

Strength for the Journey A Guide to Spiritual Practice

A CREDO Resource

A Guide to Spiritual Practice

An Introduction

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This guide to spiritual practice offers a diverse and extensive view of spiritual discipline. But before diving in, perhaps it might be helpful to remember why we practice disciplines in the first place. After all, we can undertake religious activities for all sorts of reasons: to satisfy an inner critic who says “You’re not spiritual enough”; to pursue emotional highs; or just to feel less stress. What is the context for spiritual discipline within the Christian life of faith?

Let’s begin with the word “spirituality.” Locate this category on the shelves in any major bookstore and you’ll find hundreds of titles: Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Sufi, Hindu, self-help, recovery from addiction, and the spirituality of business, baking and baseball – it’s all out there. But what do we mean by this word?

For some, “spirituality” is the doing of spiritual *practice* such as those suggested in this guide: prayer and meditation, worship, study, yoga, ministry, movement. But there’s obviously a problem with this. When we don’t practice, we believe that we’re not being very spiritual. Even worse, when we *do* practice, we believe that we are! We all know pious, disciplined people who we wouldn’t call “spiritual” at all. Jesus certainly came across some of those folk.

For others, “spirituality” means certain kinds of inner experiences, often characterized as calm, spacious, alert, loving, and non-anxious, with a sense of connection with everything and everyone. As accurately as these words might describe some of our experience, they are really the *fruit* of a spiritual life, not the thing itself. When calmness or a sense of being connected becomes our definition of spirituality, we run the risk of making these experiences into idols. We seek these experiences rather than seeking God. When we don’t feel these things, we assume that we are not “spiritual” or that God is absent.

So if spirituality is not *practice*, and it is not the hoped-for *fruit*, what is it?

It is *relationship*. Spirituality is how we are in relationship to God, to other people and the world around us, and to ourselves. Spirituality is the process of staying engaged in these relationships, what intention we bring to them, and how willing we are to evolve as the relationship affects us.

Our relationship with God

Our tradition claims that while God is ultimately a mystery and beyond all of our definitions, God is also personal. While God cannot be reduced to a person (like us, only perfect and much bigger!), God is in relationship with us personally. The Creator of heaven and earth, the Spirit of all wisdom and harmony, the connective force of renewing life in the universe – this One hears our prayers, counts the hairs on our head, and responds to the particularities of our situation.

We say that God loves us, and that we are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In this relationship, we pray, we struggle with our demons, we do our best to trust, and we give thanks. As in any intimate affinity, we are comforted, encouraged, challenged, exposed, forgiven, gifted, empowered, and sent.

And also as in every other relationship, we cannot control the outcome of our relationship with God. We may like to think that we know where it will take us – into greater peace of mind, more patience, kindness and wisdom. In fact, these qualities are promised in scripture and in the lives of the saints to all those who love God. But along the way, our relationship with God may take us through some landscape that's not so pretty! We may need to get a lot angrier before we can find peace. We may need to move through a dark night of despair before we get to the light of God.

We are in relationship to the living God, who has a character, will, and methods that are not our own. Spirituality is our ongoing, evolving relationship with this living God. This is why it is so important to not confuse spiritual *fruits* or *disciplines* with spirituality itself, making an expected emotional state or the fulfillment of religious activity into something more than they are.

For Christians, Jesus is central to our relationship with God. He may be to us a friend, an enigmatic presence, or the very face of God. Our relationship to Jesus may change over time, just as our other relationships in life change.

And it is a relationship that Jesus always asks, nothing more, really. Sometimes I talk to seekers who are worried that they aren't "real" Christians because they don't hold to particular beliefs strongly enough. They think that unless they can resolve the place of Christ in the Trinity or the paradox of his full humanity and divinity (as *if!*), they can't genuinely claim to be a Christian.

My response is to ask them to read quickly through the synoptic gospels, asking themselves what Jesus expected of his disciples. Usually what these seekers discover is that Jesus said "Follow me. Come and see." He didn't demand moral perfection or theological certainty. He wanted people to be in relationship with

him. In relationship, they would hear him, watch him in action, be questioned by him, and come to know his love for them. We might be in relationship with Jesus mystically, intellectually, sacramentally, or as a companion. What matters is that as Christians, we somehow stay in an evolving relationship to Jesus Christ. He will affect us over time.

Our relationships with other people

How do we treat the waiter at the restaurant or the person checking out our groceries? How do we respond when the man at coffee hour makes a comment that opens to us, by just a crack, the door of his suffering? How do we tell people how much they mean to us? What kind of feelings do we cultivate towards people who are unkind or unfair to us? How do we exercise our gifts in the local church or social communities in which we live? And what kind of relationship do we have with people who don't share the privileges we enjoy?

When we bring our faith, our prayer, our questions, our scriptures and our sacraments into these relationships, they are affected. The answers to the questions above will change as we see them in light of the gospel. Our behavior in these relationships will change as we pray, as we offer them in the Eucharist, as we puzzle over them with God. The application of our faith traditions to our relationships with others is what makes them "spiritual." It is also how we participate in the incarnation. For when we take our faith seriously enough to apply it directly to all of our relationships, God takes on human flesh.

Our relationship with the rest of creation

Spirituality is how we honor the earth and treat it with loving devotion, as God's own precious handiwork. It is how we stop and wonder at the color of the sky, the force of wind, the miracle of flying birds. It is how we live our daily life as consumers of the earth's resources. Creation is God's body, and our spirituality is, in part, our intentional relationship with this magnificent, fragile, interconnected body.

