

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND TECHNIQUES

'There are three phases of all exercises.

In the first, exercises are forbidden – the aspirant is not ready; exercises would harm them. This is the time when they generally desire exercises most.

In the second, when time, place and brethren are suitable for the exercises to have effect – exercises are indicated.

In the third, when exercises have had their effect – they are no longer needed. And no Master ever performs exercises for their own progress on the way, for all Masters have passed the third stage.'

Bahaudin Naqshband

Purpose, Function and Intention of Exercises

At a preliminary level, exposure to spiritual exercises and techniques gives basic information and experience in order to familiarize students with the variety and types of spiritual methods. The performance of spiritual exercises offer and potentially bring transformative experiences which help answer fundamental questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life:

The primary function of the diverse techniques of meditation is to begin to answer the basic questions of life, such questions as go unanswered in ordinary social and educational interaction. Esoteric traditions contend that personal questions about the nature of existence cannot be answered in the same rational, verbal manner as can questions about the nature of physical or even social environment. Meditation, then, is "a-logical," intended to defeat the ordinary sequential and analytic approach to problem-solving in situations where this approach is not appropriate. (1)

Spiritual exercises such as meditation are an integral component of virtually every one of the world's spiritual traditions. They are important for many reasons:

Q: All teachers advise us to meditate. What is the purpose of meditation?

A: We know the outer world of sensation and action, but of our inner world of thoughts and feelings we know very little. The primary purpose of meditation is to become conscious of, and familiar with, our inner life. The ultimate purpose is to reach the source of life and consciousness. Incidentally, practice of meditation affects deeply our character. We are slaves to what we do not know; of what we know we are masters. Whatever weakness in

ourselves we discover and understand its causes and its workings, we overcome it by the very knowing; the unconscious dissolves when brought into the conscious. The dissolution of the unconscious releases energy; the mind feels adequate and becomes quiet.

Q: What is the use of a quiet mind?

A: When the mind is quiet, we come to know ourselves as the pure witness. We withdraw from the experience and its experiencer and stand apart in pure awareness, which is between and beyond the two. The personality, based on self-identification, on imagining oneself to be something: "I am this, I am that," continues, but only as part of the objective world. Its identification with the witness snaps. (2)

The proper employment of certain techniques enables the development of a heightened perception, higher states of mind and contact with subtler states of consciousness. Spiritual exercises develop the capacities, abilities and powers of an individual or group, producing greater harmony and growth by opening the mind to the recognition of its highest potential. Two sayings express this evolutionary function: '*There is no end to learning*' and '*Humanity is infinitely perfectible*.'

One important purpose of spiritual exercises is removing the 'veils' or obstacles which interfere with balanced and harmonious development: '*Gold needs bran to polish it*.' Certain exercises are precise instruments which enhance the communication of a special contact and exchange of energy from teacher to pupil, for the purpose of 'unveiling' or encouraging *baraka* (spiritual power and grace):

Communication by mastery is associated with the transmission of 'baraka,' the 'enabling energy' by which the Work of the pupil is greatly enhanced. This transmission of a higher energy that can be assimilated to the energy of the pupil is a vital part of the whole process. (3)

Spiritual exercises are also employed to awaken states of mystical experience and higher illumination so as to "bring the seeker into affinity with the mystical current, in order to be transformed by it."

At the same time, the task of 'removing the veils' is embarked upon. This involves using special techniques to remove those elements which block human perception of the divine. It is often said that these elements operate something like insulators. They are there not necessarily because of anything vicious about an ordinary human being, such as original sin, but because, without the means to handle divine knowledge the person would not be able to reconcile it with everyday life. (4)

Theory and Practice

Spiritual exercises are based on a precise technical knowledge, tested and proven techniques, and a specific terminology. They follow a pattern derived from certain discoveries about the nature of human psychological, physiological and spiritual functioning. Many techniques are designed to cause a shift from the linear, analytic mode of consciousness to the holistic, intuitive mode identified with the hemisphere of the brain. "In the esoteric and religious traditions of the East the use of dance, movement and other bodily activities are intended to acquaint people with the basics of a mode of consciousness that might later be developed into a 'deeper understanding,' a more holistic comprehension."

The practices of meditation, of whirling, chanting, the ritual movement of Tai Chi Ch'uan, the martial arts, the design of the Gothic cathedrals and the temples of Islam, complex geometric symbols, Arabic geometrical design, the postures of Hatha Yoga and other exercises share a common physiological basis. Their "site of action" is the simultaneous information-processing of the right hemisphere of the human brain, an "organ of perception" present, but undeveloped, in everyone. (5)

The exact pattern and content of prescribed exercises depend on the nature, characteristics and stage of development of the individual or group, as well as the circumstances of the prevailing culture: "The techniques employ music, dance, movement, specific body postures, creative special visualization and techniques designed to defeat ordinary linear, sequential thinking such as concentrative meditation, Zen koans, and the literature of the Sufi tradition."

