

The Way of the Wisdom Jesus
An Online Course on Going Beyond the Mind
to the Heart of His Teaching
Taught by Cynthia Bourgeault

Talk One: The Nondual Jesus

Greetings, and welcome to this online course: The Way of the Wisdom Jesus. Some of you may remember this book, *The Wisdom Jesus*. I published it in 2008 with Shambhala, and in the several years since its publication, it's—surprisingly to me—been my most successful venture, introducing thousands of people around the world to a Jesus they always knew was there underneath all the theological and devotional accretions.

The great challenge in being a Christian teacher is that almost no one comes to Jesus with a clean slate. He's been such a part of the dominant Christian culture for so long that it's really hard to separate him from the culture that's grown up around him. If you've been raised Christian, it's hard to escape from simplistic or perhaps sweet and even sentimental portraits of Jesus, or else he fades pretty quickly into the general ethical background.

I remember one of my friends, the wonderful Texas Baptist Stanley . . . [*inaudible*], describing his early introduction in Sunday school to Jesus as “Jesus was nice, and he wants us to be nice too.” That's often as far as it goes for politely raised Sunday-school Christians.

But it goes far worse if you haven't been raised Christian, because if you haven't, the chances are that you may well have been exposed to negative and even traumatic versions of him, with the cross being used to club other religions into submission. (00:02:00) That's the history we Christians have created, unfortunately, in the name of this great prophet of peace, and we have to own it.

But the first and underlying supposition of this course is that Jesus himself is a universal, cultural treasure. He belongs to all of humankind as all of the great spiritual masters belong to all of humankind, and he's played an extraordinary role in the evolution of human consciousness on this planet. My take, as you'll see throughout the course, is that he is the first person to have been given the responsibility of bringing nondual consciousness to the West. And by the West, of course, I mean the Near East—the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea. It's the trajectory that he excavated and that he paved the way forward on, and it's such a tragedy that the excesses and brutalities committed in his name have created

a deep barrier, sometimes, to accessing this great prophet of universal compassion and love. Christianity doesn't own Jesus. Humanity owns Jesus.

Part of my own work here is to open up the conversation again, because our world so much needs this avenue of input. I've been overjoyed to see that in our own times, some of the most enlightened and compassionate work on Jesus is being contributed by masters of other faiths, such as Adyashanti and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I think this really speaks of the way that the great nondual traditions are working in (00:04:00) lockstep together to move beyond this legacy of hate and sectarianism to reclaim a message that our whole planet needs once again. It's in this spirit that I'm offering this course, to as wide a net as we can possibly invite.

When I use the term "the Wisdom Jesus," I'm thinking in precisely these terms, trying to offer a new way of framing him that cleans the slate a bit and lets us look at this person in a new light. Wisdom is basically a universal tradition underlying all the world's great religions that has to do with the awakening and transformation of consciousness. It's about waking up, getting real, moving beyond the superficial religion of duties and outer forms to a deep, mystical aliveness. When I use the term "the Wisdom Jesus," I'm thinking in this direction: trying to clear the slates of the old baggage a little bit and set Jesus in a new and perhaps more accessible context.

From the beginning of time, wisdom has been basically a universal tradition undergirding all of the great religious paths and particularly intent upon waking up—the transformation of consciousness. It's a way to get real, get here, get present—to cut beneath that outer religion of duty and forms to the inner religion of genuinely being able to be here. Jesus himself is thinking very much in these terms, and one of the pungent sayings in the Gospel of Thomas, which I happen to have here before me (00:06:00). This is saying 6. "His students asked him, 'Do you want us to fast? How shall we pray? Should we give offerings? From what foods must we abstain?' Jesus answered, 'Stop lying. Do not do what you hate, because everything here lies open before heaven.'"

Stop lying. Do not do what you hate. This is the essence of waking up, getting real, finding yourself reborn in a whole different kind of reality. This is the Jesus we're going to be sitting and encamping around over these next couple of months. I call Jesus a "wisdom teacher" for several reasons: not only because it's the theologically correct description, but because it happens to be true for several reasons.

First of all, he repeatedly announces, throughout the course of the Gospels, his intention to wake people up—to shake people up—most prominently in that famous night encounter with Nicodemus the Pharisee, in which he says, "You must be born again of water and the spirit," or as it

sometimes more accurately translated, “You must be born again from above, from that larger, more expansive mind.”

Second, he used the methods and methodologies of wisdom teaching. When you ask most people, “What’s the word that immediately comes to your mind when you ask the question, ‘How did Jesus teach?’” what you’ll hear in response is, “Parables—he taught in parables.” Parables are a classic wisdom (00:08:00) genre: short, often enigmatic, paradigmatic, koan-like spiritual teachings that turn your world upside down on one level only to break it wide open on another. So parables, he definitely used.

Along with parables, he also used wisdom sayings, like the ones we’ve just heard in the Gospel of Thomas, and he used what the Buddhists would call “dharma teaching”—making the most of a situation to break open, dramatically, a new way of being present. For example, the most famous one that all Christians know is that standoff with the Pharisees when they asked Jesus, “Well, who shall we pay taxes to?” It was certain death either way, because if Jesus said, “Pay taxes to Caesar,” he’s betraying the teachings of his Jewish faith, and if he says, “Don’t pay taxes to Caesar,” he’s guilty of insurrection against the state. So Jesus simply asks for a coin, looks at it, and says, “Hmm . . . Whose face is on the coin? Caesar’s? Oh, well, it belongs to Caesar; give it to Caesar then. Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Usually we hear this as just a pious saying, but on location, in context, it was a brilliant, flexible save brought about by his alertness to the resources of the moment. That, again, is a classic wisdom-teaching genre.

