

Part 17 (...Chapter VI continues) Seven States or Planes of Wisdom

Last time we covered the first of the seven stages or planes or wisdom: śubhecchā or a noble wish. The main points were: awakening, renunciate, renunciation, behavior of a renunciate, and, focus of a renunciate. Let us continue with the second of the seven states or planes of wisdom.

II. Vicāraṇā or direct and steady observation of the mind

When one engages in the practice of inquiry or direct observation into the nature of the reality, it is inquiry or vicāraṇā. Direct observation of the mind is not passive but active in that the watching is also transforming. One does not just observe the mind but in observing, one is conscious that one is observing and does not get lost in the observation. The more one is able to sustain inner observation, the more conditioning reduces – as long as one does not add on conditioning any other way. This is essential, not only to spiritual practice, but also in living without inner conflict.

All of what we are going to talk about today, focuses on enabling vicāraṇā or direct observation of the mind and this enabling is at once the full willingness to let the inner intelligence act instead of the ego. Vicāraṇā is not something that the ego does. Vicāraṇā is the relentless watching of the ego while the inner intelligence does what needs to be done, as the situation arises and as a natural response to the situation without standing outside it. The ego has no room in vicāraṇā and it is weakened by disuse when the inner intelligence is empowered. Vicāraṇā therefore is also the pivot of the ego's surrender. The journey of surrendering the ego is at once an abidance in the spirit and therefore there is no loss – only gain. Let us now shift from talking about vicāraṇā to looking at ways to making it happen. One who is in this stage...

1. Engages himself in the study of scriptures, in right conduct and in the practice of concentration and meditation.

Study: The sincere seeker does not 'study scriptures' to understand them, but to understand one's self. Through the scriptures, the seeker studies himself. Vasistha has carefully chosen the word 'study' as this involves being a student and a wholly different attitude. A student does not have any preconceived notions as these notions interfere and disallow study. He approaches study with a clear mind and heart, holds on to the core teachings in his heart and ponders on how to practice them wholeheartedly. These three things are the focus of the seeker's study:

right approach; finding the teachings which allow one to progress in his spiritual journey; and; fiery determination to practice them in one's life or off the mat as well.

Right conduct: This is the bringing into life of one's study in one's daily life. Spiritual aspiration is not something confined to the prayer area but extends through all life. One's conduct, which is thoughts, feelings, communication and action, should reflect the ideals of one's spiritual aspiration wholeheartedly. This is what makes 'right conduct' with a spiritual basis different from social conduct and such – one's deepest aspiration is the very foundation and basis for all of one's conduct. Protecting one's spiritual flame or aspiration may appear to be at odds with social conduct of the times as social norms change and differ continually. It is best to emblaze one's spiritual ideal or goal in the heart first, as this will allow it to reflect naturally in life. To start in the outer first without having the ideal firmly set in one's heart, does not afford one the inner stability required to sustain the journey and evolve spiritually.

Concentration and meditation: The mind for meditation is cultivated in the hours of one's regular day-to-day life or off the mat. There is therefore no such thing as day-to-day life or secular life for the seeker as inner cultivation threads all aspects of one's life – all the time. The most basic and essential rule is: do one thing at one time, wholeheartedly or with full dedication and because it needs to be done. This is the way to become 'wholehearted' or sincere. If one practices this type of concentration off the mat or in one's daily life – concentration on the mat comes naturally. If one's attention is scattered and diffused in one's regular life – concentration is a struggle at best.

Concentrating the mind in one's daily life, one can concentrate the mind further on an object or ideal. This gathers the rays of the mind further and brings them into a tight focus. Supplementary yogic practices such as tratak or steady gazing and pranayama with concentration further tighten the rays of the mind and bring them into sharp focus. Now, the mind is primed for either concrete or abstract meditation. Concrete meditation is meditation on a particular form – this, leads to abstract meditation and then to self-inquiry naturally.

