

Spiritual Practice, Part 3

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Where we left off...

Resort to good company, unswerving faith and devotion to God, cultivate and practice the six virtues which include (*sama*: serenity or tranquility of mind, *dama*: self-restraint or sense-control, *uparati*: cessation from all worldly oriented activities, *titiksha*: fortitude or power of endurance, *shraddha*: unwavering faith in God, guru, the scriptures and the Atman, and, *samadhan*: a mind fixed on the God or the Self or Atman), 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. Let us continue...

Third Stage

Having met the guru and received instruction, the seeker has to strive to actualize the teachings which is to experience them for himself. With the teachings and the Upanishads as the basis, he sets about his own investigation to actualize them or know them by his direct experience. He is asked to strive wholeheartedly to get over conditioning's reverse pull while forging anew towards his full experience. In this journey, there is much that must be given up and it is best to avoid any and all arguments while striving. Let us continue...

17. Reflect on the Upanishadic truths

Reflect: When you reflect or deeply ponder, you do not start with something known, travel along ideas that are known, or, arrive at the known through what we have somehow been familiar with. We are not somehow seeking to justify some theory. Instead, we are looking directly into ourselves to see if this could be true and staying with what we are pondering on till there is direct experience of we heard or read about. You cannot be in a hurry to arrive at a conclusion – one way or another. You cannot also set a timeline for this investigation there are many factors involved including the quality of the mind. At the same time, one cannot be lackadaisical and just go along with loss of focus.

Why investigate: What we have heard or read is someone else's direct experience and it does not become ours till we experience it ourselves. Then, there is no doubt about it. Say you are driving to a certain place that you are not familiar with. You ask someone for directions and start driving. Once you reach the place, you will be sure that the route taken works and perhaps, even discover another way that may be better for you. Till you arrive at the destination – you are not

quite sure. Now, today, we have to take this example on its suggestive basis rather than its actual basis as there are so many gadgets that give you a level of certainty for travel. But, inner travel is something quite different.

Upanishadic truths: These are very different from driving directions as the teacher knows that he is talking about what has not been seen by the student and must be discovered by an instrument which has to be sharpened while travelling, while not succumbing to habitual ways. This is a tall challenge and this is why the Upanishadic dictums are pithy and one has to reflect on them which means to let them reflect within us so that the way is gradually seen. There is a difference between 'reflecting' and 'thinking about it'. When we reflect, we do not have an idea about it in mind that we are trying to connect to somehow. We allow the teaching to pass below the chatter of the mind full of concepts, theories and opinions to the inner intelligence – not knowing but earnestly wanting to know.

Guru: Having travelled the same journey, his instructions are vital till we can have our own experience. The guru is not going to give you turn by turn or step by step instruction like a driving map book but highlight what must be arrived at and some pitfalls along the way. The guru is not going to do the work you need to do and must do either. You must be fully prepared to act on the teaching on hearing it or it your existing conditioning will add the teaching to the vast library of concepts and theories—drained of all energy and utterly weakened. It is like eating fresh food, filled with nutrients which will nourish you nicely or something from the 'bagged and tagged but I don't know when section.' Finally, the discovery must be your own in the hours of meditation.

18. Take refuge in the truth of Brahman

Difficulty: How do you take refuge in God who is everywhere and all the time? The difficulty arises in accepting this dictum wholeheartedly as it would at once necessitate a complete letting go and the heart shudders at very mention at this. This is why the core scriptures dealing with liberation should be resorted to daily so declarations of those who have verified the teachings are deeply engaged. These core scriptures dealing with liberation are not doctrinal but require each seeker to exert and know by personal verification.

Refuge: Taking refuge is not some sort of parking lot where one can study and get complacent hoping that something wonderful may happen. It is a temporary shelter from the storms along the way till we can reach the safe shore of direct experience. This journey is not a travel from point A to point B but from here to here only as we undo the layers of conditioning that have obscured the truth. This existing conditioning is enmeshed to the sense of being or feeling of just who we are in such an intricate manner that it requires both; adamant will and tremendous humility to know that it is not an accomplishment as the many we have known. When we are firm and determined – our own conditioning of existing value base will challenge you energetically. It is essential to be wholehearted at each step on the way.

