

Spiritual Practice, Part 1

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Introduction

Usually, we strive towards something that is apart from ourselves. Here we are, and, there or that is what we would like to attain. What is attempted to attain is different from who we are in being. To put it simply, the '*what*' which is to be attained is different from the '*who*' or person who will attain it. 'I', will make effort to attain 'that' – I am here now and what is sought is not, but by *correct* and focused effort – its attainment seems possible. In this arrangement or field, all goals are within reach if one is ready to make the required effort. The person as such does not matter as much as the effort needed. What is to be attained, is somehow a result of the effort made towards its attainment. But here in sadhana, the focus is on ourselves – to remove all obstacles so one's true nature can be seen. The uncompromising and unrelenting effort is on undoing the sense of 'I' or self while at the same time, focusing that freed-up sense of 'I' on knowing itself.

We have come to equate success with results, giving importance to the result and largely ignoring the process. In spiritual practice, the effort itself blossoms as the sought. What we seek is already here and now, all our efforts are aimed at removing the obstacles we ourselves have constructed and sustain. We are not working towards something for the sense of 'I' or 'me' but, undoing the sense of 'I' or 'me'.

The difficulty lies in at once mustering and sustaining the level of sincerity needed to realize one's true nature. Wholehearted practice has to be sustained by the fire of sincere aspiration and kept ablaze through the storms of old habit which gradually weaken by disuse. Existing likes and dislikes must be recycled so all energy is directed towards knowing the self, which at the same time weakens old habits.

Spiritual effort is not towards an attainment of something new or non-existent now. What we seek is to know by direct experience our true nature which though here and now, eludes our vision due to the strong force of habits. This track of habitual ways was created and is sustained by our own selves. We are the makers and sustainers of the ties that bind and we must unmake and dissolve the very ties we have created to realize our true nature.

To realize, means to make real – not conceptually but real so that there is no mistaking again. Towards this end, the great teacher Shankaracharya's 'Five Verses on Sadhana' are most useful.

Written in verse form originally, I have laid them out as individual instructions with some thoughts that I hope will inspire a framework for your practice.

First Stage

The beginning verse contains instructions regarding what the aspirant should do while leading his normal life remaining in his own house. This stage is preparatory to entering the spiritual path—a stage when the aspirant attunes his whole personality—body, organs of sense and action, mind and intellect—with the spirit within.

1. Study the scriptures daily.

Inspiration: We are not studying the scriptures so to say but through the scriptures, we are studying ourselves. The scriptures recommended are called moksha shastras or scriptures dealing with liberation. These are the records of those great ones who have gone before us, trodden the path to the pinnacle and left us their experiences. The highlight of these scriptures is that they are verified by many and verifiable by any who are sincere and enthusiastic to put forth the effort needed. We are not asked to follow these scriptures blindly but, to read them full-heartedly and exert earnestly towards validation of the truths contained. The scriptures act as correctives to how we see things in our day-to-day life till we can actualize them, which is to exert and validate them and have our own direct experience.

Immunization: It will not do much good to study the scriptures every day, get good at them but unable and unwilling to act on and from their teachings. It would be just like buying medicines or vitamins, never taking them and continuing with poor health habits. We live and work among people of different inclinations and temperaments and need to work in common ground. Each person has their own rationale for their views as we all evolve at our own pace. In communication, we share ideas on different things. When we listen to others, especially those we consider dear, kith or kin, we relax our vigilance. There is a difference between vigilance and being guarded so to say. With vigilance, we are listening wholeheartedly but intelligently but do not accept things just because of the nearness and dearness of the speaker. We do not analyze things either but while listening, we are directly looking within to see if what is said can be so. This becomes possible on the strength of our study and research from the records of others who have trodden the path to the summit and left us their verified experiences. These experiences are our strength and encouragement till we have our own.

