

Spiritual Practice and the Evolution of Consciousness

Earlier I advocated a *panentheistic* conceptualization of reality that entails primacy of consciousness, human consciousness as a specialized manifestation within matter of the universal field of consciousness, recurring material manifestations as a necessary experience for spiritual development, egotism and selfishness as the antithesis of a spiritual life, and the necessity of free will and personal sovereignty for the perfection of consciousness and enlightenment. The present piece will discuss the role of *spiritual practice* in the evolution of consciousness.

It almost goes without saying that the goal of developing one's consciousness will be for most people a task requiring some organized effort, which is generally thought of as a spiritual practice. Edgar Cayce (a.k.a. the Sleeping Prophet) frequently addressed the core and most important step in developing a spiritual practice. That step was setting a *personal ideal* or a purposive and positive *intent* to be used to guide one in interactions with others. Cayce recommended that such an ideal should encompass such qualities as *love, service, compassion* and *understanding*. He further suggested that as an aid to focus, an historical or fictional exemplar of one's personal ideal might be selected.

Simply setting an ideal is not enough because to be useful it must be put into practice. An ideal is applied by using it as a standard to *self-evaluate* one's thoughts and actions on a daily basis. Cayce counseled that the evolution of your consciousness is not determined by spiritual knowledge but how well you apply that knowledge in your actions. Cayce emphasized both thought and behavior. Thought because of his repeated admonition that "mind is the builder." What he means here is that consciousness is primary. Who and what you are ultimately derives from your thoughts and it is these thoughts that motivate behavior, including behaviors that conform to one's personal ideal. Behavior then must be motivated by positive intent if it is to contribute to one's spiritual evolution. "Good" behavior motivated by ego, coerced by social opinion or by law is done for the wrong reason and contributes nothing to spiritual evolution. *Setting and following a personal ideal then is spiritual practice in its most basic sense.*

The Seth entity that channeled through the writer Jane Roberts also spoke of the importance of ideals and supported Cayce's view that the primary way in which ideals need to be expressed is through interaction with others within the context of daily life. Seth cautions that we often set very broad and general ideals as a way of avoiding having to act upon them. Such ideals seem beyond the ability of a mere individual to significantly impact, so we fail to act or expect institutions to act on our behalf. Seth also warns that people "...often believe that any means is justified in the pursuit of the ideal." But, "Each act that is not in keeping with the ideal begins to unravel that ideal at its very core." Seth, like Cayce, suggests that "...in your job and in your associations, are the places where you intersect with the world." It is in these very personal and daily relationships where you have the most power to affect the world. Personal ideals can only be realized through acting on them. Seth argues that it is the cumulative effect of this type of action that changes the world. *Changing the world is a bottom-up process that begins with oneself.*

The book [The Spirituality of Imperfection](#) takes as its starting point the recognition that all journeys down a spiritual path begin from a state of imperfection. The authors of this book discuss some of the defining characteristics often associated with spirituality.

The first characteristic that marks the journey down a spiritual path is the experience of **release**. Release frees one from the burden of doubt. Release is what allows one to have faith in the correctness of the journey begun. Here is a little story about release that you've probably heard before:

William has fallen over a cliff and as he fell he managed to grab hold of a bush growing from the side of the cliff. There hanging on for dear life he beseeches God to save him. To his great surprise he hears a voice speaking to him. But, he is panicked by the instructions he hears for the booming voice says, "William, let go, release the bush." William shrieks in reply, "I can't! I'm too far up!" Again the voice says, "Put aside your doubt. Release the bush." William considers the instruction in silence for a few moments and then calls out, "Is there anyone else up there?"

The second characteristic is **gratitude**. Gratitude is the only possible response to something freely given. A true gift is spontaneous and inspired rather than occasioned. A spiritual person sees the same reality that everyone else sees but recognizes reality in all its aspects as a gift. Here is a story about gratitude:

A blind man begging in a park is approached by a stranger inquiring about how generous people had been. The blind man showed the stranger his collection cup with its meager contents. The stranger asked if he might write something on the blind man's sign. The blind man agreed. Later the stranger returned and the blind man told him that people had been very generous and asked the stranger what he had written on his sign. The stranger replied that he had written "Today is a wondrous spring day and I am grateful."

The third characteristic is **humility**. True humility conveys a mild and uncompetitive manner, modesty, patience and a willingness to remove oneself from the center of the universe. Humility is most of all honesty. It has been observed that those who have humility seldom realize it and those who think they have it seldom do. Here is story about seeking humility:

A man went in search of a sage and upon finding such a man asked the sage to teach him humility. The sage told the man that he could not because humility cannot be taught. It can be learned but is learned through practice. If you cannot practice it, you cannot learn it.

