

Spiritual Practice, Part 4

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Where we left off...

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

Fourth Stage

In this stage, we focus on disengaging from habitual ways of dealing with things for better choices instead. Though food is used in the first few topics, the principles can be extended to other habits as well. For our response to be different, we have to see things differently. This does not mean we become averse to the old, but, cultivate a taste for the new as it supports our aspiration. In these topics, we find a new and better way of dealing with what is necessary while pursuing what is essential.

25. Treat hunger like a disease.

It does not matter if one is just a beginner or an advanced seeker – both experience hunger. Feeling hungry is not a problem – how we treat hunger can be. As you advance in the spiritual path, there is more sense-control which leads to more self-control. Neither sense-control or self-control are suppressive in nature at all – they come about as a result of a better choice instead. For example, if you would like to save money for something better, you avoid spending money as you earn it on little things so that you have money on hand for something much better. There is no suppression here but a better choice which results in not squandering it over little things that come along. First, there is a change in one's inner vision – just how one sees things. This enables one to see the worth in something better. That seeing the worth in something better, does not allow the mind to drift on little things any more as it is set on something much better. If one does not have his sights set on something better wholeheartedly – it will be a struggle at each step as one will always look back at what can be had right now instead of even the better later.

Hunger is something we will always feel as long as there is a body. The problem is how we answer the call and not in the call itself. If we can see hunger as a disease or a call from the body that some food is needed – we can answer it with good, nutritious food. But, if we see it as an

opportunity to have something nice – choices and availability flood the mind like rivers that gain momentum when flowing.

26. Take food as medicine.

The original verse states '*taking the medicine of alms daily*'. Asking for alms may pose some difficulties in many places today.

Nutrition is very quickly forgotten once taste is a consideration. On this thought, it does not mean that one should shun food that tastes good either, but, keep in view that the purpose of food is nutrition so that one can practice energetically. The finally or goal of sadhana must be somehow brought into each equation so that all our choices and all we do must support the final goal. This, eliminates struggle as we now have our sights set on something better and bigger which is satisfaction itself. No suppression, no trickery or gimmicks – just a better choice made wholeheartedly.

When the 'why we eat food' is kept in view, the inner intelligence at once gives you the best choices for that purpose. But, if you take out the 'why' and just 'feel hungry' – well, that immediately opens up a very wide field of options and availability. Choices increase oscillation in the mind and make it restless. If for any reason, the choice made does not actualize or satisfy – there is dissatisfaction and it goes downhill from there.

27. Never ask for delicious food.

We were just talking about keeping in view 'the why we eat food'. This does not mean that if and when something tasty comes along naturally that we shun it or somehow make it 'untasty'. Sense-control leads to self-control and self-control is not only a tremendous gain or asset but necessary to know the self. How can one know the self if the sense of self is stretched out every which way? One cannot even know the shape of a piece of cloth if it is pulled in many ways.

So what to do? The key is to never ask of others or of oneself either. Asking is itself dissatisfaction as when we ask, we are seeking something that we hope will satisfy in some way and this 'seeking' is the early sprouting so to say of a need felt. This need when expressed through a certain preference is not the need for food any more but of the preference one has. The focus has shifted from 'food' to 'taste'. Now, I am not against tasty food but when we feel the need to satisfy taste – there is no stopping. When we feel hungry as in when we need food – it can be satisfied quite easily. When we put taste first, the mind continues to churn before, during and after eating. When we put food as nutrition first – there is no need for the mind to spin before, during or after. This, not only deals with hunger but eliminates asking or even hoping and this increases satisfaction as one cannot be happy when one asks or even prefers silently without asking aloud.

28. Be satisfied with what comes naturally.

If somehow, tasty food comes without asking or seeking – quite naturally – enjoy it just as any other meal knowing that in this too, there is energy that will enable you to do sadhana energetically. Both, food that is simple but nutritious and food that is tasty and nutritious are nutritious and answer the need felt for food for the body so that one can practice wholeheartedly. The difference in them is eliminated when one puts a bigger ‘why we are eating’ in the first place.

Keeping this bigger ‘why we are eating’ in view does not mean that we do not appreciate tasty food and at the same time, it does not mean that we are not equally satisfied with simpler tasting food. They are both good in that they are nutritious and give energy to practice. This seeing them as having the same inherent value does not diminish the taste of the tasty food. Tasty food is good and can be enjoyed and simpler food is also good and can also be enjoyed. There is enjoyment in both or joy in both so you are joyful through different conditions.

In these last four points that we have been discussing, we have looked at food and hunger with all its ramifications, but, this can be extended to so many different needs felt and keep them from going into wants which will and must result in loss of peace till preference is satisfied. This has to be understood and practiced intelligently so that we can extend the same mechanism to other aspects of our life and weaken the mechanism of desire, wanting and resulting restlessness – all, without denial but by better choices instead.