Truth: Time spent in studying the core scriptures is not an academic accumulation but a deepening of understanding (*which is to stand under*) of the experience of others who have trodden the same way we have now set foot on. The recognition of God’s omnipresence is itself self-surrender. If God is all, everywhere, all the time – then, where are we? This again, is perhaps easy to answer on the surface but difficult to answer wholeheartedly so that our lives, which include every thought, word, deed and feeling—are testimony to our understanding.

19. Avoid unnecessary arguments

Avoid: This is one side—avoid, the other is a better choice instead. For any change, both ‘avoid’ and a ‘better choice instead’ must be clear. All refrains and avoidances seem difficult only because we do not bring a better choice instead into play. When you have carefully examined ‘better choices instead’ – you automatically turn away from others without struggle. Naturally, this takes understanding what the not as good choices can result in.

Unnecessary: The bottom line is that it does no good for the earnest seeker as he is not seeking victory in arguments so they are best avoided. Besides, even if you win an argument – it may shake the faith of the other and this is never a good thing. Ask yourself, “Will any good come out of the argument that may result?” Why degrade the situation for all – better to leave it as it is and move on pleasantly. Always keep in mind what is really essential and never allow the unessential to enter your raft.

Arguments: Scholastic or doctrinal arguments very often result in no good as those who pursue these ways are well-versed in theory and verbosity or the play of words. Swami Sivananda calls unnecessary verbal arguments, ‘lingual warfare’.

20. Discriminate in line with sruti

Sruti: Let us start with the end of this one first. Sruti are scriptures which are direct revelations along the journey of self-discovery. If a person has risen from rags to riches and is giving a friendly talk to those interested – it may be something very worthwhile for those with similar inclinations because, you are hearing from one who has made it. Similarly, sruti contains the declarations of those who have realized God and they are nourishment till we have our own experiences.

Discriminate: This word is very loaded nowadays as it suggests different forms of social discrimination but we have to take our minds back in time when what was suggested was quite different. At each step, the seeker must discriminate or discern – which is to be very clear of the differences as we lead an examined life. Now, what is this examined life? Not taking anything at suggested value but to examine each situation for oneself when you come to it is an examined life. When you examine something, you do not start off from a known point or with a conclusion in mind but come to a conclusion based on your examination. The ‘in line with the sruti’ is not

opposed to a fresh examination – rather, it is what keeps the examination fresh as it is so easy to examine with the conditioned mind or by habit.

21. Steadily feel, “I am Brahman”

Steadily feel: It is difficult to come to this in a rush and, at the same time, it eludes one if one is not persistent and steady. The early steps were opportunity to clear all doubts. This does not mean that we have asked all the seemingly intelligent questions that could be asked but the ones that necessary to get started. The carpet unfolds as you walk on it. Confucius said, “The essence of knowledge is its application”. Ask what you are practicing and have doubts on or what you will practice for sure. This will allow absorption while assimilating and this absorption can be acted on as its roots are deep. Earlier steps including study that is brought into life or practiced – brings you to this steady feeling.

Brahman: Feeling ‘I am Brahman’ must not be cursory or suggestive as it will not help you. This feeling of “I am Brahman’ is a wholehearted recognition and embrace of God’s omnipresence. Now, the bar has been raised significantly as you must ask yourself if you are ready to practice the omnipresence of God. Proportionate to your wholehearted embrace of this feeling will be your ascent in the rungs of meditation. Now, this feeling cannot happen if we still harbor secret preferences to any as it requires a level playing field. ‘I am Brahman’ is also ‘All is Brahman’, so, one cannot harbor likes and dislikes or favorites to any – kith, kin or our people included – to get to this rung. There are many steps that if not addressed, will block the path and one will not know why it feels stuck. The spiritual path is a total path and requires total sincerity without compromise. Earlier steps in yoga like karma yoga and bhakti yoga are very helpful in weakening existing preferences and subtle prejudices. If these are skipped and one tries to jump directly into meditation – a feeling of stagnation often results, followed by backsliding and a fall.