Our relationship with ourselves

With just a little bit of reflection, this can seem very strange: how can "I" be in relationship with "myself?" Aren't I one, not two? And yet we frequently say things like "I feel good about myself...I've not really been myself lately...I feel the need to change myself...I'm learning to accept myself...I really saw myself yesterday." An important question arises - *who is the subject* of the feeling good, changing, accepting, or seeing, and *who is the object*?

Without stepping too far into a metaphysical swamp in this brief introduction, suffice it to say that we humans are gifted with the unique capacity for self-reflection, for self-awareness. Different traditions explain this in different ways. Through the contemplative stream of our Christian tradition, we can understand it as the Spirit within us relating to our conditioned self.

We are born with genetic determinates and predispositions. As we develop, we are influenced by our circumstances and the people that surround us. We adopt responsive strategies that help us survive and progress. Along the way, some of these conditioned habits of mind, emotion, and behavior become helpful, and some become harmful. Some are our virtues, some are our sins. This is the conditioned self.

Meanwhile, we are also created in the image of God. We are like a seed that contains great potential to fully become the person God intends us to become. The Spirit is given to help us evolve. As spiritual beings, we activate and affirm this Spirit through baptism and other sacraments, faith, devotion, and spiritual practice. Living through us, the Spirit becomes more and more part of our consciousness.

This makes it possible, at times, to see our conditioned self with God's eyes. As Meister Eckhart said in a sermon, "The eye with which we see ourselves is the same eye with which God sees us." So it is "the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit" (Romans 8:16). And we can boldly say that as Christians – along with our sinful and limited humanity – "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16).

In the course of our faith journey, the Spirit, the Christ within us, the image of God given to us in potential form – this true self rises up and relates to the conditioned self. Gradually, in the dance between God's grace and our effort, we evolve. We "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Jesus and Paul go so far as to say that in the process, the [false] self dies, and "it is no longer I [the conditioned self] who lives, but Christ within me" (Galatians 2:20). And yet we remain uniquely ourselves, a particularly "Brian-shaped" (in my case) version of Christ, or image of God.

And so we say that we relate to ourselves. Our spirituality is how we live out this relationship with the self. Are we intentional about it? Lazy? Perfectionist? Do we believe it is all up to us? Are we waiting for God to zap us? Are we willing to go into the empty place of grace that remains when we walk away from conditioned habits of mind, emotion, and behavior? Can we live the tension between being determined to grow and forgiving ourselves for being human?

Our spirituality, then, is how we are in relationship with God, other people, creation, and ourselves.

The place of spiritual discipline

With grace, with faithfulness, these relationships bear *fruit*. Our tradition tells us that over time, extending into eternity, all these relationships will be redeemed, that they will fulfill God's intentions: love, forgiveness and reconciliation; compassion, justice and peace; environmental harmony; and for you and me, that we will be filled with the light of God. All of this redemption is *the fruit* of our spirituality; it is the result of faithful relationships.

So what is our part in producing this fruit? Ah, this finally brings us to the subject and purpose of this guide: *practice*. Practices, or "spiritual disciplines," are the things we do intentionally that strengthen and enliven our relationship with God, others, the world, and the self. Spiritual practices are the things we do that, together with God's grace, produce the fruit of redemption.

Renée Miller has done a wonderful job of putting the spotlight on a variety of practices, some very traditional and some not so traditional. One gets the feeling that she could have kept going forever, highlighting hundreds more of them, because, after all, how we live in relationship to all of life is spiritual practice. We are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. In beginning to list spiritual practices, we end up like the author of John's gospel, when he spoke of the "other things" Jesus did, "If every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

Perhaps spiritual discipline, therefore, is just living in an awake, holistic, and faithful way. In a documentary film about the monastic life at Spencer Abbey, a Trappist monk said (and I paraphrase), "Monastic life is just putting a frame around everyday life. We do the same things everyone else does – we eat, we work, we sleep, we live in community. But we do it all with intention towards God, and that makes it holy."

Some of us are easily geared towards being disciplined. We exercise six days a week, we get up every morning and meditate and read for an hour, we always take our laundry to the cleaners every Friday afternoon. I used to be like this, and my wife called me "the human metronome."

During this period of my life, regular discipline was important; it was helpful. Like someone who practices scales and exercises on one musical instrument for many years in order to find the depths and beauty of music, the one who is spiritually disciplined might be more able to plumb the depths of their faith. Having searched this territory deeply, it will always then be near, always accessible.

But life changes us, and I'm not so disciplined anymore. My spiritual discipline is now more like what Brother Lawrence described as the "little interior glance." Others have always been this way, people who don't really need the regular discipline I needed. This little interior glance can be made while eating a meal, taking a walk, talking to a friend, sitting in a budget meeting, reading a book, surfing the internet, or gazing at the clouds. This is what Renée illustrates as she leads us through her diverse examples.

A few last words of advice

Do those practices that enliven you, not the ones you think you should do. As Dom John Chapman said, "Pray as you can, not as you can't." It's about nurturing relationship.

How or when redemption happens is a mystery. For "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how" (Mark 4:26-27).

Keep in mind what T.S. Eliot wrote: "For us it is just the trying. The rest is not our business" (East Coker, the Four Quartets).