Remembrance: Study scriptures on liberation daily, not to master the scriptures but to remember to master yourself. Our inspiration and immunization tends to fail in the face of all of what is already here – ready to experience and delight in. The tantalizing promise of joy and happiness that people, things and conditions promise comes at a very steep price which only

starts making itself known when you are committed. The lure of 'our people, kith and kin' is based on a deeper truth that you are vitally and organically connected to all but relationships are rarely if ever anchored in this feeling for then there would be no need to get related as you already are vitally. This is why remembrance becomes so very important – we must remember to put our studies into practice in the laboratory of our minds and life.

2. Perform your duties expertly.

Earlier: Earlier, people knew what needed to be done and how it should be done. People had more time in their day for both and learnt to live while working towards the goal of life while making a livelihood as well. Things have reversed as making a livelihood is first and foremost while working towards the goal of life is something that can be squeezed into any free time or as felt needed. If you ask, "Why do you work?" You would get an answer, "I have to live of course". And, if you ask, "Why do you live?" You may get various answers but they would more than likely go in circles, "I have to ...".

In days gone by, reminders of why we live were tied to certain rituals that reminded one of the goal of life. At different stages of outer accomplishment, there were reminders in the form of certain rituals where God was worshiped and thanked – not just by words but by giving in charity substantially. It is one thing to say 'God in all, God as all' but go about 'our business'. It is another thing to walk that talk and let what we feel or say reflect in our conduct in a substantial way. There is a surprising amount of hypocrisy that goes on behind the screen of our social conduct unless we are relentless in our self-examination and set to ascend inwardly.

Today: Times have changed and people's outer lives do not necessarily reflect progressive spiritual ascent or their inner lives. The link between our outer lives and inner spiritual ascent have broken and a now, each sincere seeker will have to find a way to make his or her outer life reflect an inner roadmap.

Still: So what do we do and how do we proceed? We can still start at the offering end – do everything as an offering to God for with that spirit, the heart and mind will find the best way to do and not the best way to get the most out of one's actions. But, dedicating all actions to God does not just mean saying that you are doing so in your prayer but to do them in the spirit of God's presence here and now in one and all and to be able to offer a substantial share of what comes as remuneration back as well as an offering unto God. In this way, actions are converted into karma yoga or work that exhausts karma and for self-purification. Existing self-centered ways are overwritten by the new feeling of God's omnipresence not just in words or feeling but validated in life by action and the fruits of action. Thus, these new cycles that generate and advance, take you forward and onward in the march to perfection.

3. Worship God through selfless action.

Karma Yoga: How does one worship God by our actions? Just remembering God and mentally saying that you offer your actions to God will not do. To offer is to give wholeheartedly in what you do, how you do and *what comes as a result of your actions which is more than one's need*. To not do this makes it charity, which is also a good thing but not yoga. Let us see how we can do both; to do what needs to be done because it needs to be done or on its own merit and to share the fruits of our actions with others who are in real need.

Step 1: When the 'what's in it for me' is taken out of perception and action, we see things universally – ourselves standing together with all. Personal or self-centered way of looking at things is not real seeing because it is looking from our advantage point of view. If I am at a train station and only looking for a person in a red shirt with a white cap – I am not really seeing. You would be surprised at how much we miss because of the blinders of self-first, my family, my community and my people. We exhaust our conditioning – which is all the desires, conditioning fuelled by 'I' and 'my' that we carry – by being aware of them, not fulfilling them, but instead, by doing what needs to be done *because it needs to be done* – thus, we exhaust existing karmic seeds by our karma yoga or action as yoga.

Step 2: The first step can be taken further by unhesitatingly offering a portion of any money that comes from our actions as charity – to those in real need. With this, there is further expansion of heart as earlier, we found a way to stand with others. Now, we are reaching the perimeters to share with those in need and raise the bar to work as worship.

4. Detach the mind from desire motivated action.

Desires: Desire motivated action stems from a mind with desires. Desires need not be for things or wealth, they can be for certain conditions, outcomes or even in your spiritual practice. Desires pop up in the mind because we have associated the object of desires with value – this association is not in the person, condition or thing but in our own mind. The mind cannot be kept in a vacuum when it has energy infused in it. The mind's energy has to be given a new flow or channel where desires and the limited sense of 'I' are absent and instead, ideas of universality are encouraged.

