

# Tools for Enhancing Spiritual Growth

Acarya Giridevananda Avadhuta

Spiritual growth is synonymous with expansion of mind and developing intuition. Therefore, in addition to taking care of the physical body, much work is on the psychic level (achieving balance, strength, clarity and expansion) and interaction of the psyche with the world (conduct).

## **1. Regular performance of meditation (intuitional practice)**

Calms and quiets the mind; settles the nerves; expands the mind's periphery and outlook by focusing on an open-ended, unlimited concept such as infinite consciousness or infinite love; the effort of concentration in the meditative process strengthens the will force. A major effect of meditation is to cause sam'ska'ras (karmic reactions to one's past actions) to express in one's life at a quickened pace, and as the burden of sam'ska'ras decreases one's spiritual awareness increases.

## **2. Deep relaxation**

Effective to practice for a few minutes when you want to unwind. If you experience stress as a way of life, practice deep relaxation once or twice daily for ten minutes. Reduces stress, lowers high blood pressure, helps one to recapture sanity and composure.

## **3. A healthy lifestyle**

Vegetarian diet, asanas (yoga postures) and other healthy living habits (drinking sufficient water, regular physical labour or exercise, etc.) are crucial for maintaining the vitality of a flexible body composed of pure and subtle cells conducive to spiritual development. Other necessary elements of a healthy lifestyle are contained in the principles of Yama-Niyama\*, the Fifteen Shiilas, Sixteen Points.

## **4. A balanced mind**

Steadily reduce and eliminate all psychic complexes like superiority and inferiority complexes. A helpful method is to *distinguish* between Self and behaviour. Some people *identify* with their actions, behaviour and possessions, which tends to produce unstable mood swings between pride and shame, vanity and doubt, etc. – 'I *am* a melodious (or a terrible) singer' rather than 'People seem to enjoy my singing' or 'When I was a child someone told me I couldn't sing'; 'I am a failure' rather than 'I messed that up, let me try another approach'; I *am* beautiful, handsome, strong, ugly, weak, rich, poor, etc. Learn to *identify* with your essential *Self* as being pure and unblemished, and treat your behaviour as something you *do* or *perform*. This will help reduce and later remove such mood shifts and increase inner balance. Consider adopting the approach,

"I am pure; if I *do* something "bad", "good" or "great", my essential *Self* remains untarnished and unaffected. "Good" or "bad" actions of mine do not make me a great or bad person. Whatever I *do*, I remain the divine child of the Supreme Entity; I am better than no one else and no one else is better than me. I always cherish goodwill for others."

This psychic stance (way of being) allows one to get beyond guilt trips; mistakes then become *great moments* during which we can learn great lessons to add to our life's tool box (wisdom).

## **5. 'Mind the Gap' between stimulus and response**

When feeling attacked or uncomfortable, people sometimes react automatically or instinctively with one or another emotion and sometimes later regret their uncontrolled behaviour. Creating a slight gap of time between the stimulus and one's response provides the opportunity for the rational mind to consider how to respond. Short-tempered people are sometimes advised to count to ten before allowing themselves to get angry so they can choose to get angry or not. Success at this requires one to use a portion of one's mind to observe one's own thoughts and behaviour and to continually aim and work at improving one's conduct. Regular effort at such self-restraint gradually brings one's behaviour and emotions under firm control and is a tremendous aid to spiritual progress.

## 6. Your power of choice

Everything we do is by choice. There is no such thing as a real 'have to'. Suppose you don't like your job: you don't *have* to go to work Monday morning; you *choose* to go to work because the consequences of going to work are more desirable than those of not going to work. Realising your power of choice liberates you from feeling as a helpless victim of external circumstances. Your life can become more joyous, spontaneous and empowered as you consciously choose and *own* each decision you make.

## 7. Challenge unwanted behaviour patterns and dogmas with rationality

Close scrutiny of one's behaviour, especially when one becomes aware of automated emotional patterns (when responding to uncomfortable or even harmless situations) can help one spot inappropriate and inapplicable values and belief systems which one may unconsciously cling to. As one becomes aware of out-dated or ill-fitting values and beliefs one can choose whether or not to change them. This process of observing, scrutinising and altering (when one deems it necessary) daily behaviour (and hence one's values and belief systems) is an ongoing effort known as applying one's "conscience".

## 8. Unshakable confidence

Results from the clear and conscious endeavour to *align* one's daily behaviour with the timeless, universal principles of Yama-Niyama\*. Such principles are to be treated not as rigid rules but as guiding principles, because each situation contains relative variables which must be considered in order to reach a fair and rational assessment of what to do. Did a person steal due to habit, greed, internal weakness, poverty or starvation? The rigidity of *simple morality* allows no scope for humanitarian considerations; everything is viewed as good or bad, black or white, all or nothing. *Spiritual morality*, however, takes into full account the underlying conditions and necessities of each action. Yama-Niyama are therefore to be treated not as dogmatic rules but *guides* to human conduct.

Be aware of any gaps that may exist between your accepted values and observed conduct. Observing your behaviour, especially the little things with complete self-honesty steadily brings your professed values and behaviour into alignment. As one's behaviour comes under increasing self-control, one's values and belief systems become refined. This ongoing effort increases control over one's thoughts and behaviour, which results in steadiness of mind. One becomes increasingly firm and resolute within, like a monolithic rock that gets constantly bombarded by wind, rain, and waves of the sea yet is never shaken. A steady mind detaches itself from everything temporal and attaches itself only to the core of the universe and therefore, doesn't flinch.

## 9. Freedom through discipline

Some people have a fear of discipline because it seems to bind and limit them. However, a well-chosen and consciously applied system of discipline merely sets limits on behaviour a person considers adverse to his or her conduct and encourages behaviour considered favourable to one's progress. Such a discipline provides greater freedom and speed on one's spiritual journey.

## 10. Kiirtan and surrender

Lightens the mind, fulfills the heart and stirs the soul. Dancing Lalita Marmika and singing the Baba Nam Kevalam mantra (meaning, Infinite consciousness or Infinite love is the essence of everything or is all that exists) clears and cleans the mind of all impurities and facilitates the easy surrender of oneself to the Supreme Entity (which is nothing other than one's own essential Self). Surrender to the Supreme Entity is the essence of spirituality and causes the merging of unit mind with Infinite Consciousness.

\***Yama** comprises five principles for regulated conduct -- not harming intentionally, benevolent truthfulness, non-stealing, non-attachment, and reducing one's use of resources to the minimum necessary; and **Niyama** comprises five principles for inner harmony -- physical and mental purity, contentment, penance or selfless endeavour, study of spirituality, and spiritual endeavour).