

Spiritual Practice

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Introduction

This chapter discusses spiritual practice and why it is good. By “spiritual practice” I mean activities such as meditation, chanting, special breathing, etc., the purpose of which is to put one in touch with one’s true nature, which is divine. It is good to do such practices because they put one in touch with reality, and being in touch with reality helps one to survive and thrive. It promotes well-being, both of oneself and one’s environment.

The Purpose of Spiritual Practice

A few people “get” the fundamental insight with such intensity that it radically transforms and informs their whole life. Most of us need reminders. Having had an insight into our true nature, having cognized it, we fall back into ordinary experience and fail to recognize and act on it. We don’t remember who we are. The purpose of doing spiritual practice is to put oneself in a state in which the recognition can happen more easily, a state in which one opens oneself to the Divine, pays attention to its influence on one’s life, and gradually becomes transformed such that one is a clear channel for divine benevolence.

Meditation and spiritual practices such as chanting, zikr, Sufi Dancing, etc., take one’s attention away from the distractions of daily life and turn it inward. The chattering mind is quieted. The more one drops the chattering and the focus on the outer world, the more one feels the presence of al-Lah.

This opening to the Divine has two aspects, experience and action. One has mystical experiences of grandeur, awe, peace, harmony, beauty and love. And one’s actions benefit the whole, not just the small part of the whole that we often misunderstand ourselves to be.

Neem Karoli Baba, a guru who lived in India and had a great influence on westerners, advised his followers to “Love, Serve, Remember”. This phrase is a motto of the Lama Foundation in northern New Mexico, and it is a beautiful phrase, but I am uncomfortable with it, because the point is not just to remember an ecstatic experience, and certainly not to remember a set of beliefs. The point of life is to actually live and act on the surety that one is an expression of the Divine.

The degree of effect an experience or series of similar experiences has on one is a function of three things: duration, intensity and frequency. The goal of spiritual practice (or at least one of the goals) is to increase the duration, intensity and frequency of mystical experience, thus increasing the effects of mystical experience.

The effects of mystical experience are the following:

- A pleasurable feeling of peace, happiness and well-being.
- An increase in benevolence toward others, both feelings of benevolence and benevolent actions. Acting benevolently toward others is actually both an effect and a cause of mystical experience. The more one acts benevolently toward others (and toward oneself), the more open one is to mystical experience and the more likely one is to have mystical experiences.
- An increase in guidance from al-Lah. One becomes more intuitive, more open to the voice of Spirit.

All this is an upward spiral. An increase in one generally promotes an increase in the others.

Another stated purpose of spiritual practice in many traditions is to achieve liberation from suffering. In traditions that believe in reincarnation, this means liberation from the wheel of birth and death such that one no longer returns to the mundane world in which we find ourselves, which is full of suffering. Belief in reincarnation is not necessary to obtain benefits from spiritual practice. The sense of connection to the divine, the All, the unity from which all diversity emanates, is itself a relief of suffering. In addition to this liberation from suffering, one achieves liberation from mistaken ideas, attitudes and behaviors that cause suffering.

Meditation and Mystical Experience

By "mystical experience" or "spiritual experience" I mean a feeling of being connected to all that is, and to the source of all that is. This has a cognitive element of recognizing the connection and a feeling or affective element of pleasure, even extreme pleasure, or bliss. It also includes feelings of awe and gratitude.

I have been practicing meditation of various forms for many years, over thirty at this writing. Early on I got to correlate my internal experience with an externally-observable reading on an electro-encephalogram, so I know that when I am in a meditative state my brain waves drop from the rapid oscillations called beta to the

smoother and longer waves called alpha. But I rarely think about my state in those terms.

Looking back on my meditative experience, remembering it, I see that a number of things happen during the experience. One is the doing of the practice itself, in my case repeating a phrase while breathing in a certain rhythm and sometimes visualizing something or doing certain bodily motions or both. (There are lots of different practices, and in this chapter I do not give specific instructions. If you want instruction, find a teacher who can work with you.) Another is the random thoughts that go on, remembrances of things past, anticipations of things to come, mental rehearsals of what I should have done or would like to do, etc. Another is emotions, sometimes painful, sometimes not. Another is physical sensations such as little pains or itches. After a time I enter into a sense of deep peace and calmness, which, I have learned, corresponds to a brain state of alpha waves.

So far this is much like ordinary experience, except that I am sitting quietly concentrating on the practice and am experiencing the stillness and calmness of the alpha state. Often, however, at some point I experience a letting go of the distracting thoughts and a concentration on the practice, such that the practice becomes more intense and compelling. At that point a sense of well-being arises. Yogic and tantric traditions call this “*ananda*”, bliss. Occasionally this sense of bliss becomes very intense, overshadowing or drowning out the everyday thoughts, concerns and worries. At other times it is fairly mild, but in any case it is often accompanied by a sense of relief at being released from the grip of the everyday world. Not that I think about the everyday world and notice that I am released, but the sense of relief is there.