29. Calmly endure all opposites like heat and cold.

We have just seen that it is not only possible but a better way to take care of all that we feel we really need while increasing will-power, inner strength, staying balanced – all, without increasing desires or agitation in the mind.

The inner strength that was challenged by outer choices and availability will very soon start rumbling against outer conditions. This is bound to happen unless one takes the next steps of calmly enduring natural conditions without preferring other natural conditions instead. Again, this does not mean that we stand in the snow or rain and grin and bear what is unnecessary. It is a purely mental condition that requires the inner strength that has gradually been building to simply be inwardly unshaken while outer opposites such as heat and cold go through their paces. Take whatever natural care you can but do not let outer conditions stop or even dampen your inward march. I read some place, ‘What cannot be cured, must be endured’.

The question is, ‘Does enduring natural conditions have anything to do with experiencing dissatisfaction?’ No! All of nature endures natural conditions while taking care of themselves best they can. Enduring and taking care best one can are not related. If it rains, I take an umbrella or some form of protection but I do not have to get dissatisfied? What has dissatisfaction got to do

with the rains? The rains do not bring it along, they are not part of rains – they are part of the brains - ‘b-rains’.

How does one stay calm while dealing with changing conditions? By dealing with changing conditions best we can without getting agitated ourselves or agitating ourselves. Our inner agitation is not part of changing conditions out there but changing conditions within – there is no relation between them. Changes outside do not necessitate changes inside if we are alert and live intelligently.

So, let it rain – take an umbrella. Let the clothes get wet – dry them or they will dry automatically when you leave them to dry. The same weather that brought rains will bring sunshine to dry your wet clothes and you will be good to go again. Nowadays, even this is not necessary as you can toss them in the dryer for a couple minutes and be good to go in minutes. What is the need for fearing the rain, being dissatisfied with the rain or hoping for dry weather? These things have absolutely nothing to do with the rains but with careless ways of dealing with something so natural and even beautiful as rains.

30. Do not speak unnecessary words.

We have been talking about intelligent sense-control which leads to self-control without any loss experienced but only gain. There is great joy experienced once previously squandered energy starts returning to oneself. Actually, it does not return – it is just not wasted anymore and thus an increased sense of fullness begins to be experienced. One is happy in any condition as one discovers that conditions have nothing to do with one’s happiness – carelessness does.

In these moments of regaining oneself or self-recovery, one is tempted to lecture to others. This must be avoided as others are going through their own experiences and unless they earnestly want to know – data dumping should be avoided for many reasons. They say, ‘You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink’ – the thirst must first be felt for water or a better way before pouring on them – even with the best of intentions.

Pouring or dumping will not only turn people away but make whatever you share useless to them as thoughts shared would be turned into ‘good ideas’ along with so many other good or better ideas that are placed in deep storage. Confucius said, “The essence of knowledge is its application”. When we don’t act on what we hear or read – they become conceptualized and lose their impetus or fire.

It takes wisdom and inner strength to know when to speak what needs to be spoken, to who it must be spoken to and in what manner it is best spoken. Calling a spade a spade is easy – it takes nothing and accomplishes nothing other than possibly causing some hurt.

31. Be indifferent to all worldly affairs.

“The affairs of the world will go on forever, do not delay the practice of meditation.”

—Milarepa

Whatever is happening today, has happened before and will happen tomorrow too. The shape things seem to take appears different but not things in themselves. When you are serious about inner change, you have to be *unconcerned* about outer change. This feeling of ‘unconcern’ with the outer is not disdain or hatred but indifference based on wisdom – knowing that change is the nature of things – everything changes.

The seeker is now interested in who observes the change – the observer or knower of change seems to be unchanging. There has to be a letting go of active interest in the changing appearances if one earnestly wishes to realize the witness of change. It is like focusing when seeing, when you wish to see something up close acutely, the background appears blurry. It is not possible to have your foot in both doors and get someplace. It would be like having one foot in a car going south and the other in one going north. Be bold, take a stand.

You need the energy and awareness that is or was tied-up in worldly affairs to be now focused on the affair of self-discovery. Every ounce of squandered energy and attention must be mustered for the task. When you sit to meditate seriously – you will realize that the attention rushes through the areas of least resistance or should we say – the least vigilance. When you keep hidden interests or old interests close – your energy and awareness will find that pathway and flow there. This can be good if you are sincere because you will at once discover where the soft-spots are and be able to rectify them. If you are not sincere, you will keep throwing your might and hoping that things will somehow change with more effort – they will not. When there is this dichotomy – it only gets worse. Old ways such as anger, frustration and the like will once again surge with redoubled strength and you will be very surprised.

