



A SPIRITUAL PATH
FOR THE MODERN WEST

BENJAMIN RIGGS

Finding God in the Body

A Spiritual Path for the Modern
West



Benjamin A. Riggs

Finding God in the Body: A Spiritual Path for the Modern West
Copyright © 2016 Benjamin A. Riggs. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America. No part of this
book may be used or reproduced in any manner
whatsoever without written permission from the author
except in cases of brief quotations.

www.FindingGodInTheBody.com

First edition of *Finding God in the Body: A Spiritual Path for the
Modern West* published in 2017.

Registered with Library of Congress United States
Copyright Office in 2015

ISBN: 0692760229

ISBN-13: 978-0692760222

Cover art and Albert Einstein graphic quote designed by
Michael Scott. Cover adapted from Da Vinci's *Vitruvian
Man*.

Introduction

“Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought.” ~ Basho

This book is an attempt to flesh out a functional spirituality for the modern West. By this I mean a transformative system of practice supplemented by an inner-mythos that speaks to the sensibilities of modern man. This is not an academic endeavor for me—it is my path, for I am a modern Western man and as such, my worldview is heavily influenced by the often divergent forces of Christianity, Eastern philosophy, and modern science.

I was born in Louisiana. In the Bible Belt, religion and science share a contentious border. The brand of Christianity I saw growing up did not interest me. So I looked to the wisdom and practices of the East, which in the age of the internet is closer than the church around the corner. I became interested in Tibetan Buddhism but there was something missing. In Tibetan Buddhism there is a heavy emphasis on meditation practice and a rich philosophical tradition, both of which were deeply rewarding. But the belief in reincarnation and the pantheon of exotic deities did not resonate with me. My heart just wasn't in it. I never parted ways with Buddhist practice, but my path did eventually bring me back to the teachings of Christianity. I say my path brought me back, but in truth it introduced me to Christianity for the first time. My Buddhist background enabled me to cut through the fundamentalist veneer to the contemplative core of Christianity where I found an inner-

mythos that resonated with me.

When I was four or five my family moved to a small town in East Texas. I was a typical kid: I loved airplanes, dinosaurs, and spaceships. I was also quite fond of church. On Sunday mornings these interests overlapped as I sat in the pews of the local Baptist Church drawing dinosaurs, rockets, and airplanes on the back of offering envelopes.

My family was not religious, so I often went to church alone. This wasn't a problem for me because I got to ride the church bus. The highlight of my week was sitting on the bus next to a young man with Down Syndrome who liked to sing the Bob Seger song, "Old Time Rock-and-Roll." In my early years, I loved church and everything about it.

My love for church proved to be conditional. When I was in the first grade my parents divorced, and my church-going days came to a screeching halt. I blamed God for the failure of my family. I expected him to look after me and my interests in exchange for devotion and church attendance. Every Sunday I heard that God watches over his flock, that he takes care of his own. Since I believed and my butt was in the pew, I counted myself as a member of the flock. When my parents separated, I felt overlooked, which either meant God was a liar or he did not exist. Either way, I had no use for him.

Following the divorce, I was no longer the fun loving, good-hearted kid who liked to draw dinosaurs and spaceships. I became angry and did not know how to express my anger. My family split up and there was nothing I could do about it. My sister went to live with my mother and I moved back to Louisiana with my dad.

One night, while my father and I were watching *America's Funniest Home Videos*, he caught me staring out the window at a group of kids playing football. He insisted I go out and make some new friends. I didn't want to, but he made me. So I walked down the stairs from our apartment building to the courtyard where they were playing. I picked the biggest kid in the bunch, walked up to him, and spit in his face. Then, I realized what I had done and took off running! He tracked me down and beat me within an inch of my life.

The next ten to twelve years of my life were dark. At an early age, I learned I was alone. No one was looking out for me. There was no God and no family, nothing to fall back on. I had to look after myself. That's not to say I wasn't well cared for. I had everything I needed and got more than most, but I still struggled. I did not know how to cope with life. This mounting frustration made my first encounters with alcohol welcomed occasions.

Alcohol medicated my fear and anger. Drinking was how I coped—and I coped a lot. Alcohol wasn't my problem; it was my solution. It was the antidote to fear, the countermeasure for anger, and the lubricant that enabled me to overcome social anxiety. And it seemed to work. I felt like I was back on course, but this course turned out to be a slippery slope.

At the ripe old age of seventeen, my dad sent me to Canton, Texas for substance abuse treatment. When the counselors confronted me about my drinking and drug use I said, "This is how all teenage boys from Louisiana act. The only problem I have is that my parents won't get off my back." I was not the least bit interested in what treatment had to offer because I didn't think I had a problem.

