

## CHAPTER 10

### SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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The ultimate goal of Hindu spiritual practice is to become aware of the Divine's presence everywhere at all times in oneself, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. Achieving this goal requires a mind that is exceptionally clear and calm. Hindu scriptures offer a variety of practices that help the seeker purify the mind and expand his/her consciousness. While the final goal of these practices is *moksha*, liberation, there are also immediate benefits of great practical value. Such a person rises above sorrows and spreads peace and joy to others.

The purpose of this note is to convey a broad understanding of the principles on which Hindu spiritual practices are based and outline the vast variety of practices that are described in the scriptures.

The core of Hindu spiritual practice is to recognize that our true identity is not the mortal body but the immortal, blissful *Atman*. Hindu scriptures offer detailed guidance on how to replace this misidentification with an understanding of our essential inner Divinity. When the physical body dies, our minds live on and carry to our next life the level of understanding that we attained in this life. Each life as a human being is an opportunity to improve our spiritual understanding.

The primary impediment to spiritual evolution is the deep reservoir of habits and misconceptions in our minds that prevent us from realizing the truth about our own blissful nature and seeing Divine glory in the world around us. These misconceptions are the cause of endless agitation as we vainly seek to find happiness in the wrong places. Jerked about by our likes and dislikes we fail to enjoy the peace of mind we crave for. Replacing false understanding with a realization of the inherent joy in the universe is necessarily a long and arduous process that might take several lifetimes. Hindu scriptures describe this process in depth and offer many suggestions on how to transform our minds and speed our progress on the spiritual path.

In discussions on how to transform the mind, two recurrent themes are *abhyasa* (practice) and *vairagya* (non-attachment)<sup>43</sup>. As long as our minds are preoccupied with seeking fleeting pleasures in gratifying our senses, accumulating possessions and nursing relationships, we are only reinforcing mental habits that consistently fail to bring lasting happiness and spiritual growth. Disciplining these habits by cultivating non-attachment frees our minds to pursue spiritual goals and connect with the Divine within us. Such discipline requires sustained and well-designed practice.

Hindu scriptures prescribe a vast array of practices that can be helpful to a spiritual seeker. With some ritualistic exceptions, practices are not mandated. The individual seeker is free to adopt the

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<sup>43</sup> Bhagavad Gita 6.35 and Yoga Sutras 1.12

practices that s/he finds appealing. Many seekers consult spiritual teachers (*Gurus*) and follow systematic paths. Spiritual practices constitute two broad categories: those practices that can be practiced by all seekers without much preparation; and more intensive practices that require a higher degree of commitment and preparation. The following paragraphs provide some examples of practices in each of these categories.

### **Common practices:**

- Practices as a part of daily life such as: daily prayer at a family altar at home; remembering God in simple prayers associated with daily activities such as eating and bathing; celebrating holy days; visiting the temple; regular fasting on a weekly or fortnightly basis; daily or weekly readings of scriptures such as the *Ramayana*.
- *Satsang*: Being a member of a community of spiritual seekers to engage in singing devotional songs, scriptural study, and group prayer. Listening to spiritual discourses by learned teachers. This helps keep the seeker on the spiritual path, reinforces good practices and resolves doubts.
- *Pilgrimage*: scriptures extol the practice of visiting sacred sites, preferably with the family. This enhances faith. Some pilgrimages can be arduous and strengthen spiritual discipline. There are scores of sacred sites that seekers aspire to visit, ranging from nearby temples dedicated to family deities to distant temples in the Himalayas.
- *Dharma*: Hindu *dharma* is a nuanced set of guidelines on what constitutes right action in given circumstances. Basic principles include not hurting others, being honest and living a life of self-restraint. An ethical life is the foundation of spiritual practice. Many scriptures offer guidance on *dharma*, which is a major emphasis in family upbringing as well.
- *Right attitude in all daily activities*. Basic practices include being diligent in performing all duties and focusing on doing the right thing rather than on enjoying the fruit of our actions. Engaging only in actions that promote the greater good purifies the mind, reducing the force of desire, anger and greed.

### **Intensive Practices:**

*Ashtanga Yoga*: the 8-fold path is a systematic approach to spiritual practice that includes an ethical foundation; physical and breathing exercises to mobilize inner energies; and mental disciplines that culminate in meditative absorption of the mind and complete liberation. Related *yogic* practices focus on activating internal energy centers (*cakras*) to expand spiritual consciousness. A *yogi* sees everything clearly as it is and remains unperturbed.

*Upasana*: more intensive forms of prayer that include use of physical images (*murtis*), esoteric patterns (*yantras*) and the repetition of *mantras* (*japa*) that represent the Divine. Formal worship includes the practice of *nyasa* whereby God's presence is ritually invoked in each part of the worshipper's body prior to the worship (*puja*). By recognizing God's presence in everything, one sees oneself in all others and all others in oneself.

*Yajna*: placing offerings in a sacred fire accompanied by chanting of mantras invoking Divine blessings.

*Jnana Yoga*: intensive study of the Upanishads and related philosophical texts, resolution of doubts on their meaning, followed by contemplation and application of the teachings in daily life. Seeing the One in all diverse forms, s/he sees beyond all divisions and all his/her actions are for the well-being of others.

*Meditation*: practice of deep and prolonged meditation that brings clarity and tranquility to the mind.

*Sanyasa*: total renunciation of all possessions, family, professional and social ties; and complete immersion in spiritual contemplation. Some renunciates live in spiritual communities, *ashrams*, and many wander freely in a spirit of surrender to the Divine, relying on whatever food and shelter comes their way.

Practices listed above as “common” and “intensive” can be used by both beginners and advanced practitioners to purify and calm their minds. One whose mind is completely clear and calm connects effortlessly with the inner Divinity and attains liberation from worldly agitations and sorrows.