



The Three Pillars of Practice

Unless we understand the crucial role of practice on the path, we will never be able to grasp the nature of spiritual unfoldment. Practice is the sowing and reaping, the planting and harvesting, the nurturing and gathering of the fruits of our evolution. It is an expression of taking responsibility for our destiny and becoming the co-creators in the fulfillment of the purpose of our existence.

Awakening and practice are the two sides of the path. Practice should not be seen merely as a means to 'achieve' awakening, but as its very extension. Without having roots in our true nature, there is no practice that can free us from ignorance. The world is full of seekers who work hard for their spiritual transformation, going through the most arduous training in the art of meditation, and yet nothing changes – they remain locked in the state of forgetfulness. All their efforts do not bear the fruits that they hope for because they do not know the path.

There are two extreme views on the subject of practice. One sees it as a tool for awakening; it conceives self-realization as a direct outcome of spiritual discipline. The other denies any need for practice, or even sees it as an obstruction to the realization of our true self. Here, awakening is meant to manifest through direct insight into our pure nature. The purpose of spiritual teaching is not to play with concepts or philosophies, but to reflect the reality of the path. For that reason each teacher has to be sufficiently objective, in the sense of becoming freed from the numerous conditionings that relate to his own personal path and the tradition that he followed. We should not try to grasp the concept of practice in isolation from the context of the complete vision of human evolution and the goal of wholeness. Only if one is happy to live in a partial and fragmented state of awakening is it perhaps a valid option to refuse to do any practice.

The first thing that we need to establish is that practice cannot produce awakening. Even when Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree in his desperate determination to break through, his awakening was not a result of him doing any practices – it just happened. No one has ever reached awakening through performing spiritual exercises. Even though this is relatively well known, there are still thousands and thousands of meditators sitting and trying to reach something through their efforts. Why is that? Because they do not have the knowledge of the science of spiritual evolution. They go through a lot of effort to pursue their practices, but they do not make any real effort to

understand, and above all, they do not make an effort to take their destiny into their own hands. Awakening is not a result of practice because practice takes place within the confines of our lower self. That lower self has no way to transport us into our higher self. The lower self cannot produce the higher self, nor can it create the event of awakening through doing.

Debates as to whether awakening is a result of practice or of a sudden event based on understanding or grace are as old as the science of enlightenment. In the sixth century in China there was a schism between the northern and southern schools of Zen because of this disagreement. The northern school reached its peak during the life of the sixth patriarch, Hui Neng (regarded as the true father of Zen), who was in favor of the concept of sudden enlightenment. In the Platform Sutra of Hui Neng, there are various accounts of him speaking with disdain about the practice of sitting meditation. However, there is reason to believe that in real life his views were not that extreme – otherwise the practice of sitting would not have continued into the schools of his successors – but that his interpreters took some of what he said too literally or expressed it out of context. He was a man of extraordinary intelligence, and he was not against sitting in meditation but against seeing meditation as a way to reach enlightenment. There is no Zen without meditation practice. However, in the Zen view, true meditation begins when we realize our pure nature.

Zen developed in many ways after the teaching of Hui Neng. While the true spirit of Zen may have survived here and there, the two main aberrations that developed over time were in direct connection to the concept of the gradualness or suddenness of enlightenment. One gave rise to the Soto school; the other to the Rinzai School. Because the knowledge of how to transmit the awakened state directly (in Buddhist terms ‘from mind to mind’) was gradually lost, a general confusion developed as to how enlightenment comes into existence. The solution that the Soto school proposed was a kind of compromise between the sudden and gradual approach. Here, sitting in meditation was seen as the very foundation, not done in order to reach awakening but rather to *be* awakening, to express our buddha nature through shikantaza (just sitting).

The Rinzai School also accepted the need for sitting in meditation; the main difference being that they used the koan system in order to create the breakthrough into awakening. Both the koan system and the concept of shikantaza represent a decline in Zen. Koans are the paradoxical sayings of past Zen masters which were designed to open the mind of the seeker. What has been forgotten is that these sayings or riddles were originally used in a specific context in order to ignite awakening and never as the actual *method* of awakening. Using koans as a system of practice made Zen overly mental and intellectual, defiling its original purity. Solving a koan cannot be seen as a confirmation of awakening; what it shows is a certain mastery over the Zen way of expressing its philosophy. The true koan is how to become our higher self, and no clever words or gestures can be seen as a proof of this realization.



While the concept of shikantaza is valid, the fact that there is no such thing as shikantaza unless we first of all awaken to our pure nature has been forgotten. Sitting shikantaza and abiding upon the idea that the means and the goal are already one amounts to wishful thinking. Unless one is self-realized, there is no shikantaza because it is the observer that is sitting in meditation, not our soul. Only awakening brings shikantaza into life. In true Zen, awakening is the beginning of practice, and sitting meditation is the most suitable base for practice. There is no conflict between the gradual and sudden concept of enlightenment because awakening is sudden but the cultivation of the awakened state is gradual.