Technically, I still wasn't sober. Not long after my parent's divorce a psychiatrist diagnosed me with ADD/ADHD. Adderall is an addictive stimulant used to treat behavioral problems in hyperactive children. I was a hyper active kid with a sleuth of behavioral problems, so they prescribed me Adderall. I took it most of my childhood, excluding a stint that followed a run in with the law. When I was twelve years old, I got caught selling my Adderall at school. The prescription was revoked for a time but eventually refilled, and I was taking it when I arrived in Canton—although, I was not taking it as prescribed. The treatment staff caught me hiding it in my cheek and bringing it back to my room where I would snort it. As a result, the staff doctor took me off of Adderall. For the first time since I was twelve, I could not get my hands on either drugs or alcohol. I couldn't check out. I couldn't cope.

Treatment forced me to relate to life with no anesthetic. It felt like I was losing my mind. Out of desperation I stole some coffee packets from the cafeteria. In a room search the staff found the packets in my desk drawer. They questioned my roommates and learned that I was snorting coffee in the bathroom. When they took me off of Adderall, I started to reach. I did not know how to live sober. I was willing to do anything to flee the rawness and immediacy of life. When they confronted me about the coffee, my game was up. I could no longer deny I had a problem. I couldn't continue to say, "This is how all teenage boys from Louisiana act," because I did not know another teenage boy from Louisiana—or anywhere else, for that matter—snorting coffee. Now that I was bent over a barrel, they began talking to me about God.

When it came to God, I did not parse my words. I thought God was something stupid people used to explain their

problems away. I made it clear that I had no use for God. Sure, I caused plenty of problems for myself, but God was just as useless in my eyes. The treatment center staff arranged for me to meet a man named Billy Jack. I was pretty apprehensive, but equally excited. I despised the idea of God. My hatred for God made debating his existence enjoyable. I wanted the person I was debating to feel the same hatred and disappointment I felt. I thought I could transfer my pain to the other person by defeating them in debate. However, Billy Jack took another angle with me, perhaps the only angle that would have worked at the time.

Billy Jack did not try to prove anything to me. He spoke to me about possibilities, not certainties. We never talked philosophy, dogma, or theology. In fact, we hardly talked. The conversation only lasted about six or seven minutes. It began with me going on your typical resentment-filled rant against God and religion. That lasted about five minutes. Then, conquered by boredom, he interrupted to ask me two simple questions.

First Billy Jack asked, “Is it possible that God exists?” He did not push his beliefs onto me. He simply asked if God was a possibility in my mind. To this point, I conceded. I could not disprove the existence of God any more than he could prove it. So, I said, “It is highly unlikely, but possible.” Then Billy Jack asked, “At this point in your life is there anything more important than exploring that possibility?” Again, I had to concede, but not for the reasons you might imagine.

This was my second stint in treatment. Spirituality is a central component of most recovery programs and both of the centers I visited emphasized God. My patience with God was wearing thin. I wanted to try something else, but in treatment

you are branded “closed-minded” if you reject something without first trying it. I figured that if I tried it and it didn’t work, they might offer me something else. So I said, “I will say your prayers and read your books, because when nothing changes—and nothing is going to change—this will prove that God is a joke.” He replied, “That’s good enough for me,” and walked away. I never saw him again.

At the time, I had no idea how impactful that conversation would be on me. The course of my life was forever changed by that brief exchange. If I start with who I am right now and trace it back, the encounter with Billy Jack would be the greatest aberration along my life’s trajectory. He did not convert me or even convince me that God is real. I was not impressed by his argument. He opened my mind. Billy Jack got me to step out of what I thought and see the world from another point of view. He introduced another vantage point.

Initially, my intense disdain for all things Christian did not enable me to approach a church, the Bible, or even the concept of God. My search began in the East. I had to figure out how to live sober and manage my hyperactivity without Adderall. One of the staff members thought meditation might be helpful and gave me a book about Buddhism. I understood little of what I read but the little I understood, I held onto for dear life. Before long, I was a card-carrying Buddhist.

At first, Buddhism was just a costume. The Dalai Lama was the only Buddhist I had ever seen—I’d read a couple of his books and saw him on television a time or two. As far as I was concerned, he was the official face of Buddhism. So, I did everything in my power to look and act like him.

Upon leaving treatment, I moved to a sober-living home in

South Florida. There I was in Boca Raton—a seventeen year old, 6' 8" Buddhist redneck from Shreveport, Louisiana. I was walking down the street with a freshly shaved head and flip flops trying my best to be Buddhist as hell—dramatically stepping over ants, eating veggie lo-mein, and counting the beads on my mala while mindlessly reciting the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hung* and chewing tobacco. I always believed that happiness was something I had to cook up, and at this point in my life that belief had not changed. I just had a new cookbook.