Certain exercises are regarded as primary to the goal of spiritual realization and others as secondary and supportive:

When Buddhist schools began to specialize in certain practices and procedures, it was customary to classify methods into principal and auxiliary. Generally speaking, spiritual exercises given main emphasis in a particular specialty are called principal, while exercises supporting the main focus are called auxiliary. Sometimes all methods other than the given specialization are referred to as auxiliary practices. For instance, Zen master Chinul considers 'the work of mindfulness' to be the main, or "direct" method, while doing good deeds in general is considered auxiliary. He likens the work of mindfulness to cleaning a dusty mirror, with goodness being like a polishing agent assisting in the operation. (6)

Various theoretical formulations underlie the choice and application of exercises. For instance, to 'unveil' or encourage *baraka*, the 'four pathways' are traditionally used: music and sound, rhythms, sight, visualization and concentration. Certain exercises are practices in the development of attention, either by focusing the mind on one stimulus (concentration) or

extending awareness to a larger field (mindfulness). Many exercises are based on the themes of harmony, balance and graduated development. "The spiritual and the non-spiritual are closely related and the strength of this relationship varies on different levels – a constant ebb and flow throughout all aspects of the Teaching."

Spiritual exercises should only be assigned and performed under the guidance of a wise, experienced and knowledgeable teacher. This is especially true for breathing exercises, 'kundalini' techniques and repetition of sacred syllables or 'mantras.' Genuine teachers are careful and parsimonious with their materials and exercises and certain exercises may only be performed "under the strict supervision of a Guide, who uses this exercise for a specific and limited purpose."

Exercises are specifically given to an individual or group based on a perception by the teacher of the needs and capacities of the students or group: this particular individual or group should do this specific exercise at a particular time. The success of exercises depends on monitoring and feedback. The teacher assesses the student's or group's progress and "prescribes for alterations in awareness which follow these practices and which are subject to careful adjustment and cannot be automatically performed." A teacher may also help a student with an exercise by transmitting a certain spiritual energy (*baraka*) from their own "powerhouse of consciously accumulated force."

Preparation and Ability to Benefit

The specific methods and exercises chosen by a teacher depend on the student's individuality, temperament and degree of preparation. For exercises to be effective they must be chosen and applied in accordance with the needs of the individual or group. Exercises are properly prescribed when they are within a person's capacity and ability, but also challenge and 'stretch' them: "The activities which are given are just slightly beyond the person's experience but not out of range of the person's capacity." Without proper preparation spiritual exercises will not have their intended effect on the aspirant and may even be potentially damaging: "What would happen if a bolt of high power electricity is shot into a receiver that is not strong enough to receive it?"

Exercises are indicated when a person is ready, suitably prepared and correctly attuned and not "just imagining that he or she is ready to profit from them." The capacity to benefit properly from exercises is illustrated by the following story:

Before a Sufi can participate in musical activities, including listening to music, it must be established by his director as to whether he will benefit correctly from the experience. A story is related here to show a Sufi teacher (Sheikh Gurjani) explained that a certain disciple was not yet fitted for the audition of music in the Sufi, objective, sense. In response to his request, the Sheikh said:

“Fast for a week. Have delicious foods cooked for you. If you still prefer musical movement, then take part in it.” Participation in music and dance in any other circumstance is actually harmful to the aspirant. Modern psychology has not yet realized that there is a special function of sound for elevating consciousness. (7)

Specific exercises are technical instruments designed to be used under special circumstances and whose application is finely tuned. For exercises to function properly there must be a precise knowledge regarding their developmental value. An example is the use of music:

In order for music to exercise a function in the formative or developmental area, it must be composed and performed, and experienced, on the basis of knowledge of its value for such a process. This brings us to the question of the understanding of music as a very much more important phenomenon than most people realise. Music can only be understood and participated in, by higher perception, by a mind which is capable of getting out of the music what it really contains. This can only happen if the person knows about this fact; knows how to listen and understand; listens at times and under conditions suitable for the desirable development. (8)

Many spiritual traditions employ devotional and ‘heart-based’ practices to prepare a foundation for more advanced methods and techniques:

There is a teaching, widely practiced by Buddhist yogis, known as “The Four Unlimited Thoughts,” which is used to cultivate devotional thinking and good will toward all beings. These Four Unlimited Thoughts are: friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and evenmindedness. The aim of meditating upon these virtues is twofold – to cultivate compassion toward all beings, and to reduce those barriers between oneself and others that have contributed so much to the misfortunes of the world. This meditation is regarded by Buddhists as the foundation of and preparation for all other meditations. Without the spiritual preparedness that is brought about by the cultivation of good will and devotion, any type of meditation can hardly bear wholesome fruit, and instead may often lead one astray. (9)

Specific exercises are selected for a given individual or community on the basis of suitable time, place and situation. Their developmental value and potential is the main consideration:

Sufis don't allow a person to do spiritual exercises unless they are convinced that he can undergo such exercises without harm and appreciate them without distraction. Spiritual exercises are allowed only at a certain time and a certain place and with certain people. When the ecstatic exercises are taken out of context, they become a circus at best and unhinge minds at worst.

