

Spiritual Practice, Part 2

Swami Suryadevananda

suryadevananda.org

Where we left off...

Study the scriptures daily, perform your duties expertly, worship God through selfless action, detach the mind from desire motivated action, destroy all sins, reflect over the defects in sense-pleasures and life cycles, have a firm resolve to attain liberation, and, leave your own house. These eight are preparatory to entering the spiritual path. Let us continue...

Second Stage

The next eight instructions, focuses on what the seeker should do after leaving the house till he gets himself initiated by his own guru.

9. Resort to good company.

Change: Today, we consider people wise and successful in very different ways. Earlier, the moral fiber and character of a person carried more weight than tangible accomplishments or their capacity. Now, the lines between what is considered moral and not have blurred considerably and been politicized. I've heard it said that one must keep with the times and be progressive. But, the goal of life has not changed and will never. What causes suffering to others and oneself has not changed and will never. We may think that there is increased hostility in the world, but, this hostility is the hearts and minds of the individual who sees inner cultivation as a personal discretionary consideration.

Satsang: Company of the good – not good at this or that but those who are inherently good. Whether adversity or good times knock on their door, their answer or response is the same as goodness is not seasonal or conditional. We are especially nice to those who are near and dear, sort of casual to those who are just familiar, and, cool to frozen to those who are other. We do not see that when we have these different responses, the seeds of these responses reside in us. I cannot brush you off in indifference unless indifference resides in me. Now just think, if we have quite a few 'not as good' responses in us – we have 'not so good' in us. Is all this necessary at all? Why does it matter if you or any other chose to be one way – do I need to reply in the same language? Do I need to drop to the same level? If I am at all serious about spiritual ascent, these must be let go as with them, I flow the opposite direction.

Inner goodness: So, how to change these inner currents which vehemently prompt behavior that is not conducive to my aspiration? We know how to change things outside and even smile when we are fuming. But, to change how we feel in a permanent way is quite a different thing as now we are talking about changing 'being' or who we are, and not conduct or what we do or put on display for others. It is here, the company of the good and wise, those who themselves tread the path or have trodden the path becomes necessary just as one candle is lit by another. They are good, not socially but inherently and naturally and this goodness can take any shape. Mere smiling and outer peasantries does not mean they rise from goodness. There could be some serious calculating going on beneath the peasantries. And, at the same token, firmness in response does not mean there is non-goodness or non-love, it is also part of goodness too. For example, if I know someone is tempting or baiting me towards some mischief and it is part of their makeup, I can tell them firmly not to come here again, and that's that. We must see goodness flowering in a very tangible way to at know its value deep within till lasting change comes about.

10. Have unswerving faith and devotion to God.

Faith: When you are in the company of those who are devoted to God as the all-in-all, or omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient, the feeling will catch on. You will see that their faith comes from wholehearted embrace of God's omnipresence at root level, and with this, all cares and worries drop away. Their unflinching faith is not something they do, but just who they are so it stays steady – in every clime and situation. This gives one tremendous energy and zeal for sadhana. On the same note, those who worry a lot, have not enshrined that feeling in their heart. Unflinching faith in God's omnipresence is proportional to the degree of acceptance of God's omnipresence.

The energy we spend in trying to make things happen which are not our lot is proportional to the amount of worry we will experience worrying about it. There is a difference between doing our very best at every moment and worrying. The worrying mind cannot do its best because the energy channeled into worrying, blocks one's own efforts. They block themselves. This happens in life and in spiritual practice or sadhana as well. In life as well as in one's spiritual practice, there is a difference between being vigilant to see what needs to be adjusted or changed and whether to stay the course. With vigilance, the focus is on ourselves where as in worrying, the focus is always external. Vigilance never causes worry because it sees worry and knows it to be a habit of the mind that must be exhausted, and therefore, it watches it rise, stay and fall, exhausting its residual energy by not being entertained further.

Devotion: To stay vigilant, one needs to have steady faith in God's omnipresence and with this, one becomes devoted. Feeling affectionate towards higher ideals but not willing to let go of the lower, erodes faith and disallows devotion. You can make every action one that strengthens faith and devotion if you sincerely feel that you are offering it all as worship of God. As we discussed

earlier, it is one thing to say, “God, I offer these actions to you”, without acting wholeheartedly or also offering part of what comes as remuneration to God in the form of charity to those struggling for the basics in life. If you don’t do these, you are still holding a part of the actions within you. For this, the mind must be observed relentlessly. This kind of observation is deepened in meditation and the heart when freed from the grip of personality is free to give itself in devotion to the Lord.

11. Cultivate and practice the six virtues.

Necessary: These six qualities are what the mind needs to stay steady in one’s abidance in the feeling of God’s omnipresence. The opposite of each one of these is a window from which the warm air of sitting by the fireplace escapes and the cold air from outside enters.

