

Divine Life of Swami Sivananda

By Swami Suryadevananda

How are religion, spiritual life and yoga connected to life? Are there things we do to help make it better and hope that somewhere down the line, this spark may mature into something more? Swami Sivananda has reconciled these doubts and presented us with a practical, methodical way, but still a fluid blend under the wide umbrella called 'Divine Life'.

Leading the Divine Life is leading a life of discovery and transformation *at the same time*. We are busy throughout the day—every moment we are doing something or the other. Even not doing something is 'doing nothing'.

Action is Expression

Though these appear to be different at first glance, they are all forms of action or expression:

1. Thought: though mental, thoughts are real actions as they have real consequences, which we experience.
2. Feeling: a form of expression that does not require conscious thought as such.
3. Speech: all forms of communication can be wrapped up into speech.
4. Action: what is called physical action.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction—every expression has an equal and opposite experience. The turnabout of expression into experience is what is loosely referred to as fate—though it operates on its own timing.

Vigilance: The Way of Self-Discovery

If one learns how to *stay vigilant*, alert and attentive, one can discover otherwise hidden motives that give rise to urges. Through this discovery, it is then possible to be free of these urges from the past and act in the present in the light of wisdom. The past does not allow us to do what needs to be done in the present—it interferes with and writes on the ever-fresh pages of the present with the ink of the past.

Urges are strong habits formed by repetition. The sum total of habits forms the fabric of one's character. Man's character shapes his destiny. If habits are thus allowed to shape destiny—we will get a harvest of the old, and each crop will be smaller.

Discovery and transformation at the same time is the hallmark of Divine Life. Discovery is not like a snapshot taken of the total picture at one time for scrutiny or analysis. It is what happens when there is an ongoing process of *awareness turned on our own self* to know the contents and force of habit.

Certain types of memory¹ are functional and hence useful, but memory is not necessary in understanding situations and what needs to be done. If we directly face every moment with full awareness, we are perfectly capable of doing what is best and letting go. Ongoing vigilance enables one to use memory as needed and avoid being used by it. We shall deal with the topic of vigilance in writings on yoga later on.

Divine Life of Swami Sivananda

In a few terse sentences, Swami Sivananda tells us what 'Divine Life' is.

"To lead the Divine Life is to shed all limitations, act in the spirit of the unity of all things, be ever self-centered and let these be evident in the daily battles of life".

Swami Sivananda

Goals or aims have to be fuelled by aspiration and guided by precepts. When aspiration enters life, life enters aspiration. Without life, all this remains as just nice things to talk about sitting around the coffee table, but it cannot help you.

1. Shedding Limitations

Discovery is always in the present and its unfolding is not possible if the past keeps interfering with the present. Most friction in life is the refusal to accept the present for what it is. The past insists on wanting things its way. This causes much stress and consumes tremendous energy, fatiguing us unnecessarily. This can and should be avoided.

"To shed the animal in man and to sublimate the human in him into the divine, to express this sublimation in his daily, hourly, life in thought, word and deed - that is truly divine life."

Swami Sivananda

Why do things have to be 'our way' or any certain way? We are a part of everything, part of this grand world—is it reasonable for the part to expect the whole to be a certain way? Can a drop expect the ocean to be a certain way? What does one do with these hidden wants? How does one handle them?

The *ongoing awareness* of the movement of *all thought* while we are doing what needs to be done, itself is disidentification with them—you are not what you are aware of! It is not difficult to shed limitations and gain clarity when situations are 'serious', so to say, but once things are to our preference, the awareness drops and habit regains control. There is a cost for vigilance to be established beyond situational use. One must be convinced beyond doubt of the utter futility and harmfulness of careless living—and this registers as an indelible image in the mind's eye. One has to see very clearly that the only evil is the content of one's own mind which insists on certain reactions.

