

## **“Practice, Practice, Practice”**

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Marcia stood on a street corner in Times Square frustrated and annoyed, the tourist map crumpled in her fist. After several deep breaths to calm herself she tentatively approached a safe-looking elderly gentleman to ask directions.

“Excuse me sir,” she began, “Can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?”

He smiled warmly, nodded and then answered, “Practice, my dear, practice.”

Ok, so it’s a bad joke and somewhat predictable, but I had to do it! I couldn’t preach a sermon about practicing and leave such an obvious joke out of it and as awful as the joke is there is truth hidden within. Practice after all makes perfect.

Practice: ‘the translating of an idea into action; the systematic training by multiple repetitions, learning by repetition; a customary way of operation or behavior; the exercise of a profession.’ We practice new things we learn in order to gain a skill. We practice tasks that we know how to do in order to attain a higher level of expertise – to get it right. We follow the rules of order so that what is expected can be achieved. We practice what we’ve been taught so that our ability to do our job is consistent. Practicing is integral to our growing up. Rarely do people string their first sentence together flawlessly or take their first steps without hesitation or a little wobbling. We need not only to learn the basics of a task or skill but also to repeat it often enough so that it becomes as natural to us as breathing, allowing us to sometimes find moments of grace within our work or artistry within performance.

Which is part of why I have always wondered about the term ‘spiritual practice.’ It is often used as a noun ‘my spiritual practice’ but as one of the sabbatical committee members questioned, “Is it like a law practice or like a yoga practice?” in reference to

discussing my spiritual practice. And to be honest I had to pause before answering. I said like a yoga practice. But the question got me thinking.... spiritual practice is personal; it is an expression of one's religious beliefs and understandings. And yet, it can also be communal. In one's spiritual practice you are repeating already established patterns and for some it is even a profession of some sort. So is spiritual practice more like a law practice or a yoga practice? Some would argue that both law and yoga are spiritual practices in their own rights so the question is futile. However, a primary difference I see between the two is that you cannot do a spiritual practice for another person. Someone who meditates cannot expect to meditate for the direct and sole benefit of another person. We must perform our own spiritual practice if we are to attain any results.

But, what does it mean to practice being spiritual? What is the point of the practice and what makes it spiritual? How does one practice that which concerns the spirit?

When we think of spiritual practices: meditating, yoga, praying and maybe going to church come to mind. When I was in seminary along with the questions of "What denomination are you?" and "When will you finish with your program," "What is your spiritual practice?" was one of the favorite questions to ask fellow students. I was always fascinated to watch what would happen when someone was asked that, because usually you could see from their expression that they were thinking fast to come up with something that would sound plausible and yet not quite be a lie. I discovered after my first couple of semesters that most seminary students haven't time to have a spiritual practice so those who answered after any hesitation were probably making one up on the spot. But I was always surprised by how creative my classmates were. One student's reply to this question was "napping is my spiritual practice." And then she went on to

persuade the person who had asked her based on the scriptural text of Genesis ‘on the seventh day god rested’ she had developed an entire theological argument for taking an afternoon nap. I am all for napping, but isn’t that taking it a little too far?

“[Spiritual practices] are any activity or attitude in which you can regularly and intentionally engage...which...deepens your relationship with life both within and beyond you.” So writes Scott Alexander in our reading this morning. Does that mean if my intention and attitude is in correct alignment that doing laundry can be a spiritual practice? Somehow I doubt that laundry as spiritual practice is going to fly in my house, but it sure sounds good. Alexander states that spiritual practice has to do with intention as much as action, but this is where I disagree.

If that is true, that it is only a matter of intention and attitude that our daily and routine chores become part of our spiritual lives, then is all that we do sacred? I think there is a difference between seeing holiness in all things and declaring an action holy simply because we are doing it. I am the first to admit that there are moments in cleaning the house where my spirit feels lifted or in mowing the lawn that I reach a Zen-like state, but having a spiritual experience is not the same as maintaining a spiritual practice. Alexander goes on to argue that being vegetarian or recycling are spiritual practices and with this I most ardently disagree. Yes, being vegetarian can be connected to one’s spiritual beliefs and recycling can also be an expression of one’s deep moral understanding, however, they are extensions of or external representations of the internal spiritual or religious belief. And ultimately I believe that a spiritual practice is an act of seeking out that deep belief, seeking our deepest selves and to face with openness and

honesty the deepest centers of our souls. Then how we live from that place, how we choose to express those beliefs that is living a life of faith.