The fourth characteristic is **tolerance**. Most of us seek out and identify with those with whom we share strengths and enthusiasms. However, it is our shared weaknesses that truly make us alike while our strengths are what make us different. Tolerance arises out of the recognition that we all struggle with flaws, fears and sorrows. True tolerance based on shared weaknesses makes a sense of community possible. Here is story related to tolerance:

An old and religious black man applied for membership in an exclusive, white church. The pastor tried to persuade him that it was not an idea that should be pursued. The old black man said he would pray on it and maybe the Lord would tell him what to do. He returned a few weeks later and the pastor asked if the Lord had responded to his prayers. "Yes," replied the old black man. "The Lord told me that it wasn't any use, that He himself had been trying to get into this same church for years."

The fifth characteristic is **forgiveness**. Forgiveness is possible only when *will* is replaced with *willingness*. It depends not upon effort but openness. It is not explanation nor is it forgetting. Forgiveness is simply letting go of resentment. Resentment is anger that clings to the past and revisits an old wrong, reliving over and over its pain, creating a vision of self as victim. Here is a story about forgiveness:

A former inmate at a Nazi concentration camp was visiting with a friend who had also been an inmate. The visitor asked his friend if he had forgiven the Nazis. The friend said that he had forgiven them. The visitor said that he hadn't and hated them more than ever. "In that case," commented the friend, "they still have you in prison."

The last characteristic is **being-at-home**. Home is that place where we are comfortable with being ourselves. It requires being able to accept ourselves where we are in all of our imperfection. It means being grounded enough to forgive ourselves and others of imperfections and to be open to forgiveness from others. Here is a story about being-at-home:

A man had been looking for many months for a church to attend. One Sunday he visited a church and heard the congregation reading these lines from a prayer book: "Lord, we have all left undone many things that we ought to have done, and we've all done many things that we ought not to have done. The man collapsed into a pew and muttered under his breath, "Thank God, I've found my people at last."

In addition to developing a personal ideal to guide one's thoughts and behavior, there are recognized and established spiritual practices that have a long history in human culture as methods leading to the evolution of consciousness. The following list from the book How to Find God briefly describes four major yogas or paths for spiritual practice.

Bhakti Yoga: The path of **devotion**. This is the path followed by most of the world's major religions and especially Christianity in the West. It is the simplest and easiest path with a focus on ritual worship and prayer. Its characteristics are well known to most people.

Karma Yoga: The path of God-dedicated **action**. This is a path often followed by those with a vigorous action-oriented temperament who feel a call to duty and service in the world of human affairs. The focus is on good works or seeking always to employ the right means toward the right ends.

Jnana Yoga: The path of intellectual **discrimination**. This is a difficult and solitary path only for those of considerable will and clarity of mind. Followers of this path attempt to intellectually discern between the transient and the divine in the events around them. It is a path that has produced many saints from people who would not otherwise have embraced religion in any form. The American mystic Franklin Merrill-Wolf is a possible example of someone who followed this path, as was Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Raja Yoga: The path of **meditation**. This is a path that combines aspects of the previous three paths. It is primarily for those of a contemplative nature. It also includes study of the body as a vehicle for spiritual energy with a focus on the function and nature of the seven psychic centers or centers of consciousness (a.k.a., chakras or lotuses).

According to Raja yoga, the minds of those who are fully attached to the world and not yet set upon a spiritual path are governed entirely by the three lower chakras. These chakras are centered on the organs of elimination, reproduction and digestion. The chakras involved in spiritual evolution are centered on the heart, throat, forehead and top of the head. The psychic Edgar Cayce often spoke about these chakras but reversed the order of the last two, explaining that the entire system conforms roughly to the shape of a cobra posed to strike so that the top of the head corresponds to the arched neck of the cobra and the forehead to the snout. Moving upward through the centers of consciousness is marked by diminishing ego and loosening of attachment to the material world or what the American mystic Franklin Merrill-Wolff called "the high indifference."

In the practice of Raja yoga, one focuses the mind on the form of one's chosen ideal in a chakra first by *concentration*, then by *meditation*, which is simply prolonged and unbroken concentration. Finally, *absorption* or direct intuitive knowledge of the chakra is achieved.

In conclusion, the decision to set upon a spiritual path is a decision to undertake a transformation of oneself. The psychologist George Kelly made the following observation about such tipping points:

"It is not so much what a person is that counts as it is what one ventures to make of oneself. To make the leap, one must do more than disclose oneself; one must risk a certain amount of confusion. Then, as soon as one does catch a glimpse of a different kind of life, one needs to find some way of over-coming the paralyzing moment of threat, for this is the instant when one wonders what one really is -- whether one is what one just was or is what one's about to be." (gender neutered from original)

Addendum: In the end, it matters little if you agree with the panentheistic position that has been presented in this series. The merit to be found in articulating a statement of one's personal ideals and then endeavoring to put them into daily practice can benefit anyone and depends upon no single philosophical or religious position.

David B. Center, PhD