Self-justification and reason are two cunning, potent weapons of the mind to prevent your interference. You yourself are made to participate in your bondage! In short, you are made

¹ Mechanical memory is useful, whereas vitalized memory is charged positively or negatively—and this, with repetition, will surface for still further repetition. More on this on the writings on mind.

to express and experience unhappiness. The mind says it is unhappy and experiences unhappiness. It then suggests what will quickly rectify the situation and being so caught up in this self-imposed unhappiness—we act against our highest interest.

Shedding limitations forms the true, protective armor, a disentangling from the past or habit. It is necessary for us to act differently so the resulting experience can be known.

2. Acting in the Spirit of the Unity of Things

There is a supreme unity that harmoniously contains infinite diversity without affecting the unity that alone is. It is the source, the substratum, diversity itself and the knower of all—we can call this supreme oneness by any name: God is the simplest. To live our life *in accordance with the unity of all things* is to joyfully live the Divine Life.

Perception is as honest as it seems. If you hold a pencil in two fingers (the front of one and the back of the other), you can experience two different sensations. How is it that we experience two different sensations while holding a single object? There are many clever answers but we are using this only to see that perception is flawed when it comes to knowing anything—it simply has too many limitations. Coupled with habits in thinking and a little of our own preferential attitudes—perception stands strong amidst its allies.

The cultivation of virtue is not a social nicety but a broad leap beyond the flawed limitations of conditioning. When I am good, when I do good—goodness resides in me! Swami Sivananda's dictum, "Be Good. Do Good.", should be etched firmly on the heart tablet. When you *are* good, doing good is natural, but one can do some good in the eyes of others and not 'be good'.

The cultivation of virtue is a choice to grow into goodness by larger measures consciously. The old will drop away just as the slough on a snake when its new skin has formed. Fighting old habits is futile because they reappear with redoubled force. It is wise to stay away from situations that are not conducive to the new aspiration, but at the very same time—there must be a ready new channel for old energies.

The *force* of old habits is the *movement of energy* in old patterns. This energy must already have a new channel before restricting the old. Farmers of old who use natural canal irrigation, open new pathways before closing off old pathways so water is not wasted. The very same principles apply here. Yoga calls this *vairagya* (absence of passion) and *abhyasa* (repetition of new effort)—and we shall approach this later in the writings on yoga. Swami Sivananda calls these, "Detach and Attach: detach the mind from the world and attach the mind to God." It is important to note the words "detach the mind" and "attach the mind" as these tell us that the Divine Life can be practiced by anyone—anywhere.

"To speak the truth at all costs, to speak sweetly with love, to practice non-violence, celibacy, to behold the Lord in all forms is Divine Life."

—Swami Sivananda

The practice of virtue until it is natural and spontaneous is acting in light of the truth of things—the existing unity that alone is. The practice of virtue cannot be selective when convenient. "At all costs..."—alone is virtue. Selective application is exactly that;

'application', like makeup, does not stand the test of time and gives rise to hypocrisy. There is no gray area here, it is quite black and white.

Once you embrace the path of virtue, your life will become greatly simplified, as the path of virtue is simple in essence. All decisions are made under against the spotlight of, "actions in light of truth—the indivisible unity that alone is!" It takes hard work to make this natural, as the past interferes, but it must be set aside for a *bright new future* to be yours!

3. Be Ever Self-Centered

Being self-centered is to always abide in the self that is existence itself. Beneath the body, mind and ego, you are still there, you exist, and this existential aspect or element is the same in all beings and things. It is not limited to any particular form or personality. The center has everything outside it but is never disturbed by their presence.

"To be ever in communion with the Lord by annihilating mineness and egoism through faith, devotion and self-surrender is Divine Life."

—Swami Sivananda

Spiritual life is hard work because success rises out of the ashes of defeat—the very ashes of defeat spark the embers of the flame of success. This is something we are not used to or prepared for. All our lives we have known victory as success in achievements, both external and internal. What we worked so hard for has come, and the personality which worked hard can bask in the achievement. The feeling of gain is rooted in a sense of increase—more now that there has been achievement.