“Spiritual practice doesn't seem like what we would want to do on a beautiful day filled with sunshine and free time.” Writes Benjamin, a practitioner from the Lokuttara monastic community, “We all know that daily spiritual practice takes commitment, energy and focus, and they sound too much like work. We all work, and even derive satisfaction from aspects of it, but usually we see the opposite of work as being pure self-enjoyment. So after having taken care of all the necessary tasks that are a part of our lives, we're more interested in relaxing or playing than in pursuing a spiritual practice.

“Our society places a lot of emphasis on rapid return on investment.” He continues, “This means we want to benefit from our efforts as quickly as possible and receive the maximum reward. You might describe this as 'instant gratification', although most of us are more realistic and are willing to wait a bit for the return. Although daily spiritual practice can result in short term gratification, most of the return on our spiritual investment is slow growing with maturity taking a long time.”

Practicing being spiritual, being in touch with that deeper part of ourselves – that part in which we know without words how we are connected to all that is beyond us, takes enormous effort. Authentic spiritual practice demands discipline and structure, intention and consistency. Nothing can be done well if we do not take the time and effort to make it so. Practicing being spiritual is not about feeling good, though often a sense of fulfillment and contentment may come from a prolonged and deep spiritual practice.

The trouble is that often spiritual practice is linked to an idea of becoming ethereal, less earthy. Many people believe those who have a long-standing spiritual

practice as above humanness, more spirit than person. That somehow those who are ‘spiritual’ have evolved beyond their humanity. But I don’t see that as what true and deep and honest spiritual practice asks. I think rather being spiritual is as much about learning, practicing being embodied as it is about that which is not completely tangible.

As many of you know last month I attended a weeklong retreat at a Christian monastery. Participating in the retreat required that we follow the divine hours with the brothers who lived there, observe the daily twelve hours of silence and engage in lectio divina (which simply means sacred reading). This meant that we went to worship five times each day, were silent from eight in the evening until eight in the morning, and had three dedicated hours each day to reading sacred texts. If I had thought such an adventure would be in any way ethereal the first morning I had to get up to worship at six-thirty quickly dissuaded me of that illusion.

In the midst of this rigid and, to be frank, demanding schedule I found a rhythm that was truly soul opening. Having time to sit and read, deeply read and reread things that stirred my heart and mind and soul was luxurious. Not to read with a plan on how to use it in a sermon or as an escape, but just to let the words affect me. The silence was much easier to maintain than I had expected and when I came home it took several days for me to adjust to how much sound is in my daily life. But the part that surprised me the most was that after the first couple of days I found being called to worship by the bells on the hill a gift. To have five moments in a day in which to sit and be and reflect on things important and meaningful to me was a treasure.

Let me be clear and honest, this was no easy week, but the discipline of the practice gave me a way in which to manage the difficult pieces that came up. That is the beauty of a spiritual practice, it offers a structure in which to face and deal with the

reality of our lives including the pain and hardships as well as the joy and celebration. Practicing being spiritual is not about evading our very real human emotions, but embracing them and letting them teach us about what we believe and about ourselves.

Spiritual practice, or as Karen D. Ferris refers it ‘soulful practice,’ opens us, prepares us and increases the likelihood of our experiencing more deeply the moments in our lives where the divine touches us or is awakened within us. The practicing of being a soul that is embodied is a beautiful image. We are not spiritual beings separate from our bodily form but both elements of our existence are intertwined. Much like exercise for the body and mind, the exercise of our soul is equally crucial to our overall health. We must engage with our minds and bodies and spirits if they are not to become stale and atrophied. The structure and discipline of a practice is there when our intentions are not. A close friend of mine has been meditating everyday for 2 hours for the past 30 years, and yet, she will admit that some mornings she’d much rather stay in bed. That is the challenge and the demand of a spiritual practice – to keep doing it even when we don’t feel like it.

“The life which is unexamined is not worth living,” wrote Plato. And he couldn’t be more right. The role of a spiritual practice, whether of yoga or meditation, divine reading or journaling, sacred music or dance, is to draw us intimately into our deepest selves and examine what lies within. Spiritual practice is about nurturing our relationship with what we know to be the Holy, to be God. And so practice, my friends, practice.