Q: So the ecstatic experience has its place but only at a certain time at a certain stage of development?

A: Yes, and with certain training. The ecstatic experience is certainly not required. It is merely a way of helping man to realize his potential. (10)

Some spiritual exercises, such as certain forms of meditation, are valuable in enabling the student to attain a state of consciousness which favors entry into higher planes of spiritual realization:

Certain techniques of meditation may be useful if we thoroughly understand that they have no more than an educational value. The ordinary man is so busy, so restless that it is quite a business for him to learn how to approach a state of doing nothing. Such techniques are no more than techniques of approach. With their help we do not achieve the state of doing nothing, but they allow us to draw near to it. Realization is impossible if we do not go beyond them. Generally speaking, these techniques come under two headings which might be named meditation with an object and meditation without an object. Meditation with an object is the easier of the two and is best suited for beginners. An object of contemplation, concrete or abstract, is agreed upon: Krishna, Jesus, Divine Goodness, the Magnificence of God. The meditator concentrates on this image or concept. He visualizes the image or defines the concept in its general outline and in its details. It may happen that at the end, his meditation merges him with the object, thus he knows a state of unity. Nevertheless, being pre-eminently still and peaceful, the meditator may by chance accede to realization in which he falls from a qualified state of unity into Oneness. (11)

Proper Application and Use of Techniques

The corpus or totality of individual and group exercises which are applied in a spiritual school form a pattern, normally invisible, in which all elements have their place. Spiritual exercises are precise instruments which are designed to be used to their maximum potential in a proper and suitable context: "If there is an instrument, be it music or a text, which has been very carefully produced, designed and made available, surely it is irresponsible not to benefit from or take advantage of that activity, instrument or exercise -- it has been crafted for people to use."

The technical aspects of an exercise have a relationship with the spiritual. For instance, the ambience, physical posture, breathing rhythm and person's intention create and attract energy which connects with the deeper levels of their being. Spirituality communicates during periods of heightened perception: "Like attracts like, and since spirituality is a fundamental part of the Teaching, development of techniques of awareness and openness must inevitably attract a

development in the area of spirituality.” The common senses, hearing, sight, touch, smell and taste may be used simultaneously in an exercise based on the principles of balance and right proportion. “Each reading, each music, each colour, each exercise, complements something else, optimizing the situation.”

The function of an exercise, activity or teaching tool can change according to the requirements of the time, place, situation and individuality of the practitioner:

It is a matter of using the right tools for the right situation: the harmonious selection of the technique to accord with the circumstance. You cannot use a technique for every given circumstance any more than you can use a hammer, screwdriver or saw for every conceivable activity. (12)

The time element is an important consideration in the performance of exercises. For example, if one has developed the capacity and skill, one can do an exercise for only a few minutes and still benefit. In many traditional spiritual teachings the time of day in which exercises are practised is considered an important element in enhancing their effectiveness:

Q: Are there moments in the day which are more favorable than others for these exercises of attention or may they be practised at any moment?

A: The most favorable moments are the early morning, two hours before sunrise and early evening at the time when the sun sets. The early morning is pre-eminently favorable because this is the time when nature is in a state of deepest rest. Sunset is not as beneficial, but it favors the return to oneself, because both man and nature are in a phase of relaxation. When such relaxation is not impaired by a state of fatigue, it is conducive to meditation and inner contemplation. We should not forget that any moment in the day when we feel empty, unoccupied, available, be it only for a few seconds (it is not a question of time, it is a question of quality) is an occasion. In religious terms I might say that they are a call to contemplation. (13)

The first and most difficult step in learning and using exercises is overcoming conditioning, doubts and confusion. In the early phases of learning it is important to be clear about what techniques and instruments should be used in order to avoid confusion. At a later stage the choice of method or technique may be based on ‘feel’ or ‘inner measurement.’