Though we feel the object of desire is outside, the value is self-ascribed, self-sustained and within. If we somehow deflate the value of the object, we no longer desire it. This is difficult at first as desires keep the mind in a diffused state and weakened due to our loves widely scattered.

Blaze anew: Cut a new pathway in the mind by desiring God for the flow of our love. Build on this by wanting to give or do something for others in need as service to God in all. These are not two things but one double-sided action of cutting a new single path for our desires and giving the mind a new alternative of seeing the welfare of others as our welfare and joy. Soon, the energy in the mind will find satisfaction in love for love's sake and the welfare of others as our joy. Inner

expansion will give you an even broader outlook. Existing desires will weaken by disuse and a new satisfaction will be felt by doing for others instead of just ourselves.

5. Destroy all sins.

Sins: Any notion or feeling that gives rise to a wrong sense of 'I' will demand action towards nurturing, protecting and appeasing of the 'I'. We have already cut new pathways of doing what needs to be done rather than what 'I' would like to do, and, sharing what we have with those in need instead of keeping all or most for me and mine.

Vigilance: Cultivate unrelenting vigilance so the mind does not get associated with any existing tendencies. The practices of japa and meditation will cultivate vigilance. Avoid being distracted and do one thing at one time with all your being. The inner world must be brought into the field of observation along with all you see outside.

Endure: While you are cutting new ways of thinking, feeling and action, old deeds and habits will knock on the door – let them exhaust themselves by enduring them bravely. For this, lead a simple life and do not depend on others for any of your work or needs. If it is not there, learn to go on just fine without it. Never let the mind panic or scream for something. Take joy in what comes naturally and be joyful when you don't have things. Get this joy from your love, adoration and meditation on God – knowing that you never walk alone. The more you find fulfilment in God, the less your mind will clamor for anything and it will be perfectly satisfied in any condition because the flow of attention is steady within. All sins will gradually be weakened when you are perfectly satisfied in God.

6. Reflect over the defects in sense-pleasures and life cycles.

Renew: New and good pathways in the mind should be cut immediately. This will give existing energy a healthy and productive channel for its flow. Do not delay in doing this as old habits die hard and will attack with redoubled force if there is a pause or stagnation in your practice. Never underestimate the force of old habits. The heart has to change from seeking the changing, passing and temporary to wanting the unchanging and eternal.

Inquire: As you have the momentum from cutting new channels, inquire to the defects and imperfections of pleasures – especially those you entertained earlier. Inquire without developing any aversion for pleasures or those who pursue them. Let others do their own thing as they feel best. If you have a good sadhana plan, you will have plenty of good things to put your mind on. Cultivate the habit of keeping the mind on the mantra repeated silently or on your breathing. With the mind introverted, your observation will be steady and free of the ego's criticizing and judging nature.

Recycle: When the energy is drained out of desires, it can be channeled into your sadhana. When the mind gets boisterous, change activities to something that does not involve the mind. Study

the mind and know when it gets into certain moods. Match the existing mode of the mind with an activity that can continue. For this, you need a full toolbox of sadhana. Being specialized will not give you many options. What you are doing is recycling different modes of energy: tamas or dullness and lethargy to rajas or dynamism, and, rajas to sattva or stability and balance.

7. Firmly resolve to attain liberation.

Energy: The earlier steps are designed to universalize one's outlook and with this, there is added strength for setting the resolves for spiritual life. They will also calm the mind by reducing some of its dullness and passion. You will find a new supply of energy available for sadhana from the inner changes – utilize it effectively. If you do not, the energy will once again run through old pathways with redoubled vigor as it cannot sit in a vacuum.

Resolves: It is easier to make a resolve for your spiritual goals when you have the momentum. But don't just stop there, have a good plan for your sadhana that is just right. Do not aim too low or too high but, do not give the mind any leniency or it will assert its old ways very quickly.