22. Renounce pride and arrogance

Pride: A feeling of superiority that has no justification at all – especially for the spiritual seeker. Remember what we have just covered, ‘I am Brahman’ – this also means that God is omnipresent. How can feelings of pride be justified? And, is it necessary at all?

Arrogance: Pride in action is arrogance and this can take different forms. One has to be especially careful with this one as when you try to stay in society but away from the play of society – your actions can and will be taken as slightly arrogant or very arrogant without fail. One has to be very careful in examining one’s motives, being firm in one’s resolve, and, staying the course. This firmness of resolve is and will be taken as arrogance if one lives in the proximity of people who are known.

How: Again, the earlier rungs of karma yoga and bhakti yoga will build a good foundation towards significantly weakening pride and arrogance or at least give you the ability to discern between

them and doing what is necessary or being sure. The most important thing is to always examine your motives and be steady in your resolves and their follow through. This is why it is recommended to 'move geographically' as we have discussed earlier as those who you call friends and family or kith and kin will not accept the changing you – regardless of why.

23. Give up the, 'I am the body' feeling

Body: The feeling that 'I am the body' – is the root cause of suffering. All the earlier steps including asanas, pranayama, karma yoga, bhakti yoga and raja yoga will help you first weaken and then overcome this strong feeling gradually. Just saying, 'I am not the body' – will not work. One has to move towards this from the earliest steps without missing any and as one system – Swami Sivananda calls this 'Yoga of Synthesis'. Remember, specialization is the work of the ego and generalization is a blow to the ego. If you practice asanas, pranayama and a life of moderation (*which is the earlier steps in raja yoga*) sincerely – you have already started loosening the body's strong grip.

Mind: When you include the practice of karma yoga, bhakti yoga and the later rungs of raja yoga – you start loosening the mind's grip as well. Each of the practices and ways has their way of targeting the ego and a synthetic or integral approach is a surest way.

Caution: If effort is not made to dismantle the, 'I am the body' feeling – it will continue to linger in spite of arduous practice. Don't be in a hurry with this either as it may result in becoming a doormat by others and this will only increase one's unhappiness. Wholehearted diligent practice is the surest way – make every step one with the sure footing of sincerity and keep the goal clear in the heart. Don't skip a step and try to avoid specializing. Have a wide practice at first and you will know when it is just right to loosen some and increase the core.

24. Give up arguments with the learned

Be wise: Earlier in # 19, avoiding unnecessary arguments was mentioned. Now, we have specific mention of 'with the learned'. Spiritual practice is slow and sincere seekers are few. If one is sincere, over time, one is bound to have some spiritual experiences and perhaps, meet others who have also had some. Care must be taken in sharing the experiences with those who do not practice and sharing with the ego in check with those who do practice sincerely if felt to do so. Each person will have his own experiences thought in a broad sense – the milestones are similar. A good conversation with another sincere seeker could be very useful to both but care must be taken to avoid any possible argument that one could get into – regardless of which way the pull. This is especially true for the learned who sometimes tend to share in light of their learning.

Learned: It is not wrong to be learned or pursue traditional ways at all. It is important to keep in mind that each seeker has his own ways and rationale. Never forget or overlook that each seeker may be right from their point of view and that their way works for them. Much of the conflicts

we experience in our lives, can be avoided—they are not part of the natural landscape or what occurs naturally. They say, 'It takes two hands to clap' – you can avoid your hand in any conflict or worsening of the situation by seeing what your response may lead to before responding. Keeping this in mind, you will avoid conflicts and be able to share and learn from others.

Summary

Reflect on the Upanishadic truths, take refuge in the truth of Brahman, avoid unnecessary arguments, discriminate in line with the sruti, steadily feel, 'I am Brahman', renounce pride and arrogance, give up the 'I am the body' idea, and, give up arguments with the learned.