Sama is serenity or tranquility of mind, dama is self-restraint or sense-control, uparati is cessation from all worldly oriented activities, titiksha is fortitude or power of endurance, shraddha is unwavering faith in God, guru, the scriptures and the Atman, and, samadhan is a mind fixed on the God or the Self (Atman). These six are called the six-fold wealth or shadsampat.

Wholeheartedly: When a farmer cultivates the soil well, which includes all he has to do on his side – a good harvest will more than likely be coming. I say more than likely because there is always room for obstructions in nature. Similarly, there are ways we too can get obstructed, but, we have to do our part wholeheartedly and without remission. Wholeheartedly is to have all one’s energy and heart on the path. Not only all one’s energy in our sadhana but our hearts too must really want God more than any other want to the point that mind is always fixed in God’s remembrance. Without remission means an unbroken flow of God’s remembrance.

There are many ways to help with this thought current, the easiest is to cultivate the habit of repeating the mantra and aligning it to one’s breathing. The mantra is stretched to the natural rhythm of one’s breathing and the mantra is repeated silently, once while breathing in and once by breathing out. If the mind is boisterous, the image of our personal deity is fixed in the heart space while the mantra is repeated to the rhythm of one’s breathing. Do not underestimate the power of this simple practice.

You can read more about these and how to cultivate them in Swami Sivananda’s book, ‘Sadhana Chatushtaya’, published by The Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, India.

12. Renounce all desire motivated action.

Difficulty: It is difficult to reduce our involvement in outer action until a new inner current or pathway has been created. This is what the practice of japa or repeating the mantra, aligned to the rhythm of your breathing will do. This drains the energy out of existing thought patterns and makes increased vigilance possible. With this, we can avoid self-centered action and learn to *do*

what needs to be done because it needs to be done. This bounces back and weakens the ego. So, you start a better way of perception, action and result which does not add to existing conditioning and selfish-interests are taken out.

Vigilance: Without this inner renunciation, outer renunciation will be difficult to impossible as the inner pulls the outer. This is why one must sustain a steady level of vigilance so that before any action, mental or physical, one's motivations are clearly seen. If vigilance is relaxed for those considered near and dear or kith and kin, it will be like having a pot for water with holes in it – it will not hold water.

Unless you give the mind a new thought current or expanded way of thinking and feeling, it will not let go of its self-centered ways. These are not two things that need to be tackled: this first and then the other. They work together: start new ways and don't look back. The spirit pervades all and the spiritual life requires all your focus.

False fears: There is a fear among many that 'this' will fall apart or 'that' will fall apart. It may, and you are not the cause of them falling apart. You are doing what your deepest wisdom and inspiration feel should be done and have ascended several steps in spiritual ladder in earlier lives, the momentum of which calls you now. How will you answer the soul's call? We have gone through many lives and in each, people and things have fallen apart during and at the end of the journey – the finite must end. But, nothing goes away, everything comes back again to continue. In the Katha Upanishad, the master Yama gives us a beautiful example in saying that it is like a pot with water and rice that is boiling in it – the rice goes up and then back down and keeps repeating. The rice does not have an option to get out on its own, but we do.

13. Only now, approach the guru.

Exert thyself: Swami Venkatesananda writes, "The teacher, sage or guru is not a porter who is going to carry your bags around or please you" – this is very true. Through your own sincere efforts, you have clearly seen that staying the course as is, is not tenable as it is a downward spiral and a new path must be cut. Status quo should not be acceptable as you should have seen by unrelenting vigilance that it is a dead end. You should also feel that a new way must be found that veers out of this trap and be ready to do it. It is at this stage one approaches the guru. Shankaracharya echoes this same statement by saying, "Only now, approach a guru".

New you: By now, you should have lost your taste for unexamined living and wholeheartedly want a way out but the path does not appear very clear. This is especially true today. You would have come to this stage by your own study of scriptures and life, spiritual practices and cultivated the qualities that are needed for the march forward. You cannot go forward if your boat is anchored and tied to the dock. Approaching the teacher or guru before you have developed your new base is a sure invitation for disappointment.

14. Serve the guru.

Selfishness: In service, you learn to do something to the very best of your abilities, without your own filters of ‘my way’, ‘this I like’ or ‘this I don’t like’. This new current of action is what the Bhagavad Gita talks about in saying, “Do what needs to be done wholeheartedly, because it needs to be done”. Not what I want to do or how I want to do – what needs to be done and to the best of my ability. Mostly, we thwart action by the filters of selfishness or what we expect and estimate may come. While moving forward, we have our eyes on the horizon. This is like planting a sapling and then pulling it out each day, perhaps several times to see how much it has grown – it will not survive. Selfishness is weakened by service which is doing what needs to be done because it needs to be done. The reason for doing and not doing are taken out of the equation.

