

THREE STAGES OF PRACTICE

From a talk by Swami Chetanananda
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There are basically three different stages to meditation practice. For me the most important of these stages is the first, the basic stage in which the focus is on the practice of asking to grow.

A human being is composed of layers of tension. We can experience that in ourselves by observing the different agendas that are constantly operating in us and the way in which those agendas are often functioning at cross-purposes.

We can think of these layers of tension as veils, or curtains - the classical Sanskrit term is kosha - that become our limitations. As our creative energy - this light that is within us - passes through the different veils, it takes on the qualities and characteristics of those layers of tension and becomes the expression of us as a psychic, intellectual, emotional, psychological, and physical person. Each of these veils is more dense than the one before.

In the process of passing through these veils, our creative energy is absorbed into the layers of tension, causing them to seem real. As they absorb energy, the veils become increasingly stronger and finally take on a life of their own that is independent of the deepest and subtlest sense that we have of ourselves. This process eventually leads to a crystallized state of resistance that is our ultimate limitation.

All spiritual practice is about changing our state of limitation and tension to a state of wholeness in which we are free to explore the potential which is within us already. We have to pick ourselves up out of the struggle and find within ourselves a different environment in which to work. It is our continuous renunciation of our tensions that breaks down the crystallization and stagnation, that facilitates the unfoldment from within ourselves of that infinite power-that light of knowing that brings us peace and richness and makes this life truly meaningful. This takes a whole-hearted, conscious effort on our part every day, and the key to this work is very simply the degree to which we deeply want to grow.

The way we traditionally cultivate this inner growth is through mantra, a Sanskrit word which means "protector of the mind." The practice of the mantra, "I wish to grow," is a powerful tool for releasing those layers of tension and focusing continuously on a deeper state within. Asking to grow is the mechanism by which we can have all of our energy-every part of ourselves-going in the same direction, and that same direction has to be toward transcendence.

In the first stage, we also begin to be aware of the energy channels in the body. While there are ten channels that support our mental and physical existence, the three important ones for our practice are the spinal column or the *sushumna*, and its two subsidiary channels which in Sanskrit are called the *ida* and the *pingala*. The interaction of these channels form the chakras, energy centers through which we have access to a deeper place within us, which is mind. In this dimension of mind, a degree of self-awareness remains in which our ego still functions, though it is very much more subtle and refined. The deepest part of that mind is profoundly quiet, completely open, and in every way unlimited.

In the second stage of our meditation practice, the central challenge is simply quieting our mind and keeping it quiet. This quieting is not a suppression of thoughts. We cannot suppress thoughts. Nor am I suggesting that there might be an absence of static electricity going on. The mind, just by its own very nature, is constantly making noise. What I'm referring to is a movement of our awareness, a change in our attention. It is a realization of a deeper part of us than that superficial aspect of mind which is managing the information input, its structuring, and its output. In the experience of that deeper part of us, there is a flow, a pulse, a vitality that is as yet unstructured in the form of any kind of information.

In our practice we find the flow within ourselves and feel that flow everywhere. It is in the flow that we find quiet. This quiet is not exactly the stillness that we experience in meditation, because that stillness always gives way to motion just as motion then becomes stillness again. Motion and stillness are the Shiva and Shakti, the Yin and Yang, essential and ultimately indivisible elements of consciousness. Quiet is something other than stillness. The quiet mind encompasses both stillness and flow.

From this dimension of awareness, our superficial mind is no longer able to sustain any idea of duality. Because we have learned to experience the movement of the energy through the channels and the quieting of our mind during the first two stages of our meditation practice, we have become aware of the operation of our nervous system and the interconnectedness of the whole. The experience of diversity endures, but it is in no way a dualistic event.

For me, there is only one nervous system on the whole planet. All human nervous systems are one. Think of it! You have nerve strands that are separated by synapses. Nerves communicate with each other as energy moves across those synapses, and the information is structured through that movement. So what was just the stimulus becomes a specific response as it is structured through the mechanism. But there is also a synapse that exists between human beings, the space between our bodies. If you look under a microscope the cells

in our nervous system all look exactly the same; they are one. So on the human and planetary dimensions the very same unity exists.

In the second stage, then, we learn to appreciate that there is diversity that never becomes a duality. In this experience of interconnectedness our fears and insecurities are dissolved in the understanding that there is only one-there is no other. If there is no other then we have only one thing to fear and that is ourself and our own limitations. We understand in a simple way that this whole world is a projection of our own mind, and in that experience we become at peace because clearly there is no absence of anything and the possibility of more is unthinkable.

And finally, in the third stage, this awareness matures into a transcendence of all thought and all experience, a state that is indescribable. I won't try to wrap words around it because I'm not comfortable with how it sounds. I'll only say that in this stage we are no longer working in the chakras, in the flow, or in our nervous system in any way. At this stage we become aware of ourself as an energy field in which there are a vast number of frequencies of vibration that potentially exist that we can either bring into the forefront of our awareness or change as we wish.

And at this stage of awareness, we recognize that the whole world is nothing but our own creation. Our energy doesn't function in relationship to our physical body anymore, or to our awareness, but rather it exists as an entire field. There is no practice that is possible in relationship to that; there is only pure awareness. Needless to say, this creates a very interesting possibility for an infinite amount of work for anyone who chooses to embrace that work. There is this continuously compelling adventure and mystery and miracle intrinsic to vital force-the essence of life itself-which some people are just driven to explore.

No matter how evolved we become in our practice, it's always necessary every day when we get up in the morning to work through all the different stages. The issue is how long it takes us to get all our energy going in the same direction, not if it should happen. For me it takes perhaps two seconds some days and fifteen minutes other days. We have to know the difference. We have to have the discipline to compose ourselves and get ourselves focused on all the different dimensions in which we are going to work each day. We have to be aware of that work actually happening, not just wish or assume it will.

We have to feel the energy flow. Then the flow becomes a strength that we can move from throughout our day. Once we are centered in this awareness the energy should continue to flow and move so that we are truly living and growing rather than just becoming stuck in some circumstance and stagnating.

The important issue, the only issue, is flow. The degree to which we pay attention to that flow and cultivate it consciously is the degree to which our sense of fullness within expands and becomes so large it lifts us beyond our ego and beyond our awareness of our immediate surroundings. It lifts us beyond the limitations of our biological existence into a dimension of awareness that is truly sacred and transcendent. Life is no longer a struggle in which we're trying to make something of ourselves, but rather it is an exploration of that unfolding potentiality which is within us already. We're not leading anything, we're following; we're not making anything, we're serving; we're not building, we are just the hod carrier.

Finally, the work in spiritual practice is very, very simple. We just sit and get centered; we become quiet and tune into the totality that we are. Our meditation practice is the key to expanding our understanding of ourself and our boundaries and limits as an individual, our understanding of the field of our individual experience, and the field of experience itself.