But spiritual life is life in the spirit—*That which pervades all*—and for this, all divisions must be let go. Just like a sculptor chisels away what does not belong to reveal the beauty that has always been, life becomes an adventure of removal of limitations. Mineness and egoism are at the root of all division or ideas of separateness.

Divine Life is living in such a way that ideas of 'I' and 'mine' are continually weakened. There is expansion at each step, as each action is a blow to limitations so that we can enter into the largeness they hide.

Spiritual practices take on a wide scope and are not limited to a room of prayer. One may ask what practice is and how one practices in the context of living. If life is being lived, what is the need for practice? *Practice is a steady stream of renewed and energetic effort until the aim is achieved.* Here, the aim is not external—the means are. One keeps practicing in life until one can be established in living without limitation—and thereby without sorrow or confusion. Spiritual practices done in a room of prayer are concentrated practices in a quieter setting towards the same aim—self-mastery. We shall take this up as a separate topic later.

4. Dynamic Spiritual Evolution

To realize is to make real to oneself—not conceptually but by direct experience. Expansion of being brings this realization within the individual with reference to everything. Gradually, division becomes only a concept and unity becomes a reality!—it becomes natural to want to play one's part well in life.

“Your whole life should be a perennial worship. That is the dynamic way of spiritual evolution, of spiritual unfoldment and highest experience.”

—Swami Sivananda

Expression and Experience are One

Service becomes a way of recognition and adoration of the divine omnipresence—of God. It is a dynamic means to enter into and experience more pervasive layers of the divine center. As is the cause, so is the effect . . . as is the image, so is the reflection . . . *as is the expression, so must be the experience*. If I express anger, I must also experience anger; if I continually act in light of the unity that exists, I must drop into its glorious abyss eventually.

Yoga tells us that intelligent and dedicated practice for a long time makes one steady. In the steadiness, reflections are seen *without* the distorting ripples. The mind is made up of thought and habit. Thinking and acting *in a new way alone* can bring about a change in the mind.

Since life and spiritual evolution both require action—*all effort* in life can be done in the spirit that spiritual evolution requires. Every thought, feeling, word and action must be guided by the presence of God in all and God as all, or divine omnipresence. There cannot be two rulebooks, one for getting ahead in life and one for spiritual aspiration. *One single clear aim* has to become the unalterable precept for living. Spirit pervades all and if this is to become real to me, the principles of its all-pervasiveness must guide my actions naturally. Since everything we do becomes recognition and worship of the divine, a spirit of servicefulness to all becomes necessary.

Change requires proportional effort; and since we are not omniscient, we cannot know the point of change. Thus, effort has to be without break or selectiveness. Life is a stage for evolution and each moment is an opportunity to outgrow or increase limitation. For change to be lasting, effort too must be lasting in its scope, and selectiveness cannot be. The old will not give way to the new unless the new is intent on pervading the entire space of one's being! To have a clean room, all the dirt has to go—one cannot have secret stashes of favorite dirt and a clean room at the same time. Cleanliness before room implies the whole room is clean. Similarly, change must pervade all space of one's personality—then change alone remains.

Motives are an ambassador of the ego and work is done skillfully so as to keep all motives out of actions. Do what needs to be done and do it to the very best of your ability! What is the need for any form of motivation in this? There is no need for any dangling carrot to goad me to do the right thing in the right way. Something needs to be done, good—do it the best you can. The best effort is the only thing that brings the best result and freeing action from motive is a bold step in weakening the ego.

Conclusion

Divine Life is a life of change, not changing things or our life but of *changing self*—the world will always be just what it is. A rose does not know odor because it itself is fragrance. It does not have fragrance—it *is* fragrance and hence is never affected by any odor. The sun does not know darkness because it is light and where light is, darkness is not. To lead the

Divine Life is to live in such a way that an irreversible change is brought about through living expertly and it does not matter how things are—*you ever rest in the divine center!*

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