The sandals mentioned in the original verse are not literal but indicate what he stands for and stands on. When we practice the very principles he stands for and the platform he stands on which could well be the work he does – we find our own inner platform or stability and discover how to do what needs to be done as yoga or without the involvement of the ego. This dedicated selfless service is not so much for him as it is to help us find our way – a way to do what needs to be done without the ego. This is very important as you may be alone later for your deeper practice and all research must be done before setting out on your own.

15. After serving the guru, inquire about Brahman.

Necessary: There has been considerable misunderstanding about this verse. We live today in an entitlement society today. The ancients knew that if the student did not rise to a certain level on this own, which is to cast aside his ‘I-me-mine’ personality by universalizing his outlook, teaching vedantic truths about absolute monoism would be nice ideas shared for casual conversation.

Service to the guru mentioned here is not like a down payment of sorts before he is ‘pleased’ so to say and teaches. It is a period of attunement which is necessary to loosen the ego and its ways. Usually, we do things ‘we’ need to or ‘want’ to and to ‘our’ satisfaction. In service, one learns to do what needs to be done to the very best of our ability – *just because it needs to be done*. This *doing for the sake of doing* is the opening verse of the sixth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. Behind every self-centered action is the little self or ego which is very firmly embedded in one’s psychological makeup.

Attunement: The period of service is the period of attunement where the student learns how to do what needs to be done wholeheartedly, because it needs to be done. Not just do, but do very well. The little ‘I’ which insists in ‘my’ and ‘mine’, gradually weakens by disuse and is replaced by a universal feeling in the fire of action as duty – because it needs to be done.

Cultivation: In the path of jnana yoga, the qualifications are the highest because what needs to be done has no external support – direct realization of the one, single, universal truth of things

that: “One alone is”. The mind which has not been properly cultivated, will conceptualize teachings and go about groping in the dark. The farmer cultivates the soil with tremendous care, knowing, that nothing good will come about of this step is taken lightly. The crop will grow nicely if the conditions the farmer is responsible for providing are just right. In the early stages, spiritual life is like farming – it is inner and outer cultivation – making things just right so that we can act on teachings and knowledge. The inner pot of ‘I’, ‘me’, and ‘mine’ have to be emptied as same space within will hold universal ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Later, this too will have to be let go as the ‘manyness’ is squeezed out by ‘oneness’.

16. Hear the teachings with faith and devotion.

Really hear: To hear with faith is to hear in such a way so we act on the teachings heard. There is a big difference between blind faith and the ‘...with faith and devotion’ mentioned here. Blind faith is when you hear or read something and hope that what was heard comes to you. The ‘faith and devotion’ mentioned here is one where the student is fully ready and enthusiastic about having the experience heard about himself. He knows there is much to be done and is ready to do it. There are no competing interests as he knows what was heard was all-inclusive and more so – the goal of life.

We hear and read many things, good things but somehow do not act on them as what was heard was one good thing among many other good things that one is tied to now that may fall apart. We are afraid of this ‘falling apart’ because something in us cries ‘eternal, changeless...’ and this may not be so. Changelessness is the substratum of change, in it, change animates and appears as waves to in the ocean which is calm at its depths. Change is an appearance and calm is its true nature. Not the perfect example, but I think you can see what we are talking about here.

Faith & devotion: The earlier stages of the disciple’s attunement with the teacher is there to overcome this obstacle of hearing but not acting. Faith and devotion are the two rails on which the seeker will exert relentlessly till he has his own realization. As mentioned earlier, it is not just hearing with faith and devotion and then letting it be stored among other things we have heard – this is not hearing with either, faith or devotion. There must be that level of hearing which is like a springboard to act, to verify and know for oneself.

Detach-attach: Swami Sivananda calls this single two-sided action as detach-attach: detach the mind from existing limited ways of perception and action, and, engage it in broader ways. This is the crux of the problem for many seekers, they are enthusiastic about ‘trying out’ the teachings but hesitate or do not follow through in allowing the old and limited sense of self to fall apart. This detach and attach are not two actions but one single double-sided action. When you drive north, you get further away from the south so to say. When the boat goes out of the harbor, it leaves the dock. If the boat is not prepared to leave the dock, it will never leave the harbor.

Towards making all of this happen, it is very important and necessary to lead an awakened life. New colored impressions should not be entertained and existing one's should be weakened and let-go. When you are completely on board the train of change – this is possible. When you never leave the dock, it will be a struggle at the harbor at best. Satsang or company of the good and wise, we have spoken about this earlier is an important factor in promoting this change. Satsang need not always be in the physical company of others, when you wholeheartedly take up a scripture for study, you are in the company of the author by his ideas expressed in writing. To be in the company of the good, the wholesome and conducive to your aspiration is one way to let-go of the old shores.

Summary

Resort to good company, unswerving faith and devotion to God, cultivate and practice the six virtues, renounce all desire motivated action, only now approach the guru, serve the guru, after serving the guru inquire about Brahman, and, hear the teachings with faith and devotion.