There is a general sequence of phases or stages in the performance of most exercises:

- Preparation, which involves right intention and the creation of a calm physical and mental state in the practitioner
- The operational period when the exercise is actively practised and the effects of the exercise registered in the consciousness of the student
- The coming out period following the exercise and resumption of normal activities

As techniques become more familiar through practice, they can be upgraded or used in a more powerful and efficient way. This is sometimes called the 'stretch factor' as skill and capacity develop and self-imposed limitations are overcome. Following an exercise it is useful to examine the experience objectively by asking how one could have improved or enhanced the function of the activity. During this 'scan' of the effectiveness of the exercise, it is important to remember the quality and feeling of the exercise, judging it on a basis that is qualitative and not quantitative. Ultimately, there are no conventional measures to assess an individual's deeper spiritual development. The outward performance of activities and exercises is not a measure of inner value. There is a traditional saying: '*The key of Hell is the prayer which you spin out to impress people.*'

Right Focus and Attitude

Participation in a spiritual exercise is a voluntary duty which people take upon themselves as a means of self-development. In this regard, Gurdjieff stressed to his pupils "the importance of doing our exercises, of doing them daily no matter where we would be or in what condition."

Self-imposed limitations, as a result of conditioning ("I can't do that"), need to be eradicated and removed. One way to undermine this type of conditioning is by personal "experiential proof" or demonstrating competency and success in performing an exercise or activity.

Certain exercises, especially of a psychological nature, require for their effectiveness strict obedience to the instructions of the teacher, without any hesitation or doubt. But this imposed discipline must be conscious, not mechanical or conditioned. For almost every practitioner some degree of effort and discipline is necessary in order to overcome inertia or unwillingness to do an exercise. Charles Stanley Nott, a student of Gurdjieff, describes this inner resistance:

As for the inner exercises, they never became easy. Each day I had to make an effort to start them and an effort to continue them. A fly, or a movement of something, a sound, would distract me and divert my attention; ("Where my attention is, there am I") or I would find myself falling asleep, or tensing myself instead of relaxing. More often my attention would be caught up by something or other in the stream of associations – physical, emotional or mental – which begins at birth and never stops until death. Caught up in this stream, my attention would be dispersed in day-dreaming, or in disputing with an imaginary person, or talking to myself.

When my exercises were interrupted by exterior and interior happenings I would have to re-collect myself and begin again; and I acquired more real force from the exercises than from working in the fields. The force came from constantly compelling myself to overcome the inertia of the organism and its unwillingness to do the exercises. There was almost always the struggle between 'I' who wished to do them and 'it' which did not wish to do them;

as if the organism were in a way fulfilling its functions of the denying part against the affirming of 'I wish.' Constant struggle between the affirming and denying leads to understanding – of oneself, those around us, and the universe. (14)

Before beginning an exercise or spiritual activity it is important to express and clarify one's intention and objective. A clear intention or "calm purpose" enhances an exercise:

If one keeps one's intention in mind, that is the compass-point, the star, if you like, by which one steers. Then during the course of an exercise or activity, if one's attention wanders off, it can be brought back into focus, or back onto the direction of one's intention. If one hasn't clearly defined one's intention before beginning, then it is very possible that one's attention can be distracted during an activity and focused on something seemingly interesting, valuable or fascinating, and at that point you get what we call the 'butterfly mind': you just hop around. (15)

The inner attitude and state of mind of the student is a critical factor in performing exercises correctly. This is especially emphasized in the schools of Zen Buddhism:

Although sitting is the foundation of zazen, it is not just any kind of sitting. According to Zen master Dogen, one must sit with a sense of dignity and grandeur, like a mountain or giant pine, and with a feeling of gratitude toward the Buddha and the patriarchs who made manifest the Dharma. And we must be grateful for our human body, through which we have the opportunity to experience the reality of the Dharma in all its profundity. This sense of dignity and gratitude, moreover, is not confined to sitting but must inform every activity, for insofar as each act issues from the Bodhi-mind it has the inherent dignity and purity of Buddhahood. (16)

In a broader sense, spiritual exercises should be undertaken and performed for the benefit of all humanity rather than for self-centered, egoistic purposes:

Zazen is sitting meditation. *Za* means "to sit," and *zen* is tranquility. In Chinese, the character *za* is a picture of two people sitting on the earth. This means we have to sit zazen with others – not just with other people, but with all beings. You can't sit zazen alone – that is, you can't sit within an egoistic, selfish territory that is all your own. It's impossible. To sit zazen, you must open yourself to the universe. To sit zazen with all beings is for all beings to sit zazen with you. (17)

Levels and Stages of Exercises

Certain exercises are preparatory, designed to “provide stepping-stones for further development of understanding.” Some spiritual techniques are of value as a “working hypothesis” for a limited time and for attaining specific objectives, so as not to become an end in itself or a barrier when no longer needed. Exercises differ in complexity and ease of mastery. Some are relatively simple to learn while others require sustained effort and the mobilization of a high degree of attention and concentration to be properly performed. Regardless of the level of the exercise, patience and perseverance are essential requirements for mastery and proficiency. In the words of an insightful adage: *‘If you hurry, you don’t succeed.’*

The understanding and capacity to use techniques properly follows a progression. Some exercises can be understood fully and used immediately. Some techniques become more and more familiar every time they are used. Certain exercises can be modified and refined as experience and capacity increases. However, others keep themselves hidden until the person is capable of understanding how they function. Giving people powers and energies that they cannot use correctly is irresponsible: equivalent to giving a young child a loaded gun.

