

[How Our Soul Matures](#)

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How Our Soul Matures

People the world over are working for spiritual advancement. But just what is the soul and how does it progress and mature?

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In Hindu thought the concept of life and the soul are synonymous. For example, the Sanskrit word jiva refers to both and contains the meanings of individual soul, living being, life, vitality, energy, spirit and strength. The Tamil word uyir has the same double meaning of life and soul.

The soul, which is so perplexing and seemingly out of reach to many, can be understood simply as life itself. One of the advantages of this simple description is that it makes it easy to experience the soul. How can we do this? Just look into a mirror. Specifically, look deeply into your eyes and see the light and sparkle within them. That life, vitality, willpower and awareness is your soul, your divinity, the real you, that which continues on after the physical body's passing. Looking into the eyes of another, you can become aware of the life within that person and thereby see the soul and acknowledge his or her divine nature.

The Tamil word uyirkuyir takes this concept of divinity one step further. It is translated as "God, who is the Life of life, the Soul of the soul." A philosophical phrase that conveys the same meaning is "God is the essence of the soul, " implying that if you look deeply enough into the soul, you will experience God.

How do we know, when seeing the life within ourselves or others, if we are experiencing the individual, evolving soul, or experiencing God as the essence of the soul, the Life of life? Here is one way to make that distinction. When we are perceiving an individual soul or souls, there is a sense that every soul is separate from the others. However, when we perceive God as the Life of life, that sense of separateness is replaced with a sense of oneness. Thus, if you can look at a group of people and be aware of the divine oneness that pervades them all, you would be seeing God in them. This deeper experience is achieved through internalizing our awareness, going deeply inside ourselves through worship or meditation.

An analogy can be made to japa beads. We can focus on the beads and perceive them as 109 separate beads. We can also focus on the cord on which they are strung and see the oneness that connects all the beads. A popular story about Paramaguru Yogaswami illustrates this point. There were four people gathered to sing devotional songs in his small hut one day. Yogaswami asked, "How many are here?" Someone replied, "Four, swami." Yogaswami countered, "No. Only one is here." He saw the unity; they saw the diversity.

The Hindu idea that God is inside every person as the essence of the soul, which can be experienced today, is quite different from the concept of Western religions that God is up in heaven and cannot be experienced by those living on Earth. They believe they have to die to meet God. Gurudeva often spoke of the immediacy of God's presence: "God is so close to us. He is closer than our breathing, nearer to us than our hands or feet. Yes, He is the very essence of our soul."

Turning now to the goal of life, we know the Hindu perspective is that life's ultimate purpose is to make spiritual progress. This is also described as evolving, maturing or unfolding spiritually. All of these terms refer to enjoying ever more profound realizations of God--personal experiences that deepen our understandings of life and transform our very nature--culminating in moksha, liberation from rebirth on planet Earth.

We can usefully distinguish here the Hindu view of the spiritual destination--experience of God and subsequent liberation--and the journey to that destination, which we are speaking of here. By focusing on the journey and the steps in front of us, we progress more surely and swiftly.

Let's ask the question, "What, exactly, is it that makes this spiritual progress?" Not the personality. Not the intellect. Not the emotions. It is, of course, the soul. In thinking of spiritual progress, it is helpful to understand the concept of the soul as a human-like, self-effulgent form comprised of the life and light we previously talked about. Technically, there are two terms in Sanskrit for this immortal soul body: anandamaya kosha, "bliss body, " and karana sharira, "causal body." Just as our physical body matures from an infant into an adult, so too does this self-effulgent body of light mature in resplendence and intelligence, evolving as its consciousness expands, gradually strengthening its inner nerve system, progressing from ignorance of God to intimate communion with God. In Sanskrit, this advancing on the path is called adhyatma prasara, spiritual evolution. It is a process that takes place over many lifetimes, not just one.