The word *rabbi*, which his students very quickly affixed to him, means “a teacher.” Again and again, throughout all the Gospel scenes, that’s the common denominator. What we see is him teaching (00:10:00) in the synagogue, huddled with small groups of disciples, at dinner parties in his honor, and with huge people around the lake of Galilee and the other major teaching sites. It was “rabbi” all the way: teaching, teaching, teaching.

Now, what kind of a teaching did he bring? As I suggested before, the way I like to picture him is that he was the first person to teach and model nondual consciousness in the West. And nondual consciousness was then and still remains the cutting edge of our human evolutionary advancement. I’m not the first one to notice this about Jesus.

About fifteen years ago now, a man by the name of Jim Marion wrote a groundbreaking book called *Putting on the Mind of Christ*. In this book he suggested that Jesus used, over and over and over, the metaphor “the kingdom of heaven.” “The kingdom of heaven is like this . . . The kingdom of heaven is like that . . . Pay attention to the kingdom of heaven.” Jim Marion suggested that this kingdom of

heaven was Jesus's pet metaphor for the state of nondual consciousness attained. Why? Well, because it represents a state of no separation, and no separation is the essence of nondual consciousness.

Jim Marion pointed out how Jesus saw no separation between himself and God. "I and the Father are one," is Jesus's (00:12:00) most powerful proclamation of this. But he didn't reserve that right to himself exclusively; he offered it out to all of his followers. "As I and the Father are one, so may we be one so that all shall be one." It was a universal, inclusive oneness that included the finite and the infinite in one interabiding unity.

Secondly, Jesus clearly saw no separation between self and neighbor. Perhaps the most clear and famous example of this is in his teaching "Love your neighbor as yourself." Despite our usual egoic way of wanting to put an *as much* in there—"Love your neighbor as much as yourself"—that's not what he said. He said, "Love your neighbor as yourself"—interchangeable, indistinguishable, a continuation of your own very being. This is a view based radically on nondual interabidingness, again, interequivalency. *Interbeing* is the term we would use nowadays. Jesus saw it, modeled it, and taught it.

The kind of interabiding unity he saw was not quite a static state. "I and the Father are one," exactly as in the old Hindu "Atman is Brahman; Brahman is Atman"—it was one that was always in motion by a continuous sort of exchange and self-giving. It was beautifully, beautifully intimated in some of his most powerful metaphors. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Abide in me as I in you." (00:14:00) Interabiding. In what's known in the Gospel of John as his great, high priestly prayer, which he uttered just before he went to his death on the cross, he stammered it out in these beautiful words—in these beautiful prayers: "As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they—my disciples—also be in us. I in them and you in me, that we all may be completely one." That we may all be completely one—it's this dynamic oneness that we're going to attempt to be following in this online course, not simply to know about it but to work with the practices that help call it forth and stabilize it in our self so that we, too, can see as Jesus sees, from no separation.

The title of this course is *The Way of the Wisdom Jesus: Going beyond the Mind to Experience His Teaching*, and I'd like to say a word about this "going beyond the mind" bit. I'm very, very indebted to my late colleague, Marcus Borg, for being the first to point out that the word *metanoia* that we usually translate in Christianity as "repentance"—repent, for the end of the world is at hand—actually comes from the Greek *meta-noia*, which means "go beyond the mind" or "go into the larger mind." Either way, this is fine. It doesn't mean "zone out, go beyond the mind, man," nor does it really mean "go beyond the mind into the feelings." (00:16:00) Undigested, they're just as slippery as the cognitive mind. It means to go into a kind of wholer, bigger mind: a whole-ographic field, a whole new kind of

perception, that by seeing from wholeness sees wholeness. This is the gift that Jesus brought to the West; this is the gift he offered to us, the gift which I believe institutional religion in two thousand years has not yet fully unpacked and which we're going to hunker closer to for the next two months.

Now, a final word, and particularly at those of you who would consider yourself more traditionally raised Christians: when I call Jesus a "wisdom teacher," does that mean he's only a wisdom teacher? Not the only son of God? Not the third person of the trinity, not fully divine, not . . .? Am I trying, essentially, in this course, to demote him? Well, no—no way. But from what we're doing in this course, I think we can set those wonderful titles aside: not because they're not true but because they're not immediately relevant to what we're doing here. In this course, wherever he was coming from, what he was really interested in was to bring us along to where he was coming from so that we could do it our self—walk those steps in our own way.

For so many years now—for about sixteen hundred of them, in short—Christianity somehow morphed from a religion of Jesus (00:18:00) to a religion about Jesus. That was a wonderful observation that Elaine Pagels made a few years ago in her book, *Beyond Belief*. This watershed was really important, because we moved, institutionally, from a religion whose primary purpose was to help people to walk the path into the heart of Jesus and out into the world from the heart of Jesus to a path in which being saved meant believing the right things about Jesus.

But this was never what Jesus said. As people asked him all the questions about where he came from, what he was about, what was his nature, what was his substance, his answer was always and only, "Come and see." And that, friends, is what we are intending to do. Thank you, and welcome aboard.