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Practice Makes Perfect

Five core disciplines for bringing our inner perfection into our intellectual, emotional and instinctive nature

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"Practice makes perfect" is certainly a commonly used phrase. Normally it refers to how we can acquire a skill that we do not have. For example, let's say we type twenty words a minute with two index fingers. We make a decision to improve that skill and attend a typing class for six months, practicing every day. We master the skill of typing with all ten fingers, without looking at the keyboard, at an average speed of fifty words a minute! Our practice made our typing more perfect.

When this concept is applied to efforts in our spiritual life, it takes on a different meaning. This is because our inner essence, our soul nature, is already perfect. Our practice, or self effort, is to bring that inner perfection into our outer intellectual, emotional and instinctive nature. Thus we could modify the adage to be "practice manifests perfection."

Swami Ranganathananda (1908-2005) of the Ramakrisha Math and Mission expressed this idea beautifully in an article we published in 1999 on medical ethics. He stated that the Hindu view of man "is that his essential, real nature is the atman or Self, which is immortal, self-luminous, the source of all power, joy and glory.

Everything that helps in the manifestation of the divinity of the soul is beneficial and moral, and everything that obstructs this inner unfoldment is harmful and immoral."

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of Hinduism Today, gave a succinct description of our divine nature: "Deep inside we are perfect this very moment, and we have only to discover and live up to this perfection to be whole. We have taken birth in a physical body to grow and evolve into our divine potential. We are inwardly already one with God. Our religion contains the knowledge of how to realize this oneness and not create unwanted experiences along the way."

In giving talks on the idea of how we can grow and evolve into our divine potential, I frequently use the analogy of dance. I ask the audience, "What is most needed for a youth to become good at Hindu classical dance?" Invariably, many state the answer that I have in mind: "Practice!" Reading books about dance won't make you a good dancer. Nor will attending classes without practicing what you have learned. Regular practice is needed to make the body limber and master the many movements, positions, gestures and expressions. Likewise, to grow and evolve into our divine potential--to manifest our inner perfection in our outer intellectual and instinctive nature--requires regular practice.

A core practice that I recommend focusing on first is daily worship in the home shrine, preferably before dawn. Every Hindu home should have a place of worship. It may be as simple as a shelf with pictures of God or it can be an entire room dedicated to worship and meditation. Many families have a spiritual guide or guru and display his or her picture in the shrine. If you are living away from home, such as at a university, a single photo may have to do. In this sacred space we light a lamp, ring a bell and pray daily. The most devout hold a formal worship ritual, or atmartha puja. This regular daily worship is called upasana. Residents go to the shrine for blessings before leaving for work or school. At other times one may sit in the shrine to pray, chant the names of God, sing devotional songs, read from scripture or meditate. The home shrine is also an excellent place to recenter oneself through prayer and reflection when emotionally upset.

A second expression of Hindu worship is utsava, holy days, observing the same day each week as a holy day and celebrating the major festival days through the year. On their weekly holy day, the family clean and decorate the home altar, attend the nearby temple and observe a fast. To make such weekly visits practical,

Hindus seek to live within a day's journey of a temple. Those who do not live close enough to a temple to visit weekly go as often as they can and do their best to attend the major festivals.

The temple is a sacred building, revered as the home of God. This is because of its mystical architecture, consecration and the continuous daily worship, or puja, performed thereafter. Puja is performed by qualified priests, invoking the Deity by chanting Sanskrit verses from scripture and making successive offerings which conclude with arati--the waving of an oil lamp in front of the Deity while bells are rung loudly. The Deity image, or murti, is especially sacred. It is through the murti that the presence and power of the Deity is felt by devotees who attend the puja for blessings and grace.

A third expression of Hindu worship is pilgrimage, or tirthayatra. At least once each year, a journey is made for darshan of holy persons, temples and places, ideally away from one's local area. During this sojourn, God, Gods and gurus become the singular focus of life. All worldly matters are set aside. Thus pilgrimage provides a complete break from one's usual day-to-day concerns. Special prayers are kept in mind, and penance or some form of sacrifice is part of the process. Actually, the preparation is as important as the pilgrimage itself. In the days or weeks before a tirthayatra, devotees perform spiritual disciplines such as decreasing the intake of heavier foods while increasing lighter foods, fasting one day a week, reading from scripture each night before sleep, and on weekends doubling the time usually spent in religious practices.

These three forms of worship--daily puja, holy days and pilgrimage--help us to manifest our inner perfection in our outer nature. A fourth aspect of Hinduism that can be embraced as a core practice is dharma, or virtuous living, living an unselfish life of duty and good conduct, which includes atoning for misconduct. One learns to be selfless by thinking of others first, being respectful to parents, elders and swamis, following divine law--especially ahimsa, which is mental, emotional and physical noninjuriousness toward all beings. An important focus for upholding dharma is to uphold the ten ethical restraints, or yamas. The first restraint, ahimsa, is the foremost. The others are: satya, truthfulness; asteya, nonstealing; brahmacharya, sexual purity; kshama, patience; dhriti, steadfastness; daya, compassion; arjava, honesty, straightforwardness; mitahara, moderate appetite and vegetarianism; and shaucha, purity.

Our fifth practice is the observance of traditional rites of passage, called samskaras. At these crucial ceremonies, an individual receives the blessings of God, Gods, guru, family and community as he or she commences a new phase of life. The first major samskara is namakarana, the name-giving rite, which also marks formal entry into a particular sect of Hinduism. It is performed 11 to 41 days after birth. At this time, guardian devas are assigned to see the child through life. Annaprashana, the first feeding of solid food, is held at about six months. Vidyarambha marks the beginning of formal education, when a boy or girl ceremoniously writes the first letter of the alphabet in a tray of uncooked rice. Vivaha is the rite of marriage, an elaborate and joyous ceremony in which the homa fire is central. Antyeshti, the funeral rite, guiding a soul in its transition to inner worlds, includes preparation of the body, cremation, bone-gathering, dispersal of ashes and home purification.

These five practices are referred to as the pancha nitya karmas, "five eternal practices," by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, who notes, "We could say that they are an amalgam of all the counsel of the Vedas and Agamas to guide daily and yearly religious life. These five obligatory religious practices are simple and applicable for all. Study them and put them into practice in your own life."

Upasana, worship
Utsava, holy days
Tirthayatra, pilgrimage
Dharma, virtuous living
Samskaras, sacraments

These five duties, faithfully performed, are powerful tools to help us grow and evolve into our divine potential. Many Hindus go one step further in their striving by receiving initiation, known as diksha, from a qualified priest or guru. Mantra diksha is the primary initiation, the empowerment of a specific mantra as a personal sadhana, and the assignment to chant it as a daily practice for a minimum number of repetitions, such as 108. A second diksha is initiation to perform a specific form of puja, and the commitment to perform it daily in the home shrine.

In Hinduism, it is not enough to just be--or to wait for grace. The most devout know that each life on Earth is an opportunity for advancement and therefore take advantage of the many tools their faith provides. Following these five traditional observances brings forth, day by day, the perfection that lies, waiting, within each of us.