2. Resorts to the company of the wise and the good.

This is the glue that binds one's life with one's spiritual aspiration. No matter how things are, we always have the choice of a way that increases inner goodness or other choices. There are only these two paths. Katha Upanishad refers to them as preyas and śreyas – the pleasant and the good. This is the very basis for one's spiritual growth: knowing what is good, what supports one's spiritual ascent and the wholehearted willingness to practice it.

The company of the wise and the good is not limited to programs one attends from time to time or gatherings with some religious theme. To keep company is to keep steady companionship with the good or what supports one's spiritual aspiration as the basis for all choices in life. This

wholehearted embrace removes struggle from the journey and if struggle is felt – there is lack of wholeheartedly embracing the good.

3. Knows what is good and what is harmful, what is right and what is wrong.

As we have discussed, the mind for concentration and mediation is cultivated in our day-to-day lives. Therefore, one should resort to company of the good in all aspects of life. Our choices add or subtract momentum to our spiritual practice. This makes it essential to know what is good and harmful, right and wrong as there is a direct impact in our spiritual quest.

All of this may stand at odds with today's 'politically correct atmosphere' but it has been this way since the very beginning. The scriptures give us a beautiful analogy, "Be in this world but not off the world..." It is impossible to please two masters – the flesh and the spirit at the same time. This does not mean that one has to be at odds with the world at all. The world will go on with its own momentum and direction – let it. The seeker has his own direction and momentum. Both these intersect as needed but the seeker is set on the goal and clear of what is truly worth seeking. When there is this level of clarity in the heart – there are no choices at all. Sincerity is being fully onboard what is good and right and this fire, at once does away with the allure of any other temptation. Inner conflict is a sign that such clarity has not yet dawned in the heart.

4. Resolutely gives up all negative qualities like pride, envy, vanity, desires, delusion, etc.

Sincerity is the pivot in the spiritual journey. The last time we discussed bringing about this level of sincerity. When sincerity blossoms in the heart, it is like a fire that burns any existing or new desire as the heart is set on what it considers truly best. Sincerity simply means that you are fully onboard your deepest aspiration. Both of these must be there – you have a deep aspiration or one that you value more than all others and you are prepared to do what is needed towards its attainment – this is sincerity.

Just aspiring will do nothing unless you are enthusiastically prepared to let go of all that is not conducive to your aspiration. Giving up negative qualities like pride, envy, vanity, desires and delusion is giving up what stands in the way of your spiritual aspiration. Instead of struggling with the 'giving up' – it is easier to focus on the aspiration as the grip of all that hinders will loosen with time. While focusing on aspiration and all that supports it – you have to still have to recognize the surge of habit and avoid it by strengthening all that supports aspiration.

If there is a slip to negative qualities, there must be a system of accountability or intelligent self-punishment as we have discussed earlier. This is what makes it resolute as it has a resolve to stay on the chosen path. This intelligent self-punishment is positive and not punitive as it checks backsliding. Today's 'politically correct climate' tends to differ with any way of self-accountability so one has to maintain a deeper understanding for any real progress within.

It is necessary to clearly see that any or all of these negative qualities keep you from what you really want and consider best. The struggle on the journey lessens in proportion to your being fully on board your own aspiration. Regular meaningful study of scriptures, service of the teacher and relentless vigilance are an excellent backdrop in cultivating the heart and mind for one's spiritual journey.

Summary

What we have discussed today, is the very heart of spiritual progress and ascent. Vicāraṇā or direct and steady observation of the mind is the second of the seven states or planes of wisdom. Lack of direct and steady observation thwarts spiritual progress and will stagnate or set-back all efforts. These help towards direct and steady observation of the mind...

1. Engage in the study of scriptures, right conduct and in the practice of concentration and meditation.
2. Resort to the company of the wise and the good.
3. Know what is good and what is harmful, what is right and what is wrong.
4. Resolutely give up all negative qualities like pride, envy, vanity, desires, delusion, etc.

Next time: we take up the second of the seven states or planes of wisdom: tanumānasa or the thinned and weakened mind.



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