Spiritual teachers warn against becoming attached to blissful states, and certainly people can misuse spiritual practice to try to escape from problems without actually dealing with them. Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, calls the attachment to blissful states “spiritual materialism”, meaning that such states are objects of consciousness like any other, and the point of the practice is not to reinforce desire for any specific object of consciousness but to disengage from the objects and experience one’s unity with the ground of being, the source of all objects.

And yet, if there were not cheese at the end of the maze, one would not go to the effort to traverse it. It is undeniable that the sense of bliss, the ecstasy, is highly pleasurable.

Paying attention to how I feel and the state of the world as it appears to me shortly after meditation, I see that when I am under the influence of meditation I feel calmer, my mind is quieter, the world appears more vivid, and subtle small influences are more clearly discerned than when I am in an ordinary everyday state of mind. It’s a bit like being under the influence of marijuana, but without the instability and labile nature of that experience. I seem to be more intuitive. When one is quiet one can more clearly hear the still, small voice of God.

Sometimes I just feel waves of gratitude. Sometimes such a wave comes on me, unbidden. Sometimes I remind myself to be grateful and then feel gratitude. This, too, is a practice.

Transitory and Permanent States

Sufi teachings distinguish between two kinds of experience:

- *Hal*, translated as “state”; a temporary state of intense feeling.
- *Maqam*, translated as “station”; a relatively permanent orientation to life and the world.

In the actual practice session and its aftermath, one sometimes experiences states of ecstasy. These then pass away; and one practices again, seeking to experience them again.

As a long-term effect of doing the practices, one becomes oriented to the world in different ways. Sufis distinguish between various stations of the soul (*nafs*)¹: the soul that is tormented and does self-destructive things (*nafs al-ammara*); the soul that recognizes its unhelpful behavior and regrets it (*nafs al-lawwama*); and the soul that is at rest in the peace of Allah, no longer harming others or itself (*nafs al-mutma'inna*). (By “soul” here I mean coherence of interiority. See the chapter on Self.)

One reason people do spiritual practices is to experience the states of ecstasy. Another reason is to transform one’s soul to become less tormented and more benevolent and at peace. For most people the transformation is not strictly linear; one moves among the stations, sometimes being in one and sometimes in another. But the long-term trend is upward, toward peace, love, harmony and beauty.

¹ URL: <http://www.sunnah.org/tasawwuf/jihad002.html> as of November, 2006

[*Nafs*] has two meanings. First, it means the powers of anger and sexual appetite in a human being... and this is the usage mostly found among the people of *tasawwuf* [sufis], who take “nafs” as the comprehensive word for all the evil attributes of a person. That is why they say: one must certainly do battle with the ego and break it (*la budda min mujahadat al-nafs wa kasriha*), as is referred to in the hadith: *A`da `aduwwuka nafsuka al-lati bayna janibayk* [Your worst enemy is your nafs which lies between your flanks].

The second meaning of *nafs* is the soul, the human being in reality, his self and his person. However, it is described differently according to its different states. If it assumes calmness under command and has removed from itself the disturbance caused by the onslaught of passion, it is called “the satisfied soul” (*al-nafs al-mutma'inna*)... In its first meaning the *nafs* does not envisage its return to God because it has kept itself far from Him: such a *nafs* is from the party of shaytan. However, when it does not achieve calmness, yet sets itself against the love of passions and objects to it, it is called “the self-accusing soul” (*al-nafs al-lawwama*), because it rebukes its owner for his neglect in the worship of his master... If it gives up all protest and surrenders itself in total obedience to the call of passions and shaytan, it is named “the soul that enjoins evil” (*al-nafs al-ammara bi al-su'*)... which could be taken to refer to the ego in its first meaning.

Three Pillars of Practice

In order fully to achieve the benefits of spiritual practice, three things are necessary. In Sanskrit they are called *Sadhana*, *Satsang* and *Seva*.

“*Sadhana*” literally means “effort”. The word refers to the spiritual practice itself, the meditation, the special breathing (called *pranayama* in Sanskrit and *qasab* in Arabic), the chanting or visualization, etc. Regular practice is essential to long-term benefit. One influential guru, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, has said “One who performs *sadhana* twice a day regularly, that person’s liberation is a sure guarantee.”

“*Satsang*” means community or company of people seeking truth. Associating with others of like mind, with “holy company” as the Quakers say, gives one encouragement and helps reinforce one’s determination to do one’s practices. Doing practices with others is a particularly powerful way of strengthening and deepening one’s own practice.

“*Seva*” means service, helping others. Being of service to others – humans and other beings – promotes and reinforces the realization that one is not separate from the All. Failing to help others – being selfish in the usual sense of that term – promotes feelings, attitudes and behaviors that are fearful and confining, the exact opposite of the truth.

