George Long in *The Great Books of the Western World* (Encyclopedia Britannica). Translation by P. E. Matheson in *Dover Philosophical Classics*. Unattributed translation at <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/discourses.html>

William B. Irvine, *On Desire*. (Oxford: The Oxford University Press 2006)

Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*. <http://www.bartleby.com/246/1129.html>

Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press 1989)

Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. Translation by George Long in *The Great Books of the Western World* (Encyclopedia Britannica), also available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.html>

Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press 2002)

Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1994)

Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (New York: Ballantine Wellspring 2001)

Jonathon Tucker, *The Silk Road: Art and History* (Chicago IL: Art Media Resources 2003)