

Framework for Spiritual Practice

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Yoga is not doing something in particular but the spirit with which one lives life. Underlying all change is an unchanging principle. Yoga is the discovery of oneness at all levels. Yogic living is to be harmonized first—and then lived harmoniously with everything and in every condition. For success in any endeavor, effort cannot be haphazard or by fits and starts.

1. One Clear Single Aim

Having a single clear aim gives direction for effort. It removes ambiguity, doubts and hesitation, and choices are greatly simplified. Life is change—everything changes. To merely go with the flow is to be at the mercy of change! The aim of life is itself light on the path. This single aim guides all our actions, in all conditions, and is the rudder of the boat on the sea of life.

Thoughts, feelings, communication and actions are four different forms of expression. If all expression can be testimony to the single aim, *the resulting experience must be of the same character*. As is the cause, so is the effect. If the cause is fragmented, the effect will be of a similar character.

2. Program of Life

Having a clearly defined aim necessitates a program of life to make sure that all effort is directed in its light. Here, we are not talking just about how one lives his life but also how he engages in certain practices that can add momentum in the journey. We all make lofty goals but often drift with the rise and fall of moods and changing conditions. If we are at all serious about having the aim we have set before us always in view, there must be a proactive approach with a clearly designed program of life which will remind and even nudge us to do what we ourselves deem to be in our best interest.

Example: “From this very moment, I will live life in light of the unity of all things. All my thoughts, feelings, communication and actions, will be in light of this truth: God in all, God as all.”

We may ask ourselves: “Aside from living my life in accordance with the aim, what are all the things I must do in order to succeed?” This must be clear and precise, with activities and times noted down in a spiritual diary or journal—similar to those kept by athletes. The spiritual diary should have columns to indicate quantity, or number of times an activity is performed, as well as an area for notes that will be advisory at a glance. Swami Sivananda has a wonderful spiritual diary with 27 all-encompassing items—from the time one wakes up until periods of introspection before going to sleep at night.

3. Way of Self-Accountability

A process of daily self-analysis and a means of self-accountability is the third requisite. Daily self-analysis is taking stock to see how the day's activities were done. Did I do all that I set out to do? —and did I do these well? What lessons did I learn? —and are there any changes needed?

Aside from self-analysis, there must be self-accountability. How do you plan to hold yourself accountable for things you set out to do and just did not do—regardless of the excuse? This is also a form of self-discipline and it is crucial in the development and cultivation of will power. It is the lack of will power that weakens resolve and diffuses effort.

Self-discipline or self-accountability is not punitive and should not be a sort of silly beating of oneself in any way. Affirm: “I set out to do something that I myself deemed to be in my own best interest. I am not concerned with the reason why I did not do it, as there will be ample reasons for not doing something—regardless of their validity.” No excuse is valid if you are serious about progress, as latent potential energy is only roused to the conscious level when a *sense of urgency* is felt within. This sense of urgency is cultivated by self-accountability or self-discipline.

Can I be firm enough to give up the evening meal, some sleep or anything else to make time to do what is needed before the end of the day? The use of the spiritual diary or journal is best in the early to mid-evening hours when there is still time to hold oneself accountable.

Discipline is the stuff that makes greatness. It is the *refining fire* that turns innate talent into ability. It is not punitive, but positive, as it insists that you do what you yourself deem to be in your own best interests—and hence is your best friend. Self-accountability is your steady guide and light on the path. It empowers you to take steps to ensure that what must happen, does happen.

4. Safe Harbor

Whenever a new direction is chosen, the old collides with the new. The old is not limited to people, things or external conditions but to old habits or modes of *thought*. Friction on the path of change and evolution is proportionate to the hold of the old.

The excuses and lack of will stem from our own selves—not from anything or anyone else. We are our own best friend and our own worst enemy. Our past itself rises to obstruct the future in the present—there is no other blockage. No one can stop you from doing what you want to do if you really want to. This is particularly vital when cutting a new path. What is key is that this safe-harbor should be, in its very character, contributive or supportive of the aim—else, it is an escape and the older urges will rise again with renewed strength!

Firstly, there must be clarity in dealing with the external, old environment. Things not conducive to the aim must be abandoned and those conducive to the aim encouraged. This must happen

not by pressure or advice from others but *from a need felt in our own selves* in order to do what needs to be done.

Secondly, there must be a safe-harbor; a background of thought or activity in which to take refuge in moments of inner turmoil when our own old ways rise in tempest—as raging storms. If you have developed the practice of continual japa where the mantra repeats itself with each inhalation and exhalation, it will be very useful in bringing up a background of thought which can immediately re-center the mind. If the inner storm is fierce, you can use activities like japa, kirtan, a period of study or asanas and pranayama or even a good run in the open air for exercise—all can help by channeling the energy positively while supporting the aim. If you choose an activity, remember that it is not an escape, continue to watch the inner surges while shifting gears in activity. Observing from another vantage point will extricate you from the clutches of any rising mood, keeping you centered, and it will give you clarity during the rise and fall of inner surges.

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