I started to read everything I could get my hands on about Buddhism. I observed certain codes of conduct—I abstained from alcohol and drugs, didn't eat meat, and practiced meditation. During my stay in Boca Raton I learned how to meditate from the Roshi at a local Zen temple. Meditation enabled my mind to settle, but I still didn't see the link between spirituality and my daily life. I intellectually understood the connection, but I did not practice it. Spirituality was a private affair. I read my books and practiced meditation and *then* I went about my day. I wouldn't make the connection between practice and daily life for several more years.

Fast forward five years: I'm back home in Louisiana, and my girlfriend and I are at a Mardi Gras parade. I've been practicing meditation for a while and have read a number of books about spirituality. As a result, I thought the mysteries of the universe had exposed themselves to me. This inflated self-image came crumbling down when my girlfriend uttered two simple words: "He's cute." Those two words triggered an explosive reaction within me. In front of God and everyone, I turned and spat in her face.

Relationships were difficult for me. I was terrified of

rejection and extremely clingy. I always thought my partner was looking for a way out. When she said, “He’s cute,” I turned to see who she was talking about. “He looks an awful lot like her ex-boyfriend,” I thought. Long ago I identified him as the man she would leave me for. This incident sparked fear within me, which quickly turned to rage. Then, I spat. For a moment, I was stripped naked. It embarrassed the hell out of me. She stared at me in disbelief before walking away.

Spitting in her face proved to be one of the greatest revelations of my short life. In that moment, it became unequivocally clear to me and the people around me that I was full of crap. All the books I read, my vegetarian diet, and Buddhist tattoos—none of it mattered. When confronted by fear, anger, and jealousy my spirituality fell like a house of cards. The self-image I bought into and sold to others was a façade. I was the same angry child who stormed out of church and spat in the face of that kid in the courtyard. I still had no idea how to cope with life.

This insight was not some glorious moment that placed me on a pink cloud of bliss. It was devastating. I was humiliated and did not know what to do. I knew drinking and drugs were of no help. Once again, I was suspicious of all things “spiritual” but did not know where else to look. So I cracked open one of my books about Tibetan Buddhism. There I read about the practice of *Tonglen*. This wasn’t the first I heard of *Tonglen*, but it was the first time I ever practiced it. Before I thought I was too advanced for *Tonglen*. I thought I was beyond fear and resentment. Now, I knew better.

In the practice of *Tonglen* you visualize someone you are resentful at and imagine yourself breathing in their suffering,

symbolized by a black smoke. With the exhalation you breathe out a white smoke that represents the causes of happiness, which they inhale. So I did this practice with the two people I resented most, my girlfriend and her ex-boyfriend. And the resentment began to subside. After a few weeks of daily Tonglen practice the fear and anger fell away. This was the first time my spirituality and daily life came together.

I knew what I was looking for was within me and that daily practice was the only way to find it, but subconsciously I believed there was a shortcut. Daily practice is hard work and takes a long time. I wanted something more magical. I wanted to leave the rigors of practice and daily life behind and escape to a spiritual Shangri-La where enlightenment is obtained through osmosis. This sounded like a monastery to me. The strict structure, intense practice, and long hours of study did not figure into my idea of monastic life. I imagined a monastery as a kind of Buddha factory—you went in one side all messed up and came out the other side enlightened! The only problem my monastic escape plan presented was location. All the Buddhist enlightenment factories seemed to be in Asia.

About this time, I was introduced to the great Catholic mystic Thomas Merton. Through his writings I discovered a side of Christianity not often seen in the Bible Belt. He introduced me to the contemplative dimension of Christianity, which has depth and is more concerned with daily life than the hereafter. At times his Christian language rubbed me the wrong way, but his powerful writing style, profound insight, and masterful use of symbolism resonated with me on a deeper level than did Buddhist lingo. So, I began studying contemplative Christianity.

I befriended a local priest who was familiar with Merton

and was himself a Franciscan friar. He helped me to better understand the contemplative side of Christianity, and how to apply spiritual principles to my life. When I told him about my plans to enter a monastery, he suggested a trial run. He made arrangements for me to stay at a Franciscan Friary in Ava, Missouri, which shared a property with a Trappist monastery, the order to which Merton belonged. This gave me the chance to test the waters of monastic life without having to commit to Asia just yet.

I cannot stress enough the value of my trip to Assumption Abbey. There I met the most whole and complete men I had ever known. For me, spirituality was a superficial endeavor. It had more to do with changing my self-image than true transformation. But these men were transformed. They were living it. Standing before me was a group of men who embodied exactly what I was looking for. So naturally, I hopped on a plane and flew clear across the world in search of what I had just found!