Gurudeva shared, from his own experience, a mystical description of the soul body in Merging with Siva: "One day you will see the being of you, your divine soul body. You will see it inside the physical body. It looks like clean, clear plastic. Around it is a blue light, and the outline of it is whitish yellow. Inside of it is blue-yellowish light, and there are trillions of little nerve currents, or quanta, and light scintillating all through that. This body stands on a lotus flower. Inwardly looking down through your feet, you see you are standing on a big, beautiful lotus flower. This body has a head, it has eyes, and it has infinite intelligence. It is tuned into and feeds from the source of all energy." Similar descriptions of the soul as a body of light are found in our sacred scriptures and in yogis' writings.

Hastening progress: Let's turn now to the question of what can we do to hasten the unfoldment of our soul. In Hindu thought, there are fourteen great nerve centers in the physical body (sthula sharira), in the astral body (sukshma sharira) and in the body of the soul (karana sharira). These centers are called chakras in Sanskrit, which means "wheels." Esoterically, spiritual unfoldment relates to the raising of the kundalini force, the serpent power, and the subsequent awakening of these chakras within our subtle bodies. Everyone has all of the chakras, though they usually are content to live in only a few.

There are six chakras above the muladhara chakra, which is located at the base of the spine. When awareness is flowing through these chakras, consciousness is in the higher nature. There are seven chakras below the muladhara chakra, and when awareness is flowing through them, consciousness is in the lower nature. Most Hindu teachings regarding the chakras focus on the yogi's awakening, balancing or stimulating the muladhara chakra and the six above. These seven centers of consciousness govern, in order, memory, reason, willpower, direct cognition, divine

love, divine sight and illumination/Godliness. However, my guru has a different emphasis. He states that spiritual unfoldment is not a process of awakening the higher chakras, but of closing off the chakras below the muladhara. The seven chakras, or talas, below the spine, down to the feet, are all seats of instinctive consciousness, the origin, respectively, of fear, anger, jealousy, confusion, selfishness, absence of conscience and malice.

Brahmadvara, the doorway to the Narakaloka located just below the muladhara, has to be sealed off so that it becomes impossible for fears, hatreds, angers and jealousies to arise. Once this begins to happen, the muladhara chakra is stabilized and consciousness slowly and naturally expands into the higher chakras. As the kundalini force of awareness travels along the spine, it enters each of these higher chakras, energizing them and awakening, in turn, each function according to the intensity of spiritual effort.

This understanding of the centrality of sealing off the lower chakras highlights how important emotional control is to our spiritual progress. Certainly the emotion that is the most important for people on the spiritual path to control is anger. Just possessing the knowledge that anger prevents us from experiencing the higher chakras increases our motivation to live a life that is totally free from this devastating force. Anger comes in many forms, ranging from frustration and resentment to uncontrollable rage. In its simplest shade, it is an instinctive, emotional protest to happenings at a particular moment. "Things are just not right!" anger shrieks. The source of peace and contentment is the opposite sentiment--a wholesome, intelligent acceptance of life's conditions, based on the understanding that God has given us a perfect universe in which to grow and learn, and each challenge or seeming imperfection we encounter is an opportunity for spiritual advancement. To those who are anger-prone, I advise replacing that fuming reaction with an affirmation that everything is just as it should be in God's perfect universe.

An initial focus on controlling anger and the other lower emotions and instincts is wisely built into the traditional concept of yoga as having eight limbs. The first limb is yama, which means restraint and is exactly what we have described--controlling our base emotions and instincts. Unfortunately, many modern yoga teachers and texts leave out this essential step that allows us to keep awareness above the lower chakras. Having sealed off the lower chakras, we are naturally drawn to be of service to others, to worship regularly and thereby deepen our devotion to God and to look within through meditation to experience our soul nature and eventually God's indwelling presence as our very essence.

The regular practice of these traditional spiritual disciplines not only keeps our awareness in the higher chakras, it also provides nourishment to our soul body. The soul body starts to grow within the emotional body. Gurudeva described this growth process by saying that the soul body grows like a child, fed by all of our good deeds. All of our service and selfless actions toward others feed that body. All of our working with ourselves to conquer instinctive emotions is food for that body, as it draws from the central source of energy. Finally, the spiritual body matures to the point where it becomes aware in the superconscious, intuitive mind, taking on more spiritual force from the Infinite. Ultimately, it takes over the astral emotional-intellectual body. And after moksha is achieved, it continues maturing in the inner worlds.