

Approaching Spiritual Practice

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

When people discover that there is such a thing as spirituality, they understandably feel as excited as did Columbus upon setting eyes on the shores of America. Spirituality affords them a broader vista than they ever considered possible. They suddenly realize that conventional society is designed—partly consciously but for the most part quite unconsciously—to prevent us from seeing our full potential as human beings. Conventional life primarily revolves around the pursuit of rather limited goals: physical comfort, material possessions, sex, emotional gratification, mental stimulation, and power.

According to Hinduism, there are four legitimate pursuits to which we can dedicate our time and energy:

Artha — material welfare

Kâma — physical, emotional, and intellectual satisfaction

Dharma — morality (notably justice)

Moksha — spiritual fulfillment

Much, if not most, of conventional life falls into the categories of *artha* and *kâma*. Our civilization has invented countless ways to keep our attention focused on comfort and pleasure. Billions of dollars are spent every year in advertising to make sure that we keep up our consumption of material goods, whether we need them or not and that we strive for a “comfortable” life.

Dharma is pursued in a much more limited way. Our moral standards appear to be at an all-time low, which is in keeping with the Indic notion of the *kali- yuga* or dark age, which is expected to prevail upon Earth for many millennia more. By comparison, the contemporary New Age belief in the imminent upliftment of humankind, by magical *fiat* and without any effort at all, appears like a mere whimsical hope. We must acknowledge that American society in particular suffers from widespread injustice in the legal system and that litigation has become a way of life.

If moral integrity is not high on our list of priorities, spiritual aspiration is almost entirely absent from our lives. Few people really understand what spirituality is, and fewer still actively pursue a spiritual path.

The situation is somewhat different in India. With the exception of the Western-educated élite, the traditional value of liberation (*moksha*) is still allowed a certain space in people’s belief system. They are at least aware of this great ideal in India’s past and among today’s renouncers of worldly life, even though they themselves may not feel ready to pursue it. There is a sense of awe about yogis and wandering sadhus, who are still a visible element of Hindu society. In 2001, the Kumbha Mela gathering, which is held every twelve years, this time drew a crowd of 100 million people and tens of thousands of spiritual practitioners, both genuine and fake.

Admittedly, however, even India's people have only an inadequate understanding of the yogic lifestyle and often fail to distinguish genuine adepts from impostors. It is also true that in view of the increasing modernization, the traditional reverence for the sacred is gradually being eroded to the detriment of Indic society.

When a Western seeker encounters spirituality, he or she must come to terms with the four core pursuits of material welfare, physical-emotional-intellectual satisfaction, and moral integrity. Central to spiritual practice are self-inspection and self-understanding. We must be willing to examine our habit patterns: how we act and react in all kinds of situations. Then we must be willing and able to also understand what we see about ourselves. The next step is to eliminate those habit patterns that are not conducive to further spiritual growth and replace them with positive habit patterns.

Newcomers to spiritual life often do not realize that spiritual practice requires consistent self-application, that is, a measure of effort. They tend to assume that their peep beyond the walls of conventional life is sufficient in itself. But to see a boat is not the same as rowing it to the other shore. Intellectualizing spiritual life is less than helpful.

But even when neophytes actually take up a course of spiritual practices (*sādhana*), they still sooner or later encounter the fire test of an ordinary daily routine. Then the challenge is to renew one's spiritual practice every day. Otherwise boredom sets in, which undermines the will to transform oneself.

Neophytes feed on their own initial zest, always looking for the next "spiritual" hit—a nice meditation, a spectacular vision, a sign from God, or a compliment from the teacher or another person. Little do they suspect that this "honeymoon period" is about to be tested. Typically, the teacher ignores them or instead of sweet compliments utters sharp criticisms. Their fellow students or relatives tell them that they are full of it, while others might reject their proselytizing.

Few pass beyond this stage to go on to regular (unspectacular) daily practice. Many get quickly discouraged when the emotional highs become scarce and they are beginning to confront the stark reality of their own confusion, negativity, or presently limited capacity for spiritual life.

The next hurdle is the recognition that we have many deeply ingrained habit patterns that take time—a lot of time—to change. At first the typical neophyte is sure that he or she has a tremendous capacity and will grow more quickly than others. Then the sobering realization dawns that the degree of self-transformation is equal to the effort made.

If the neophyte has persisted thus far, he or she will almost inevitably encounter doubt: doubt about his or her own capacity; doubt about the teacher; doubt about the efficacy of the teaching. It is not far from the truth to say that the practitioner who does not befriend doubt is bound to be self-deluded. If there is no doubt or self-delusion, the person is quite simply enlightened.

Another obstacle, not often identified, is the fact that the practitioner's karmic tendencies (read unconscious or semiconscious habit patterns) are magnified because awareness is enhanced through regular practice. This can be likened to a bright search light shining

deep into the well of the mind. In the depth of the unconscious are all kinds of unpleasant realities that get flushed out by steady application to self-inspection and self-understanding. At times, the unconscious materials that drift into the conscious mind seem overwhelming, and then it becomes clear to the practitioner that spiritual life is a form of brinkmanship. The Indic tradition speaks of the razor-edged path.

Gradually the spiritual practitioner learns to overcome his or her innate materialism (i.e., constantly thinking in terms of the visible reality only). There is a progressive loosening of the ego knot by which the ordinary individual anxiously seeks to hold everything together. The spiritual practitioner learns to be humorous about everything, including himself or herself. Life is seen from a new perspective: as a strange play in which we are willy-nilly involved and which we can either misunderstand and suffer or understand and transcend even while being fully engaged in it.

Practitioners must prevail over spiritual materialism—the false sense of accumulating “higher” experiences. They can realize inner freedom only to the extent that even the goal of liberation is renounced. Liberation, or enlightenment, is not a thing to be attained or acquired. It is living in the moment from the most profound understanding and without egoic attachment to anything.

Those who parade their extraordinary spiritual accomplishments in front of others are possibly the least illumined of all. They merely substitute material commodities for “spiritual” merchandise. The Indic heritage knows of many adepts who after years of intense practice achieved a high state of consciousness or astounding paranormal ability and then promptly fell from grace. The higher the elevation, the steeper the drop into oblivion.

Therefore the authorities of Yoga ever admonish practitioners to be circumspect, to keep their attainments to themselves, to focus on the cultivation of moral integrity, understanding, self-transcendence, and not least service to others.

It was a great Western adept— Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov (1900-1986)—who periodically reminded his disciples that all beginnings are charged with potency and that therefore we must enter new beginnings with the utmost care and best understanding we can muster. This is especially true of the beginning of spiritual life.

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