Sivananda's Trishul: A trishul is a trident, it has three prongs. Swami Sivananda gave us three tools to get started and continue to stay motivated in spiritual sadhana. First, put your resolve down in writing and write down what you will do this month and over the next three months. Have some tangible goals so you can measure your efforts. Second, have a good plan to do these things and a weekly spiritual diary to keep track of them listing the items and times to do them. Third, have a system of self-accountability which you do not waiver from. Let it have items like envelopes to send charitable donations, skip a meal and do more sadhana, give away something you like to charity etc. These three together should not be spineless, they must be enforced. You can find samples of these in the book, 'Sadhana', by Swami Sivananda.

8. Leave your own house.

Changes: Aside from a place to live, a house is also our 'familiar zone'. Nowadays, people move around geographically much more than in earlier days but, have more memories that are mobile and always accessible than in the past. Earlier, memories were preserved as hard copy, today, memories are stored digitally and one has access to them instantly. Earlier, there were limited means of communication, today, there is instant live communication and sharing. Earlier, when people relocated, communication and contact faded away, today, it does not matter where you go, instant communication is possible and expected. Also, what you share with one person, can quickly get broadcast to all irresponsibly. Before you consider leaving home physically, start leaving psychologically by inner change in establishing a solid practice and starting a new current in the mind stream.

Uncertainty: Spiritual life is not something that can be shared and talked about as it resonates with one at a depth, unique to each one. When one feels the call to the spiritual life, it is best to keep these thoughts and one's response to oneself so that it does not become casual

conversation. The early periods of spiritual life are times when much is sorted out, rearranged and therefore – periods of change and perhaps, even some uncertainty till one is established in their own practice.

Getting started: Some helpful initial practices are: a simple asana routine to get the body and energy in good order, study as we have discussed earlier today, prayer which includes kirtan and japa, some form of karma yoga or where one can do some serviceful work to others and loosen the sense of self-importance and a daily brisk walk or jog for exercise and to just be by oneself outdoors without any need for thinking, planning or worrying etc. Keep the routine simple but have an intelligent system of self-accountability like Swami Sivananda's resolve form, spiritual diary and self-punishment system.

RSRD: With so much digital media available, one can find what one needs to get started towards having their own practice right where they are. Just as still waters run deep, it is good to be a little quiet about one's practice as there is much sorting out and perhaps, some changes to be done by and for oneself. RSRD is run silent, run deep – a good principle in regards one's outlook and practice. This inner detachment is like an inner relocation and gives you room to change, correct and sort things out. You will also be able to know clearly if an outer relocation is really necessary and at what stage. The most important thing is to protect your spiritual fire – the flame of aspiration. This is not a small thing my friends, it is precious and a call to the soul. Be wise, read the lives of yogis and saints who have trodden this very path before and draw inspiration from them. You will be infused by ideas for your own journey. You are never really alone in the spiritual path though it sure feels like it sometimes. This happens because we are habituated to being with others outwardly or physically. In spiritual life, you have to discover that you are one with all, at all times inwardly, vitally and thus, never alone but: all-one. So, chalk out a program of life as Swami Sivananda advises, take stock of what has to be done and what can be let go. Delay not, begin your simple practice today. Pray incessantly, not for this or that but for light on the path, inner strength to stay the course, and, wisdom to sift through the essential and unessential. Above all, exert tenaciously and reflect. Have a resolve form, keep a spiritual diary, and have an intelligent system of self-punishment or self-accountability – these three makeup Swami Sivananda's Trishul or trident. You can learn more about them in his book, 'Sadhana'. Make the necessary adjustments and be cheerful.

Summary

Dedicated time in self study daily, performance of one's duties without desire for fruits, worship of God through them, renunciation of desires, expiation of sins, reflection over the defects in sense-pleasures, a firm resolve to attain liberation and leaving one's own home are preparatory to entering the spiritual path.