Spiritual exercises can be a corrective as much as a system of inner development, providing support for the aspirant while helping to overcome the wrong kind of development engendered by the operation of the false personality or secondary self:

Sufi assignments, whether they be manual labour or working on exercises contain the element least suspected by the student: the one whereby he comes to a realization that perception comes *beyond* activity. When Sufis report results of enterprises, exercises, or even doing gardening chores, it is to be noted that these developments do not come during the activity, but invariably after it. This is underlined by hints from Sufi sources that the ordinary ‘self’ as experienced by most people, stands in the way of self-realization. Only a fatiguing of this secondary self makes it possible for the subtle impulses to be received by the primary self; and then only when this is done as part of a program planned and carried out by a real teaching master, not by imitation. Sufi activities both contain the effective function of blocking the working of the would-be analytical mind and the grosser self, as a preparation for higher insight. (18)

According to Tantric teachings, spiritual energy can be raised through seven centres or ‘chakras’ from the lowest ‘plexus’ at the base of the spine, to the level of the heart centre and finally to the crown of the head where “perfect harmony is attained.” Each of the seven levels is associated with a corresponding inner exercise suitable to each particular stage of development.

In traditional Yoga teachings a series of exercises are prescribed by the teacher reflecting successive stages in the journey to self-realization: *asanas* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (contemplation) and *samadhi* (self-realization):

Regulation of the breath is prescribed for making the mind quiescent. Quiescence lasts only so long as the breath is controlled. So it is transient. The goal is clearly not *pranayama*. It extends on to *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*. Those stages deal with the control of mind. Such control becomes easier for the man who has earlier practised *pranayama*. *Pranayama* leads him to the higher stages involving control of mind. Control of mind is the goal of yoga. A more advanced man will naturally go direct to control of mind without wasting his time in practising control of breath. (19)

Buddhist teachings regard *dhyana* as process and *samadhi* as the goal: *samadhi* is the spiritual state realized by the exercise of *dhyana*. A number of levels or stages of *dhyana* are identified in Zen Buddhism:

The first dhyana is an exercise in which the mind is made to concentrate on one single subject until the coarse affective elements are vanished from consciousness except the serene feelings of joy and peace. But the intellect is still active, judgment and reflection operate upon the object of contemplation. When these intellectual operations too are quieted and the mind is simply concentrated on one point, it is said that we have attained the second dhyana, but the feeling of joy and peace are still there. In the third stage of dhyana, perfect serenity obtains as the concentration grows deeper, but the subtlest mental activities are not vanished and at the same time a joyous feeling remains. When the fourth and last stage is reached, even this feeling of self-enjoyment disappears, and what prevails in consciousness now is perfect serenity of contemplation. All the intellectual and emotional factors liable to disturb spiritual tranquility are successively controlled, and mind in absolute composure remains absorbed in contemplation. (20)

The practice of meditation awakens progressively more refined states of consciousness as the practitioner enters into deeper levels of reality:

Meditation is a deliberate attempt to pierce into the higher states of consciousness and finally go beyond it. The art of meditation is the art of shifting the focus of attention to ever subtler levels without losing one's grip on the levels left behind. One begins with the lowest levels: social circumstances, customs and habits; physical surroundings, the posture and the breathing of the body; the senses, their sensations and

perceptions; the mind, its thoughts and feelings; until the entire mechanism of personality is grasped and firmly held. The final stage of meditation is reached when the sense of identity goes beyond the 'I am so and so,' beyond 'so I am,' beyond 'I am the witness only,' beyond 'there is,' beyond all ideas into the impersonally personal pure being. (21)

Observing the Effects of Exercises

In an exercise or activity, a certain amount of the conscious mind can monitor, scan and observe the effects of the exercise in an alert and relaxed manner. A person may feel an echo or feedback from an exercise: these feelings should be consciously registered and remembered, without necessarily labelling them with a name, measurement or evaluation. In performing an exercise there will naturally be certain physical and psychological sensations which vary from individual to individual: "Because of background, education or because of a dozen different things, people feel or react in different ways, which causes them to register or explain their feelings to themselves in different ways, some in a more dramatic way, and some in a dismissive way."

