



What is a Spiritual Practice? (part two)

Following the conclusions of the need to apply our native and natural genius in balance with deep practice to explore our relationship with the universe and life.

Recognising the flow of life, and beyond life as the dynamic, changeless yet evolving, limitlessly creative process of enlightening presence.

We can continue to explore the depths of what is a spiritual practice?

Mary Daly the radical feminist philosopher states that she stopped using the word 'spiritual' as it immediately creates a mental dichotomy. She continues to say that,

"I think matter is extremely alive and spiritual in the deepest sense, so whenever possible I use the word elemental"

We create nouns, concrete terms out of things that are verbs, the word be-ing is a verb, the word universe is a verb, God or Goddess is actually a being word, a verb, not a thing word or noun.

It is through our unresolved and fundamental fear of death and the insecurities that arise from this fear that the ego concretises both metaphorically and literally the world around us, making it seem safe, secure, knowable and known, controllable and controlled.

The practices of Hatha Yoga have as a part of their root through the Tantric masters Matsyendranath, Gorakshanath and indeed Lord Shiva himself a deep and intrinsic connection to the Tantric view of all of spirit-matter being divine. The need to sustain the incarnate vehicle and to use it as the both the celebration and temple of awareness then becomes of essence.

The codifications of Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras indicate the presence of the unchanging absolute within our changing sensorial and relative existence and call it the Purusha. The realm of the changing called the Prakriti is usually translated as nature. Patanjali's texts however owe much to the earlier Pali cannon, the teachings of Buddha, which had been prominent in northern India for a thousand years before Patanjali. A re-appraisal of Patanjali's work by S.N.Tandon (1995), shows many of the sutras of Patanjali have their origin within the teaching of Gautama-the Buddha. Gautama himself had amongst his background the understandings of the various yogic practices of his day, which also informed his teaching.

One of the key tenets of the Buddhist view is the nature of the Absolute as empty, as formless. Emptiness is often radically misunderstood, emptiness is actually potent, it is rich with possibility, it is empty of all limitation and all conceptual tone. Realisation of emptiness is a massively humbling and liberating perspective as it also implies there is no individual soul, no jivatman, no self, no little

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

piece of 'me' to continue into the sublime hereafter. It means the end of the last little piece of selfishness as some Buddhist teachers say. It empties our ideas of everything including who we are.

It is this realisation of emptiness that frees us from the need to believe in anything, to be in control of anything, to pretend we know anything, to strive for personal egoic immortality.

All the great books crumble to dust in the face of the radikal freedom of emptiness, all that is left is awareness.

All the mental constructs and creations we have built up, cherished and protected about the shape, form and nature of the absolute similarly crumble into nothingness, as they are revealed as what they are, mere constructs.

This realisation of emptiness is the beginning of awareness of whatever may be spiritual. Anything else can be just an endless mind trip.

Emptiness has facets, like the facets of a diamond, the flickering qualities of unobstructed compassionate energy and total wisdom arise as the essence of emptiness. This is what Buddhists call Buddha-nature, though it goes by many names and Buddhists claim no monopoly over it. From this place of emptiness we see and feel and know life as it is, not as we would like it to be or would rather believe it to be. We know the fragile, iridescent, sparkling flow of awareness, beyond any ideas of God, beyond any ideas, ideas dissolving into the radikal emptiness that is totally full.

A wonderful story in Daniel Odier's 'Tantric Quest', tells of his teacher Devi who found herself embroiled in a dispute about the nature of the Absolute as emptiness or fullness, to which her reply is to take a breath and slip into the deepest Samadhi. It is only in the awareness of Samadhi that the answers are really known. All else is speculation, concept, idea, all filtered through the narcissistic personal ego.

Bearing in mind all practices are relative paths, any practice we engage in has the quality of consciously engaging awareness, awareness is already existent and as it has no beginning can't be developed, we merely consciously engage. Perhaps we should more honestly call our 'spiritual' practice 'awareness' practice.

From the perspective of the spirit-matter continuum, as different from 'spirit' and matter doesn't matter; or spirit opposed to matter; all practice that deepens awareness of life in all its complexity and beauty is deeply 'spiritualising'.