Once you have taken a stand to know the self or your true nature, be as less concerned with the outer as necessary – the less, the better. Every ounce of energy and attention must face what must be known – on the mat and off the mat. There are not two kinds of energy – just one. So, the energy that was flowing towards this, that and the other previously – must be first freed-up and recycled to know the self or your true nature. The Bhagavad Gita tells us, “You are your worst enemy and you are your best friend”. This ‘being your best friend’ is when you are sincere which means – wholehearted.

Indifference does not mean to hate something. To be indifferent to it is not to see it as different if things are one way or the other way or – to simply leave things alone. When you leave people, conditions and things alone – they leave you alone. Till you are interested in them – they will demand your attention – not only when you are up and about but in the hours of meditation.

32. Renounce completely feelings of kindness and harshness to others.

By now, the seeker is in an advanced stage and the higher he ascends, the thinner the air – so many things can cause his downfall. There is always more at stake as you go along. A very loose example here to make a point. When you are in your first year of college, you are in a new world as you may be on your own and have to set your own study habits, time for recreation and other things. So, you experiment and after some adjustments – get a schedule where you can accomplish most things you have to. Soon, you begin to realize that accomplishing things does not equate to a good job and so you adjust to make sure your grades are the best they can be while still having some time for other things that you feel are needed. The focus and priorities of a student sharpens as he goes along if he is at all serious about being successful. He realizes that college is not a playground but possibly, a launch platform for his career.

In the spiritual path too – there is a lot of experimenting. If one is at all serious, he realizes that most of the old ways undo whatever effort he puts forth and it seems to be a law of diminishing returns. If one does not let go of the past sincerely – the effects of one's sadhana, however well-intentioned will not last past the meditation mat or prayer area. One is at a crossroads and must choose between aspiration and habitual ways and this may include many things that one may hold dear. When you wholeheartedly embrace the change you aspire for, letting go is natural.

In society, feelings of kindness to some, indifference to others and perhaps, harshness to some may be common. But, for the sincere seeker who has been on the path for a while – different attitudes may spell differences in seeing things or a mind that once again starts fragmenting. Different feelings such as feelings of kindness and harshness is the front end and the back end of this is a fragmented mind. Why does one have to be kind, indifferent and not as kind at all? Why should the behavior or demeanor of others determine how I act towards them? This is the first point. When I act differently towards them, I harbor the different ways I see them and this is fragmentation. How can a mind that is fragmented ever know itself? Self-knowledge requires the whole mind facing itself in all earnest and humility with the sole quest to know one's true nature. Everything else must be let go as only the all can know the all. All of you has to face itself to know one's true nature.

This is why the sincere seeker is asked to be indifferent towards things other than the task on hand. To be indifferent does not mean to be hateful but to while 'being good' and 'doing good' – to be concerned with the task on hand of knowing one's true nature. You may feel that this 'kindness towards others' is part of 'doing good' but at this stage – it is not. In your journey to realize the truth – the idea of 'other' has to be overcome completely as there is no other – One alone is. Earlier habits of kindness towards 'others' has been a slippery slope for a fall by many as kindness is seen as good while 'others' is overlooked. This is a very difficult one to understand or stand under and this is why renunciation is vital as one goes along – not just as one advances but as one treads.

This is why the ancients had a flow or progression in life. The goal of life was self-realization and towards this, each progressed in different speeds but making sure that in each life, there was substantial progress on the path and less entanglement or conditioning. This, not just by what one knows theoretically but by example in one's life. After the student stage, one progressed to the householder stage and then to a semi-retired stage where one diminished outer involvement significantly and focused on the inner quest. This was not the activity of the retired stage – there was no such thing. A retiree is tired – again – re-tired! There is no retirement in yoga. Every ounce of energy till the very end. After this third stage of disentanglement or detach – one was able to attach or devote his full attention in life's quest of self-knowledge. Full attention to the full quest – full-time.

Those days have gone and the way of purposeful living as a framework of living has gone with it. Today, each must map out their path but we can always look to our ancients and cull from their research for ours all that we need. The fundamentals and elements needed are the same – the outer appearance of things may have changed. The spiritual path cannot change as it is not outside and change is outside only.

There is tremendous wisdom and teaching contained in these five verses we are covering. Each verse has eight pithy but important instructions which can illumine our path today and for time to unfold. Next time, we take up the fifth verse where the seeker is cautioned let go of the past and abide in the quest till the quest itself matures into realization.

Summary

Treat hunger like a disease, eat what comes as alms or naturally, never ask for delicious food, be satisfied with what comes naturally, calmly endure all opposites like heat and cold, do not speak unnecessary words, be indifferent to all worldly affairs, and, renounce completely feelings of kindness and harshness to others.