



Lesson 35:

Go Straight to the Goal: Living Spiritual Practice

During our practice, it is always helpful to remember that we are not engaging in a never-ending list of dos and don'ts. We're not practicing for sainthood. We are adjusting our thoughts, speech, and behavior to align with the enlivening power that runs the universe. We are setting ourselves up to thrive...

– The Jewel of Abundance

Let's explore what living our spiritual practice can be. Even the root meaning for the Sanskrit term for spiritual practice—*sadhana*—offers a wealth of inspiration. It means: *to go straight to the goal*. Rightly understood, our practice is less about finally getting somewhere, or attaining something. It is simply the way we live a spiritually awakened, dharmic life. Going straight to the goal is living a spiritually conscious life—a yoga life—where we are arriving with peace and clarity in every moment. That's the ideal, of course. And that requires discipline.

Sadhana is discipline; it is self-effort directed toward soul-inspired living in the moment and the ultimate freedom or liberation that unfolds when conditions are right. Our self-effort is both the act of discerning what is in harmony with the soul, and it is the will to do what is best at any time, or in any situation. Discern; choose; act. Discern; choose; make a mistake. Discern; choose again. Repeat. Learn. Grow. And, while we are growing, remembering to enjoy the process of ever-new self-discovery.

Sadhana also means the way. It is the way we discover, the way we learn, the way the gem of our body-mind is polished through the trial, error, and self-correction that allows the inner light of the Self to shine through more clearly. It's the way we cooperate with the Infinite. We cooperate mainly by following our inner guidance as revealed through our discernment, intuition, and



conscience. The more purified the mental field is—the calmer and clearer it is from our steady and deep meditation practice—the easier it is for us to hear the still small voice of inner guidance. After discerning that inner guidance, then comes our response. That’s where true sadhana lives, in that moment of choice and cooperation.

Four Types of Spiritual Practitioners

Referring to our ability to experience higher states of consciousness in meditation, Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* indicates that our progress on the spiritual path is directly related to the intensity of our drive or our focus (sutras 1.21 & 1.22), whether it is mild, medium, or intensive. This can be extrapolated to apply to our spiritual practice in general. Like anything else we apply ourselves to, the intensity of our focus makes all the difference. It’s a good place for us to look when we feel that we are not making the progress we hope for. How focused are we on our daily spiritual practice?

The teachings of yoga delineate four types of spiritual practitioners. Each is considered by the intensity of their focus and their surrendered devotion to the guru, or spiritual teacher. Even without a guru or relationship to a spiritual teacher, this tiered evaluation can help us reflect on the questions: *How well do I listen? How willing am I to do what I know I should do?*

The first practitioner is one who lacks motivation, energy, or zeal. Such a person is said to be dense or dull. They are often greedy, self-serving, and attached to things and outcomes. This is a student who does not carry out the directives of the spiritual teacher, even when directly asked or invited. Inwardly this can also be viewed as one who does not discern inner guidance, and when it arises, does not follow it.

The second practitioner is farther along on the spiritual path, has developed a clearer mind, is steady with discipline, committed, even-minded, patient, and yearns to live a more conscious, virtuous life. This practitioner is one who follows the directives of the guru when asked. Inwardly,



this would be one who follows inner guidance when it is strong and clear, but perhaps at other times is not so finely in tune.

The third practitioner is fervent, devoted, ardent, and continuously engaged in spiritual practice. For this one, there is no “coming and going” of discipline. It is steady and strong. This practitioner is said to be able to *anticipate* the guru’s directives. No prompt is needed; guidance is clearly arising from within, being met and followed.

The fourth practitioner is the one for whom Self- and God-realization is nearest. This one is living in the spontaneous flow of right action, in complete harmony with the soul.

Loving the Process

One of my favorite stories about gradation of spiritual focus and attainment was told by Zen master Shunryu Suzuki (Suzuki Roshi) in his delightful book, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*. He offers a teaching from the *Samyuktagama Sutra* about four kinds of horses. The four kinds are: the excellent ones, the good ones, poor ones, and the bad ones.

The excellent horse will run fast or slow down, turn right or left, in attunement with the rider’s will, even before it sees the shadow of the whip. The good one will also closely follow the rider’s directive, making the adjustment just before the whip touches its skin. The poor one will respond and follow when it feels the pain of the whip on its skin. The last one, the bad one, will not respond until the pain of the whip reaches its bones.

We all naturally want to be the excellent horse or the most attuned practitioner! And if not that, at least the good one. Alas, many times we can more readily identify with the worst horse (or the dull student). Where Suzuki Roshi takes this teaching brings a breath of fresh air and a sigh of relief. The teaching he offers is that it really doesn’t matter what our skill level is—whether we are the excellent horse or the bad one. What matters is our fierce determination to awaken, to realize the truth. This is because even our imperfections, our errors, and the many ways we miss



the mark, are precious opportunities for growth and awakening. Suzuki Roshi wrote: *When you are determined to practice zazen [meditation] with the great mind of Buddha, you will find the worst horse is the most valuable one. In your very imperfections you will find the basis for your firm, way-seeking mind.*¹

To support your practice, refer to:

The Jewel of Abundance, p 157-159



¹ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice* (Weatherhill: New York, 1970), p.38.