When an exercise is properly performed there is both an immediate and long-term physical benefit. For instance, physical tension can be identified and relaxed during an exercise, partly by establishing a harmonious breathing rhythm. Some exercises produce insight into the workings of the body and greater control over coordination and movement. One of the by-products of relaxation exercises is an improvement in the depth and quality of sleep.

During and following an exercise, positive feelings such as happiness, tranquility, harmony and relaxation may be produced. In some spiritual traditions this feeling of deep inner satisfaction following the proper performance of an exercise or activity is called the 'earned pearl.' However, the impact of some exercises may not be immediate or obvious as their effect reaches deeper, more subtle levels of consciousness. Spiritual exercises also provide a non-conceptual approach to experiencing Ultimate Reality. "At the end of your meditation all is known directly, no proofs whatsoever are required."

Definitions and descriptions have their place as useful incentives for further search, but you must go beyond them into what is undefinable and indescribable, except in negative terms. After all, even universality and eternity are mere concepts, the opposite of being place and time-bound. Reality is not a concept, nor the manifestation of a concept. Concern yourself with your mind, remove its distortions and impurities. Once you had the taste of your own self, you will find it everywhere and at all times. Once you know it, you will never lose it. But you must give yourself the opportunity through intensive, even arduous meditation. (22)

During the course of an exercise there may be a passage or transfer of subtle energy of a higher order. This 'spiritual communication' can occur in both individuals and groups and is a natural, though little understood, phenomenon. Concentration on a specific spot within the body can lead to definite psychic experiences associated with different body centres:

Focusing the attention on any part within the body will produce extraordinary and sometimes astonishing results. A specific psychical experience will always be brought forth by concentrating on a specific body center. For instance, concentrating on the point between the eyebrows will produce the experience of "light," and concentrating on the navel-center that of blissfulness. When the concentration is on the heart center, the positive and negative forces of the body will soon become united and will thus, in time, produce the "illuminating-void" or "blissful-void" experience. Buddhist Tantrics assert that each of the five main centers (*chakras*) of the body has its special functions and preferential applications. (23)

Certain practitioners of advanced meditation techniques may experience strange psychic phenomena such as bright colours, unusual sounds, smells and visions. "Many of them are of a delusory nature. The yogi is repeatedly warned by his Guru that he should never pay attention to them; otherwise he will be misled and go astray." The practice of concentrative meditation can also lead to the acquisition of a very subtle state of consciousness, sometimes called the 'blank state.' Rather than being a gift, it may be a trap and hindrance to the enlightened state beyond duality and ordinary perception: "All states, feelings and sensations are objects which keep you bound, no matter how subtle and pleasant they are. They are delectation for the 'me,' sweets for the ego, that's all."

Although one of the by-products of mastery of an exercise is the acquisition, in some people, of so-called supernatural powers such as clairvoyance, clairaudience, telepathy and telekinesis, students are specifically warned against the dangers of such occult powers and the striving after paranormal gifts. Authentic spiritual teachings regard psychic powers or *siddhis* as minor indications of inner development, not to be mistaken for enlightenment. The secondary importance of unusual psychic manifestations is clearly encapsulated in the words of Pope Pius Benedict XIV:

The existence of heroic sanctity is not guaranteed by stigmata, levitations and other charismata, however remarkable, but only by a consistently virtuous conduct in the trials of daily life and by an adequate use of the opportunities which may present themselves of promoting the service and glory of God. (24)

Misuse of Spiritual Exercises

Many originally valid spiritual techniques have deteriorated into ritualism or cultural and religious artifacts whereby they lose their higher developmental effect, serving instead as mere forms of repetition, disguised entertainment, imagination or emotionality. This process is exemplified in the importation of unknown exercises and techniques into the West from the East:

A series of ideas or practices which may depend for their efficacy upon a certain kind of usage, are modified sometimes out of recognition, sometimes out of function. Then there is another kind of importation: where physical, psychological and other techniques are literally 'lifted' from the culture for which they were prescribed and imported, then practised, in communities which cannot benefit functionally from them. At most these patterns train, 'condition,' people to feel a sense that something significant is connected with them. It may be, or it may not be. All will depend upon the specific case. (25)

In authentic spiritual systems, the same practices and exercises are not carried out continuously. Techniques are useful at a specific stage of development and "persistence in any technique after the appropriate period would be a waste of time or might even be harmful." Those who 'teach' single techniques, without a comprehensive overall knowledge, are only conditioning people. One of the misuses of spiritual exercises is when people "imagine that just because they have learned exercises, this gives them the right and capacity to apply them on others."

Participation in certain exercises when the aspirant is not ready or prepared may be useless or actually harmful. "Carrying out exercises without being in the corresponding condition to benefit from them is worse than useless."