Any illusions of a Shangri-La were promptly shattered upon arriving in India. The overwhelming frustration I experienced after being involved in what amounted to a kidnapping and credit card fraud, plus the sheer culture shock, popped my fantastical bubble. Don't get me wrong, India is an amazing place—I would go back in a heartbeat—but it was not what I expected. Obviously, this was not India's fault. I was looking to escape, and I brought with me the one thing I wanted to leave behind: myself.

Fortunately, I picked a less populated part of India and went during the offseason. I had no one to talk to, no TV to watch. I was without distraction for the first time in my life. It

was a beautiful accident. I was forced upon myself. Most of my time was spent reading and meditating. I would also go to the monastery and listen to lectures about Buddhist philosophy and meditation. And I was fortunate enough to meet someone who had devoted their life to contemplative spirituality and was willing to work with me.

One morning I was walking down the winding mountain road that connected Dharamkot and McLeod Ganj. I regularly went up into the mountain caves and spent a couple of days in retreat. One day, on the way down the mountain, I saw a monk standing on the side of the road. In broken English he asked, “Do you want learn meditate?” That was my first meeting with Jetsun Thubpten.

Jetsun was a Buddhist hermit who had spent the last twelve years living in the mountains. After two decades in one of the largest Tibetan monastic colleges, he concluded that study was insufficient. He wanted to live a life of practice. So he left Sera Mey monastery and took to a life of solitude and meditation.

Jetsun and I sat together for two hours every other day. We would meditate, eat, and talk. Jetsun taught me that meditation was not limited to the cushion, but was alive in everything we do. He used to say, “If you can’t meditate while you cook, eat, and shit, you can’t meditate!” Mostly Jetsun taught by way of example—not fancy lectures or philosophical discourse. In Jetsun, spirituality and daily life were one and the same.

The physical and spiritual are not opposed to each other. They are not two competing worlds. There is not something apart from our life called the “spiritual journey.” The journey is our life. When we sleepwalk through life, we are just along for the ride. When we mindfully participate in the journey, we are

walking the spiritual path. Like the men at Assumption Abbey, Jetsun was awake.

I wanted to stay in India. Jetsun asked, “For what?” I hemmed and hawed around for a minute before replying, “To learn more about meditation and Buddhist spirituality and maybe,” I awkwardly added, “teach Western tourists passing through India about meditation.” Jetsun smiled through my confusion and jokingly said, “We don’t need any more Gurus!” Then he told me, “If you want to teach Westerners meditation, you should go back to the West where Westerners live.” So here I am, eleven years later, sharing my experience as a Westerner walking the spiritual path.

Jiddu Krishnamurti once said, “We are all the story of humanity.” This story is written in our body. We must sit down and read the pages of our heart. In this book, I share not only what I have learned from studying myself, but—and more importantly—the path of practice that has enabled me to study myself.

Spirituality is at a crossroads in the West. We are looking for a practical path that resonates with our modern, Western mind. This is difficult to find because it is not readily available. Therefore, the main objective of this book is to introduce the reader to a seamless path structure. Such a structure must speak directly to our suffering and its causes, as well as the transcendent potential embedded in the human condition (Chapters 1-6). It must also incorporate an inner-mythos that appeals to our heart without offending the modern sensibilities of the Western mind (Chapters 7-8). And no path structure would be complete without a system of practice that enables the individual to move beyond the false-self and reconnect with the

richness of their True Life as it is revealed in the body (Chapters 9-13).

The great Zen master D.T. Suzuki wrote, “So long as the masters are indulging in negations, denials, contradictions, or paradoxes, the stain of speculation is not quite washed off them.”¹ I do not pretend to be a master, nor do I believe this book is free of such indulgences. However, I hope that with every word I write, someone finds the inspiration to dig deeper. There is an inner voice calling us out of the claustrophobic world of the false-self, inviting us to reunite with the life of the body. This book outlines the path of practice and the inner-mythos that has enabled me to answer that call and I hope it empowers the reader to do the same. It is to this end that I dedicate *Finding God in the Body: A Spiritual Path for the Modern West*.

¹ Shunryu Suzuki, *Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, “Practical Methods of Zen Instruction,” Doubleday (1956), pg 122

About the Author

Benjamin Riggs is a meditation teacher, author, and columnist. He lives in Shreveport, Louisiana where he serves as the director of the Refuge Meditation Group.

Connect with Ben at:

FindingGodInTheBody.com

[Facebook.com/FindingGodInTheBody](https://www.facebook.com/FindingGodInTheBody)

[Twitter.com/Benjamin_Riggs](https://twitter.com/Benjamin_Riggs)

If you are interested in Ben leading a workshop, retreat, or speaking visit: findinggodinthebody.com/about-the-author/