Since we have discussed the Buddhist approach to practice, we should also look at the Advaita approach. Buddhism and Advaita are without a doubt the main influences in our world on the subject of self-realization. The beauty of Advaita is that it is the only path that has been entirely removed from a religious context; it has never been institutionalized. In this way, it resembles Gurdjieff's take on spirituality, the so-called 'fourth way': beyond monk, fakir or yogi. The only difference would be the fact that Gurdjieff wanted to bring spirituality into the real world, whereas Advaita does not concern itself with living a worldly life.

While Zen can be seen as a path of self-knowledge and practice, Advaita is the path of self-knowledge and devotion. Due to its tendency to neglect the need for practice, the only way for Advaita followers to reach awakening is through receiving grace from a guru. Advaita gives one the illusion of independence because it proposes that awakening is a function of self-knowledge. However, sooner or later the seeker realizes that he cannot make any progress without his teacher. It is because of this dependence on the guru that the energy of devotion developed. In Advaita, the main object of devotion is the master, as he or she serves as the link to the realization of the self. True self-knowledge cannot be gained through the mind enquiring into itself. Rather, the role of self-knowledge in Advaita is to create the post-awakening understanding of one's realization. One has to awaken to who one is first; only then self-enquiry starts to make sense. Self-enquiry is limited to the observer, to the mind, and that mind cannot, under any circumstances, create the event of awakening.

Neglecting the dimension of practice is the main flaw of Advaita. Without having the foundation of practice, a seeker is not ready to receive grace; he is not ready to contain the awakened condition. Furthermore, even if he does experience awakening, without the process of cultivation he cannot stabilize and integrate that state. Hence, most adepts of Advaita who glimpse their true nature remain in a fluctuating and fragmented state of being. However, we should not forget that Advaita is not a fully unified system, and many of its masters did advocate the need for practice. For instance, Ramana Maharishi insisted on sitting meditation in addition to the practice of self-enquiry. Indeed, he himself spent 20 years sitting in caves in deep absorption, deepening and



integrating his own realization. He did not follow any specific spiritual discipline himself, but after assuming the role of a teacher, he chose Advaita as the most suitable channel of expression for his realization – probably due to a lack of better options.

The problem with many followers of Advaita is that they only hear what they want to hear. They hear that there is no need to practice to realize the self because we are that self. They do not hear that unless they complete their inner work, they will not ever become that self. The danger of Advaita as a system of teaching is that due to its one-dimensional logic and non-dual concepts, what most reach is not awakening but a hypnotic state of mind.

Since Ramana Maharishi became the archetype of self-realization and sainthood, it is worth mentioning that though he was a master of higher rank, he greatly simplified the vision of his own path. His evolution was happening in a spontaneous, unconscious way, meaning beneath the threshold of his conscious mind. Many of his followers assumed, based on his own accounts, that he reached complete awakening when he was a young boy. However, for whatever reason, he chose not to mention that during those many years of sitting in samadhi, he was actually going through many different states of awakening before becoming truly complete. He was changing, evolving, integrating. For instance, at an older age he stopped going into trance samadhis, which was an obvious indication of a more deeply integrated consciousness. The point here is that one should know that enlightenment does not yield complete understanding. The evolution of understanding and the realization of our inner light do not always run in parallel. Many masters do not fully remember exactly how they arrived at self-realization. They are not able to recall all the steps of their inner unfoldment, either because they have simply forgotten or because their intelligence was not able to register them. Because they did not have the vision of a multidimensional evolution, they tended to simplify the memory of their own path. As a result, their teachings became simplified and created an unrealistic model of the path for their followers.

Coming back to our main subject: practice and awakening are the two sides of the spiritual path. If one is missing, the other becomes handicapped. Awakening without practice is like being able to see but having no legs with which to walk; practice without awakening is like being blind and walking without any sense of direction. Because we have covered the subject of awakening extensively elsewhere, here we will focus on the dimension of practice.

There are three pillars of practice: preparation, post-awakening cultivation and integration. Preparation is the process of aligning our consciousness and energy with the next step in our evolution. While it is true that the path begins with awakening, most seekers do need to have established a base of practice before they are ready to meet their true self. Aside from this, preparation also represents a transitory period between one awakening and another. Preparation always points to two areas: energetic and



existential. Preparation is often necessary to redirect our energy flow or reach energetic stability, or to create an energetic opening and purification. Energy is the building block of our inner self, and each state of awakening has its energetic dimension. Existential preparation is the process of growing on the level of our intelligence, consciousness and intention to move deeper into our pure nature and to create the correct relationship with that aspect of our self that we are about to become through our further awakening.