People imagine that exercises are the key to higher understanding. But if they are applied upon people who are not correctly attuned for their reception, they will either not operate at all, or else produce a complete illusion of well-being, which is misinterpreted as 'enlightenment.' Many well-meaning people try to operate exercises in this way. The result is not higher development at all, but recreation. (26)

If exercises are used by people who are attracted to techniques without due regard for correct attunement, they may only operate on a lower psychological level:

Certain physical and mental exercises are of extremely significant importance for the furthering of higher human functions. If these are practised by people who use things for emotional, social or calisthenic purposes, they will not operate on a higher level with such people. They become

merely a means of getting rid of surplus energy, or of assuaging a sense of frustration. The practitioners however, regularly and almost invariably mistake their subjective experiences of them for 'something higher.' (27)

Many imitation meditation systems are ineffective or produce only auto-hypnotic or trance states. Some forms of meditation evoke physiological changes in the practitioner which are mistaken for 'higher experiences.' Spiritual exercises may be used on a lower level for release of emotional tension, self-gratification and excitement. Imagination, obsession and suggestibility are mistaken for spirituality: "The operation of such things as self-will, greed and the tendency to imagine and desire emotional stimuli will drive spiritual experiences out, and they will even 'lose their investment'." There is also a tendency for people to overestimate or misinterpret subjective experiences during the course of an exercise:

My own feelings had been unusual. At the height of the dance I sensed a great peace, as if my normal life was sleep, and as if I were usually in pain, and that this sensation, this dance, gave me relief and freedom. As soon as we returned to the reception-room, I felt that I had to ask the Sheikh about this. He smiled when I told him. "It was imagination. You could have felt that from any dramatic event which you have waited a long time to see. People will not believe this, however, and prefer to feel that the dance gives them relief and makes them feel better. In the early stages this even happens to some of our brethren. This is not spirituality – it is suggestibility. (28)

Indulging in exercises without first overcoming certain personal propensities may produce detrimental effects, including fixations and illusions of certainty. "Greed is the dominant, though well concealed, characteristic of those who imagine that exercises are the entry to knowledge." Exercises may produce a feeling of exhilaration and harmony that can be misleading, when nothing of permanent value has yet been achieved:

Gurdjieff would often emphasize that there were many dangers that would inevitably be encountered in the process of self-development. One of the most frequent obstacles was that, at times, the performance of a particular exercise would produce a state of exhilaration or well-being. He said that while such a state of exhilaration was proper to the correct and serious performance of such exercises, one danger lay in our misconception of "results" or "progress" – it was necessary to remember that we should not expect results at all. If we did an exercise expecting a certain result, it was valueless. But, if we achieved a recognizable result, such as a feeling of genuine well-being, even though this was a proper, temporary, result, it did not in any sense mean that one had "achieved" anything permanent. It could mean that some progress was being made but it was then necessary to work that much harder in order to make such "results" a permanent part of oneself. (29)

The repetition of sacred syllables (*mantras*) has been widely used as a spiritual exercise in cultures throughout the world. The practitioner repeats a carefully chosen word or phrase over and over. However, to be effective it must be employed very carefully under the guidance of an experienced teacher:

Although it gives a harmonious center, a mantra also closes the mind. Indeed, if it is used without adequate supervision by a teacher who has used the mantra himself or herself over a long period of time, it can have a deleterious effect on the mind, closing it off from its source, and effectively blocking all spiritual progress. (30)

Techniques of meditation which narrow and focus the attention rather than expanding awareness are limited in their effectiveness as a vehicle for self-realization:

Many forms of practice, commonly called concentrative meditation, seek to narrow awareness in some way. Examples include reciting a mantra, focusing on a visualization, even following the breath if that involves shutting out the other senses. In narrowing the attention, such practices quickly create certain pleasant states. We may feel that we have escaped from our troubles because we feel calmer. As we settle into this narrow focus, we may eventually go into a trance, like a drugged and peaceful state in which everything escapes us. Though at times useful, any practice that narrows our awareness is limited. If we don't take into account everything in our world, both mental and physical, we miss something. A narrow practice does not transfer well to the rest of our life; when we take it into the world, we don't know how to act and may still get quite upset. A concentrative practice, if we're very persistent, may momentarily force us through our resistance, to a glimpse of the absolute. Such a forced opening isn't truly genuine; it misses something. Though we get a glimpse of the other side of the phenomenal world, into nothingness or pure emptiness, there is still *me* realizing that. The experience remains dualistic and limited in its usefulness. (31)

Although techniques of concentrative meditation are useful in the preliminary stages of spiritual development, they can easily become an end in themselves and block deeper, more subtle levels of perception and understanding. "Any technique is potentially a conditioning, and those techniques of meditation which claim to un-condition, remain within a vicious circle."