From the perspective of spirit-matter there is only here and now, this raw and magical moment. This moment hidden by ideas of how it is, or ideas of who we are, this moment obscured by past pain or glory and ignored by future fears and dreams, this moment condensed in space time to a fear ridden event or a mental construct of who we are and why we are here and therefore how I can justify this is not, 'the moment'.

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

Any practice that brings us more deeply into our incarnation in this moment is a deeply spiritualising practice.

When we understand from the view of the absolute-relative continuum the inter-dependence, contingency and connection between all things, the total ecology of it all. Dependent origination as Buddhists call it, then all of a sudden everything, all thought, all feeling, all action, and every moment matters.

The 'I' or individual ego is born out of insecurity and terror, terrified of non-existence. The 'I' cannot really love and cannot relate any way except in reference to it's own continued, status, power and existence. The 'I' is a reactive defence mechanism with which we have almost exclusively identified.

It is the nature of the 'I' to seek control, to seek power, to seek status, to seek to ever expand it's domain and security, to seek immortality. As a part of this process it takes, as it's own, aspects of being, possessions, beliefs and practices!

Any practice that returns our attention to the nature of this incessant grasping and assists us in the process of freeing us from this insidious process is again a deeply 'spiritualising' practice.

Practices that also celebrate and deepen the awareness of the internal and external inter-relationship and inter-dependence of all being are practices that are also deeply 'spiritualising'.

Deepening awareness of the wonder, beauty and sacredness of life, deepening awareness of here and now, deepening awareness of relationship and inter-dependence, deepening awareness and real understanding of the function and nature of ego, deepening capacity to drop into radikal emptiness balanced with love and wisdom, these are a few possible characteristics of a very real 'spiritualising' practice.

Other aspects of spiritualising practice that support conscious awareness include inquiry and ruthless honesty with oneself, and being ruthlessly honest can we locate a 'self' within us? If I ask the question "who am I?" often enough I might even begin to believe there is an answer when the question itself, badly formulated, pre-supposes an identity, therefore in our hunger to avoid dissolution and emptiness we come up with an identity.. the sacred 'I' as opposed to the mundane I.

Where does a baobab tree begin or end? When does it change from seed to tree to seed again? We choose to mentally divide this space and time- based continuum into discrete entities; we choose to separate the vast genetic flow and intra-dependence of 'baobabness' into individual trees.

We choose to separate the flow of absolute and relative into fragments to aid our construction of complex philosophies.

The psycho-physical organism 'I' laughingly call my 'self' is equally a part of the rich play of the Divine, part of the sparkling efflorescence of divine oneness, consciousness, essence.

Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation

All practices are practices in relativity, engaged within the relative end of the absolute-relative spectrum that is the Divine.

Awareness practices deepen our awareness of our nature as Spirit, as pure being, 'we' don't exist, being no-thing (no mental construct) therefore only Be-ing, flowing with the web of life.. into deeper and deeper awareness.

Ironically awareness of the absolute as a real lived and enlightening process does not come from doing practices, it is already here! We cannot make happen what already really is. This truth is what we are.

Meantime having forgotten this, practices, as Baker Roshi says, can make us 'accident-prone'; awakening to truth is an accident waiting to happen.

So what is a spiritual practice? We know now that there are no such things really, yet the 'spiritualising' practices that lead to a powerful, profound awareness and make us accident prone for the grace of realisation to occur are essential to see, know and realise.

As Hari Dass Baba said, "Who realises what, that is realisation".

I trust and hope that the process of reading this article, digestion of its intent, assimilation and incorporation into your personal genius and any wise response be part of that enlightenment that we all already are.

Blessings to all beings everywhere.

Christopher Gladwell

Bibliography

S.N.Tandon, A re-appraisal of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras in the light of the Buddhas teaching, Vipassana Research Institute, 1995.

Daniel Odier, Tantric Quest, An Encounter With Absolute Love, Inner traditions International, 1997.

Mary Daly, No Man's Land, An Interview by Susan Bridle, What is Enlightenment, Moksha Press, 1999.