

Actualize Your Spiritual Potential

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The average person's habitual thoughts, emotional states, lifestyle preferences, and behaviors—and thus their personal circumstances—are primarily determined by subliminal (below the threshold of conscious awareness) inclinations and tendencies. So long as this condition prevails, life is experienced as a semi-conscious dream; random accomplishments are of little value; spiritual growth, if it occurs at all, is minimal.

To awaken from this dreamlike condition and begin to actualize one's innate spiritual potential, the question that needs to be asked is, "What is life for?" If the answer to this important question does not immediately arise to the surface of awareness, the fact that it is sincerely asked will attract a response from Universal Mind referred to by Ralph Waldo Emerson as "the one Mind which is common to all of us." Information will then be provided in ordinary ways, which may be intuitively recognized as being valid.

Over half a century ago, in an endeavor to apprehend the meaning of life, I prayed for guidance and avidly read the writings of people who were considered to be enlightened—knowledgeable because of their flawless insights and their personal experiences of life's processes. I discovered that saints and sages of various philosophical traditions are in agreement in regard to why we are in this world. We are here to:

- To live in harmony with the laws (processes) of nature by using our knowledge and abilities constructively. By doing this, we can unfold our innate potential, experience personal fulfillment, and make a useful contribution to society and the ongoing trends of evolution.
- To learn to experience the easy fulfillment of wholesome desires which enhance our lives and benefit others. By doing this, we can accomplish our worthy purposes and experience enjoyment without attachments to our actions or to their results.
- To learn to have our needs spontaneously satisfied by the responsiveness of the universe. As our awareness becomes clarified and expanded, we become increasingly conscious of the one Power that enlivens the universe and discover that, as we compliantly cooperate with it, it unfailingly provides resources, supportive events, and appropriate relationships for our highest good.
- To respond to our innate soul urge to have our awareness restored to wholeness by nurturing our spiritual growth until we are fully Self- and God-realized. The Self of us, which is to be acknowledged and directly experienced, is our immortal, true nature. We are individualized units of the one field of Consciousness commonly referred to as God.

Endeavors to accomplish all four of these primary purposes of life can be applied simultaneously. While choosing to live in accord with the laws of nature, we can also perform effective actions and be receptive to the fulfillment of desires, have faith that our needs will be met, and unfold and express our soul qualities. The key to doing this is to be established in awareness of Being while performing useful actions.

At the innermost level of our Being, knowledge of Consciousness and its processes is innate to us; here, we are always serenely conscious of our wholeness. It is only at the surface of our awareness that confusion and conflict may occur. This is why the teachers of most enlightenment traditions recommend that contemplative prayer and meditation be learned and regularly practiced.

Although the side benefits of meditation—some of which are stress reduction, strengthening of the body's immune system, enlivening of the nervous system, and orderly thinking—can be welcomed, the primary purpose of practice is to accomplish the stage of alert, tranquil awareness which allows superconsciousness to be experienced. The superior influences of superconsciousness weaken and eradicate problem-causing subconscious influences and improve the meditator's intellectual powers, allowing authentic spiritual growth to spontaneously occur in the course of time.

The key to effective living and to spiritual growth that results in emotional maturity and clarified, expanded states of consciousness is mastery of attention. A spiritually unawake person's awareness is overly identified with mental and emotional states, physical sensations, and objective circumstances. A spiritually awake person, because established in Self- (soul) awareness, is able to view thoughts, moods, physical sensations, and objective circumstances with insightful dispassion and to consciously live with meaningful purpose.

Purposes which have value (which enhance and spiritually enrich our lives and the lives of others and which nurture the planet) are meaningful; purposes which have little or no value are meaningless. Focusing attention and actions on meaningful purposes, then, is a spiritual practice.

During a conversation with truth seekers, my guru Paramahansa Yogananda said, "There is a fundamental purpose for our lives. To know it, we must understand where life comes from and where it is going. We must consider life's highest potential for development and look beyond our immediate goals to what we ultimately want to accomplish."

What do we want to accomplish during our sojourn on Planet Earth? Have we chosen to be victims of circumstances? Or are we intent upon learning how to live effectively so that we can experience the unfoldment and actualization of our innate potential as quickly as possible? We can easily determine the degree of our spiritual awareness by self-honestly examining how we view ourselves in relationship to life and our habitual behaviors. The seven stages of soul unfoldment have been described as follows:

1. Unconsciousness. Awareness is almost completely identified with conditioned mental states, erroneous beliefs and opinions (delusions), and illusions (misperceptions of what is observed). Apathy, disinterest, and boredom are common characteristics. If one is religious, one may seek refuge in a system of beliefs to comfort the mind.
2. Dysfunctional self-consciousness. The self-conscious state is egocentric: mind-, body-, and personality-centered. Although awareness is somewhat clarified and curiosity about life and the possibilities it offers is compelling, delusions and illusions prevail. Psychological conflicts may be troublesome. Because intellectual powers are not yet highly developed,

endeavors to comprehend higher realities (even though sincere) are not always fruitful. There may be a tendency to presume illusions and fantasies to be the truth.

3. Functional self-consciousness. Although still self-conscious, one has fewer psychological problems, is able to more easily exercise freedom of choice, is more goal oriented, and is able to efficiently accomplish purposes which are considered to be of value. Functional self-consciousness provides a firm foundation upon which to investigate higher realities and to nurture spiritual growth.

4. Superconsciousness. Purified intellectual powers and intuition enable one to clearly discern the difference between ordinary states of fragmented awareness and the essence of one's Being, the true Self. When superconsciousness is stable, Self-realization is permanent.

5. Cosmic consciousness. As superconscious influences further purify the mind and refine the nervous system, episodes of cosmic awareness progressively unfold, providing clear perceptions of the wholeness of life.

6. God-consciousness. As cosmic consciousness matures, the reality of God, the one field of Consciousness, is directly apprehended and experienced.

7. Full enlightenment. Now completely spiritually awake, with all delusions (erroneous ideas) and illusions (misperceptions) absent, the totality of life is flawlessly comprehended. Soul awareness is liberated.

Is it possible to actually experience satisfying spiritual growth while attending to duties and responsibilities and relating to rapidly changing social conditions? Yes, it is possible. All that is required of us is aspiration to excellence, a clear sense of purpose, Self- (soul) confidence, willingness to learn how to live effectively reinforced by determination to do so, and compliant cooperation with the universal, impersonal processes of life that can and will produce the desired results.

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