Q: What about techniques that use objects for meditation?

A: All technique aims to still the mind. But in fact it dulls the mind to fix it on an object. The mind loses its natural alertness and subtleness. It is no longer an open mind. Meditation is not meditating on something. Focusing on an object keeps you a prisoner of the known. Meditation belongs to the un-

knowable. Stilling the mind by techniques can bring a certain relaxed state but the moment you leave it, the problem of daily life continues. The practice of regular meditation may make you familiar with a peaceful state which you remember in daily life. Apparently you live with less agitation, but this relaxation is still a state of which you are aware. It is state of duality. Though it has therapeutic value it has nothing to do with our real quietness. For it still belongs to a function. A still mind, a relaxed state, is an object of awareness, a fraction, and a fraction can never bring you to the whole. It may give you a glimpse of tranquility but there is a great danger that if you proceed this way you will become fixed in the perception. For all progressive teachings, the transition from the subtle state of deep relaxation to the permanent non-state remains an enigma. (32)

Cautions and Dangers

Certain exercises and techniques must be taken very seriously and practised only under the strict supervision of a knowledgeable and experienced teacher. The consequences of violating this stricture may include serious physical harm or even, in rare instances, death. It is very important that the technical aspects of exercises be correctly followed. The improper performance of exercises may result in negative physical, mental or emotional manifestations. For example, "The rosary is held to accumulate a certain kind of power of virtue, which is communicated to others. If, however, the rosary is held when the individual is in the wrong state of mind, unpleasant consequences can ensue, for the inner and outer life of the individual."

Certain exercises which involve retention of the breath can have harmful consequences unless carefully monitored under the guidance of an experienced teacher:

Practising meditation through "suppressing or holding the breath" is perhaps the most powerful and direct approach. It is capable of producing prompt yogic results, and thus quickly bringing the yogi to the state of *Samadhi*. However, it may be very dangerous and harmful if not properly applied. It is, therefore, not advisable to attempt this technique without proper guidance from a teacher, together with a sound foundation of easier breathing practices of the "softer" type (such as counting the breaths, etc.) (33)

It is relatively easy to produce an apparently unworldly state by certain breathing techniques. Many systems of breathing are based on partial understanding and can cause unforeseen consequences to the body and mind. Trying to perform breathing exercises from books without proper instruction is dangerous and can lead to disorganization of the body's functioning. Gurdjieff was insistent on this point:

Many organs work mechanically, without conscious participation. Each of them has its own rhythm, and the rhythms of different organs stand in a definite relationship to one another. If, for example, we change our breathing, we change the rhythm of our lungs; but since everything is connected, other rhythms also gradually begin to change. If we go on with this breathing for a long time it may change the rhythm of all the organs. It is a thousand times better not to interfere with our machine rather than correct it without knowledge. For the human organism is a very complicated apparatus containing many organs with different rhythms and different requirements, and many organs are connected with one another. Either everything must be changed or nothing, otherwise instead of good one may do harm. Artificial breathing is the cause of many illnesses. To work on oneself one must know every screw, every nail of one's machine – then you will know what to do. But if you know a little and try, you may lose a great deal. The risk is great for the machine is very complicated. It has very small screws which can be easily damaged, and if you push harder you may break them. One must be very careful. (34)

Many spiritual teachers warn against practising techniques which artificially raise vital energy in the subtle body from 'chakra' to 'chakra', a process of activating the energy of 'kundalini.'

There are several techniques to bring energy upwards but to me these are completely artificial. When there is real understanding there is a natural integration of the energy in the ultimate. If the release of energy does not happen spontaneously but is made the object of one's intention it not only keeps you in the becoming process, the subject-object dichotomy, it can also cause an imbalance of the body-mind. The level of energy must correspond to the whole behaviour in daily life. It must be harmoniously integrated into your completeness, otherwise you may behave in certain ways which don't belong to the level of energy. It happens often in mad people. Freeing of energy comes out of understanding of your whole intelligence. (35)

There is a real danger that concentrative meditation techniques may ensnare the practitioner in a subtle subject-object duality from which it is virtually impossible to escape:

To reach the source, the essence of existence, form and ideas must be entirely abandoned. Many seekers caught up in the subject-object web find themselves confronted by a final object, the blank state. The object has been reduced to its generic form but this undifferentiated potentiality then becomes an object which cannot come home. It always threatens to become again differentiated. There is a certain effort to maintain this blank state. For those caught in this subtle duality, the blank state becomes a mystery which the mind can never solve. Having reinforced dual conditioning by bringing it to the most subtle levels a seeker can never escape this self-made prison. It is a tragic enigma which only blessed and unexpected circumstances can solve. (36)

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