Cultivation is the process of nurturing the awakened state into stabilization, and deepening it through surrender and the intention to embody it. The initial awakening is never complete. It is more like an opening to a new state which then requires conscious cultivation in order to render it permanent. The role of cultivation is very important, not only to make any state constant, but to begin to develop a proper relationship with it. Through cultivation me is evolving into I am; it is itself transforming. It is already learning how to maintain the continuity of recognition, how to surrender, how to embody I am, and how to function on the human level from that deeper place. Through correct cultivation, the integration process is already engaged and post-cultivation integration becomes accelerated.

Integration is the process of harmonizing all the aspects of our existence with the awakened state as well as polishing that state into perfection. The goal of integration is to make the awakened state fully natural, both in itself and in relation to the other centers of the soul. To have an integrated state means that it has become an integral part of who we are. This integration takes place on the level of the relationship between me and I am and on the level of me having learned to relate properly to the world from the place of being unified with I am.

While I am has to be energetically integrated to become fully mature and complete, the true subject of integration is in fact our me. Me is integrating with the awakened state on many levels. This integration has two directions: inward and outward. The inward integration of me refers to arriving at a natural condition of surrender into I am: establishing continuity of recognition of I am, unification with I am, embodying I am as pure me, and through this, shifting into the higher identity of the soul. The outward integration relates to me mastering the art of natural functioning from the place of being merged with the inner state. Me has to learn how to exist in a new way in the world so that the inner realization will not isolate it from creation. It must learn how to be efficient and clear in its interactions without diminishing in any way the depth of its unity with the soul. When me is not integrated, it tends to activate its past tendencies and recreate the center of ego outside of the soul. Learning how to live from our inner self in harmony with the world, being natural and total, is the highest challenge for each person on the path. It is this aspect of integration that allows us to arrive at the state of oneness with the manifested existence.



As we have said, the path begins upon us gaining entry into one of the awakened states. Ideally, this first entry should be into pure consciousness. Without the foundation of an awakened consciousness, true evolution cannot happen for the very simple reason that one simply remains unconscious. There is no hope for those who are unconscious other than to become conscious. As the path begins, practice begins. If we have no connection to I am, who is there to practice? The observer? All the mental gymnastics that the observer performs in the name of practice are a joke; this is not practice. Practice begins within the sphere of the relationship between me and I am. Without I am, me has nothing to relate to other than itself and its mind.

It must be absolutely clear that practice is all about the relationship of me with I am. Me is practicing in order to deepen this relationship through remembrance, abidance, surrender, merging and embodying I am. After the period of cultivation and integration has reached its culmination, one has arrived at the stage of being beyond practice on that particular level. This means that the state has become fully natural and assimilated into our identity. This stage of being beyond practice does not mean that the relationship between me and I am comes to a standstill, which would in fact imply a *lack* of proper integration. Integration involves reaching the condition of the natural, uninterrupted surrender of me into I am. From there, the relationship between me and I am is no longer defined as a practice but as a natural way of being – the natural state.

Each awakening ultimately leads to a state beyond practice. However, the condition beyond practice is not the end of practice as such; it is merely the end of one level of practice. Either through one's own intelligence or through instructions received from a spiritual guide, one has to recognize the next level of practice. For instance, after consciousness is fully awakened, one then needs to begin the process of opening the energy of being. If the state is not yet awakened, one has to engage in the process of preparation, in which we become increasingly tuned to our next step of evolution, learning how to redirect our energy flow and re-orient our me so that it can come as close as possible to the state that we are trying to activate. After the state is awakened, the period of cultivation follows.

There is often no clear line between awakening and cultivation because cultivation actually completes awakening. For instance, reaching a certain depth of being already contains the element of awakening to this dimension. However, unless the absolute state is reached, the realization is still incomplete. Therefore, one is not merely cultivating being in order to arrive at completion on that level, one is cultivating it to reach its final limits so that this practice can be transcended. Another way of looking at the work with being is that it is not yet cultivation but rather a preparation for awakening to the absolute state. After the absolute is realized, that state is then being cultivated to establish its final depth and stabilize the continuity of surrender.



The more we are complete, the less there is a need for practice. The role of practice is to bridge separation between me and I am, and between the soul and existence. The more we are unified with our pure nature, the less there is duality between our lower self and our higher self, and between our higher self and existence. When we have become complete, we have actualized our evolutionary potential and can finally just rest, just be, beyond practice. We have become one self. This does not mean that our evolution stops; it means that it is no longer based on practice. We are one with life and one with the unfoldment of time, the becoming of the light of creation. There is no separation between who we are and our evolution. We no longer evolve into the inner realm; we evolve within the inner realm, in the domain of the beloved. When we are one with reality, our very existence becomes a constant revelation of truth, like a flower of love and understanding that never ceases to open.

Blessings,

Anadi

**For a glossary of the terminology used in this teaching and for further resources, you may visit our website: www.anaditeaching.com*

