

SELF-MASTERY AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Vicente Hao Chin Jr.

What is called spirituality is that level of consciousness that transcends the mind, emotions and body. It is an experience that has been affirmed for thousands of years in various cultures and traditions. It has been called the mystical consciousness, cosmic consciousness, Buddhi, prajna or ananda. It is equivalent to the state which the psychologist Abraham Maslow called self-actualization and self-transcendence. It is indicative of a high level of maturity and understanding. There is a new branch of psychology that deals with this experience. It is called Transpersonal Psychology.

Spirituality can be attained by certain practices and ways of life. These practices have been outlined by many mystics both east and west, such as in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, the eightfold path of the Buddha, the contemplative life in Christianity, the "tariqah" or Path in Islamic Sufism, the Tao in Taoism, and the Path in Theosophy. While the details may vary, these pathways have common essential elements. I will discuss one of the most important facets in the pursuit of the spiritual life. But first we need to review our understanding of our nature.

Our Dual Nature

Every human being is composed of many levels of consciousness, such as physical sensation, emotions, ordinary thinking, abstract thinking and the spiritual consciousness.

These levels are divided into two groups.

The lower self. The lower three, composed of the body, emotions and lower mind, are what we call the personality. This is the product of upbringing and conditionings. They are the habits and behaviors that we have formed, such as brushing our teeth, driving a car, being afraid of snakes, the tendency to easily become angry, or having a fixed attitude towards a person or an idea. These behaviors are reaction patterns that are almost automatic. We hardly think about it. We just do it as a reaction to circumstances. They are formed by the training and influence of our parents, our schools, by society, media and the environment. These habits and behaviors may be harmful or useful.

The higher self. We have higher levels of consciousness which are different from the personality.

The first is the abstract mind or subtle mind. It perceives things differently from the ordinary thinking mind. It is not influenced by our likes and dislikes. If it learns that alcohol is harmful to the brain, then it recognizes that fact whether the person likes or dislikes to drink alcohol. The lower mind does not behave this way. If a person likes to drink alcohol, the lower mind will tend to look for justification to say that it is all right to drink alcohol. The personality will tend to continue a behavior depending on the habits that it has developed.

The awakening of spiritual consciousness. Within the higher self, there is a subtler level which is commonly referred to as the spiritual consciousness. This level is usually not awakened in the average individual. When awakened it is the origin of true intuition. It perceives a deeper level of unity with other beings, hence spirituality is compassionate and loving. It transcends the thinking faculty and sees reality in a radically different way. There is a quality of detachment towards the things in the world. One's values become different. There is selflessness.

Being spiritual is different from being religious. A person may be very religious in terms of belief or rituals, but he or she may not be spiritual. Spirituality transcends the ordinary thinking mind. In Christianity, the New Testament speaks of *metanoia* as the means of entering the kingdom of heaven. *Meta* means beyond, while *noia* refers to the mind, hence it means going beyond the mind. It is however translated misleadingly as "repentance". People who repent are not necessarily spiritual. In the east, it is equivalent to the awakening of *prajna* or intuitive consciousness.

Self-Mastery

These qualities of the transcendent consciousness often contradict the habits and tendencies of the lower personality. While the personality tends to get angry and wants to hurt others, the spiritual consciousness tends to love and be compassionate. While the personality wants to possess, the spiritual consciousness tends to be share, to give or be detached. While the personality tends to be selfish, the spiritual consciousness tends to be egoless.

Here we encounter a universal observation in the emergence of the spiritual life: there is a constant conflict between spiritual behavior and the

habits and tendencies of the personality. Progress in the spiritual life depends on which one is dominant in one's life: the higher will or the personal desire.

This is where self-mastery becomes important.

As mentioned before, the awakening of the intuitive consciousness opens up certain insights that go against the habits of the lower personality. The lower personality can often pull the individual away from the truths perceived by the spiritual consciousness. The lower self then becomes the strongest obstacle to the spiritual life.

There are a few practices that can strengthen the spiritual will as opposed to the personality's habits and desires:

1. *Reading of mystical literature.* Mystical writings resonate with one's spiritual self and stimulate its growth and development. This is the meaning of "inspiration", the entering of the spirit. Mystical books have little effect on a person whose spiritual consciousness is not awakened yet.

2. *Meditation.* Meditation is the practice of making the lower self silent. This opens up one's awareness to the subtler levels of consciousness. The soft and subtle voice of the higher consciousness is not therefore drowned by the noise of the mind and the emotions.

3. *Being with spiritually-oriented people.* Our intimate companions have a very powerful influence upon us and the way we live. When our close friends keep on talking everyday about business and earning money, then we begin to feel that such activities are important. When they are interested in mathematics or art, then we are similarly influenced in those directions.

Since the ancient times, teachers have formed communities of spiritual people. In the east they are the ashrams, the sangha, the convent or monastery. We don't have to become monks or nuns, but we can associate ourselves with organizations that have spiritual inclinations. Their companionship supports and strengthens our decision to live the spiritual life.

4. *Self-mastery practices.* We need to deliberately change our habits, inclinations or attitudes. This can be done by specific practices that are intended to undertake such transformation. For example, if we have the tendency to get angry easily, then we should learn an approach to effectiveness in life without the need to be angry. If we have fear or anxiety, then we must develop awareness that can erase such fear. If we are engaged in a career or work that involves the violation of our deepest spiritual values, then we have to do something to prevent such violations,

even if it means that we should change our work or career. These are the contents of the Self-Transformation Seminar that we have been conducting in more than 20 countries around the world for the past more than 20 years.

In Christian mysticism, this process of self-mastery is referred to as mortification or purification. We decide not to give way to the unwholesome habits of the personality, even if it will mean pain and suffering. It is what John of the Cross called the first dark night of the soul. In yoga, it is the practice of *yama* and *niyama*, or restraints and observances. It is through this that we strengthen our spiritual will.

Sustaining the Spiritual Life

When the above steps are undertaken, then the higher will becomes stronger and it will gradually subdue the unwholesome desires and habits of the personality.

Every small triumph over the contrary habits of the personality is a small but important step in spiritual development. It just needs to be sustained, hence the importance of being part of a spiritual community or organization that will help us sustain our efforts.

Self-mastery is not just about controlling ourselves. It requires an inner awareness that is detached from the things of the world. This the reason why meditation is important. Meditation sustains us in being in touch with our higher consciousness.

For those among us who feel this inward call towards spirituality, we must realize that there have been thousands of people who have trodden such a path successfully. It is not a delusion. We must not be discouraged by the skepticism of the world. Our success will depend upon our own clarity and determination.