In addition, good conduct toward others is a helpful, if not necessary, pre-requisite for practice. The classical text *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* advises one to follow ethical guidelines – *yama*, observances, and *niyama*, restraints – as the first two steps toward yogic realization. The reason for this advice is to help one have a calm mind, which is conducive to meditation, rather than an agitated mind, which is not. *Yama* and *niyama* are not rules to be followed because of divine command but recommendations for what works to advance one’s spiritual progress.

Prayer

There are many types of prayer, if by “prayer” we mean an attempt by a created being to communicate with the Creator². Three are fundamental:

- Help me, help me, help me.
- Thank you, thank you, thank you.
- What can I do for You?

Characterized by bodily posture, in “Help me, help me, help me” one is bent over as if depleted, with hands outstretched forward, palms up to receive, begging. In “Thank you, thank you, thank you” one stands upright, with face turned up, hands outstretched upward and palms facing each other. The posture is like that of a flower facing the sun, and one feels the divine grace as if it were sunlight, nourishing and

² I speak as if the Creator is separate from its creation. That is certainly one way to experience one’s relationship with the Divine. See the chapter on Metaphysics.

enlivening one. When one is full, even to overflowing, one turns the palms outward and directs the gaze outward to express “What can I do for You?” One feels so full of grace that one wants to give it away to others. The “you” here may refer to the Creator or to other created beings. Ultimately these are not two.

Another helpful posture is prostration. One kneels with one’s forehead on the ground, hands outstretched forward. The head is lower than the heart. A more intense form is full prostration, the entire body flat on the ground, forehead on the ground, hands outstretched. If not lower, the head is at least not higher than the heart. This position seems to be particularly conducive to “Help me, help me, help me” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Another type of prayer is a plea to help someone else. It is closely related to “Help me, help me, help me” in that one feels a lack that one wants the Creator to fill, and to “What can I do for You” in that the focus is on someone else, not oneself. I do not yet have a bodily posture for this type of prayer.

Another type of prayer is contemplative prayer, also called centering prayer, in which one sits quietly in the presence of the Creator. It is similar to meditation, in that one sits quietly with eyes closed and does a practice, one effect of which is to still the mind. It is similar to more expressive forms of prayer in that one thinks of oneself as being in relationship with the Creator. A friend of mine who practices contemplative prayer in a Christian tradition tells me that the only thing necessary is to intend to consent to the will of God. I find interesting the minimalist nature of what is asked. You don’t have to obey the will of God. You don’t even have to consent to it. All you are asked to do is to intend to consent to it.

There is another state which might be called prayer or might be called simply a state of being. One of my teachers told me that the natural response of the created being to the experienced presence of the Creator is an overwhelming feeling of awe. The word in Arabic is *hamd*, which is sometimes translated as “praise,” but praise is a derivative state, akin to “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” The primary state is speechless adoration. If there were words, they would be simply “Oh my God!” This is a state (*hal*) that may pass, but its effects are lasting.

The Spiritual Teacher

For most people it is necessary to have a spiritual teacher, called *guru* in Sanskrit, *murshid* in Arabic. At a minimum, the teacher is someone who knows more than the student does about spiritual practice and how to perform it. Sadhana is just like any skill; it helps to learn how to do it from someone who knows and can coach you. Because of the promise of liberation from suffering, and because the practice can be overwhelmingly beautiful and awesome at times, people often feel great devotion for their guru. This devotional love, called *bhakti* in Sanskrit, can be in fact a practice in itself, leading one to forget the sense of a separate self and merge oneself in love for the guru or for God.

Some traditions revere the guru as an embodiment of God. There is both promise and danger in doing so. The promise is that considering the teacher an embodiment of God

holds out the possibility of realizing oneself as an embodiment of God. The danger comes when one holds the guru to be God to the exclusion of oneself, considering oneself as in some way less than God. Doing so can lead one to abandon one's own discrimination and decision-making power. Particularly in communities organized around devotion to a guru, it is possible to devolve to a child's point of view, consciously or unconsciously viewing the guru as a parent. There is certainly a sense of freedom from worry and a sense of belonging in such a situation, as one feels that the guru and the community will fill all one's needs. In fact, however, this can lead to psychological stultification of the personality.

In any case, it is normal and appropriate to feel great affection and gratitude for one's teacher. At best, the teacher can see the student's condition at a particular point in time and prescribe practices designed to meet the student's precise needs at that time. Typically, the teacher is intuitive and can address questions the student may not even express outwardly. The teacher can guide the student to high meditative states and can impart such states by, as it were, sympathetic vibration. By sitting in the presence of a teacher who has realized their true nature to a greater degree than the student has, and who can get into deep states of meditation, the student is led into such states and such realization him or herself. These are states, transitory, but having been there one can more easily attain such states in one's own personal practice. And the more one experiences the states, the more one progresses toward a station of being at rest in the knowledge and experience of being one with al-Lah, an expression of the living divinity which is the All.

Revision History

Version	Date	Author	Change
1.0	27 July 2008	Bill Meacham	First publication
1.1	12 August 2008	Bill Meacham	Fix minor typo