

POLISHING THE MIRROR

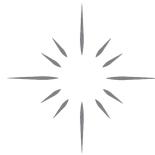
How to Live from Your Spiritual Heart

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with Rameshwar Das

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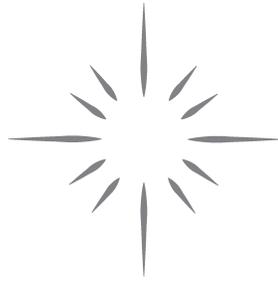
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Chapter 1

Polishing the Mirror

MIND FIELDS

The essence of yoga is union or becoming one with the universe. The conceptual heart of yoga, Patanjali's yoga sutras, begins with "*Yoga citta vritti nirodha*," which means "unified consciousness comes with cessation of thoughts." Quieting the mind allows the natural depth of the spirit to manifest.

Meditation, the practice of quieting and concentrating and purifying the mind, aligning it with the spirit, is a foundation of yoga. Although it can start from the thinking mind and you can get into it through thought, meditation goes beyond the thinking mind. Meditation stems from the truth that who you really *are* is more than who you *think* you are.

The more you desire to know who you truly are and why you are here on earth, the more you are drawn to that truth. As you are pulled inward, you begin to leave behind the kinds of clinging and attachment that keep distorting and narrowing your vision.

Your mind can take you into the spirit, but it can also keep you deeply attached to your ego, to who you think you are. Western culture glorifies

the mind, but there are other ways of knowing, and the thinking mind is only part of our being. The reality of oneness is greater than what is available to you through your senses and your thoughts.

Attachment to the melodrama of your ego is what keeps you from being here now. This model of who you think you are and how you think the world is constantly brings you down into separateness. These are habits of mind. Because of the nature of these attachments, you can see only what you can see, which from the ego's standpoint is a world of subject and objects, me and the material world.

A more skillful use of the intellect is contemplation. It is also a form of *jnana* (pronounced "gyān") yoga, the path of knowledge and wisdom. In this yoga of the mind, you use the mind to reflect on itself. For example, each morning, take out a holy book and work with a thought. Don't read many pages; just take one thought and sit with it for ten or fifteen minutes. Think about it throughout your day.

If we reflect on the qualities of Christ's love, or of equanimity, kindness, or compassion, we begin to take on those qualities. Sri Ramakrishna said, "If you meditate on your ideal, you will acquire its nature. If you think of God day and night, you will acquire the nature of God."

YOU CAN'T KNOW IT; YOU CAN ONLY BE IT

If you're reading this, you already recognize you're on a spiritual journey. You also may understand that, from within the illusion of our separateness, what we perceive is relative reality, what in India is referred to as *māya*, the projected illusion of subject and objects. All around you there are various levels of relative reality. In exploring the mind, it is helpful to examine those relative realities.

Many people are so totally involved in their lives that the spiritual element is irrelevant to them. They have no sense that behind their apparent reality there is another equally true reality, a spiritual dimension.

When you begin to awaken to your predicament—that you are trapped in illusion—you begin to see through the dreamlike quality of the veils of illusion. Everything you thought was real you now see as *māya* (illusion).

Motivations and desires affect our perceptions. We don't necessarily see things as *they* are. We see them as *we* are. Our desire system creates our perceptual universe. In that sense, you can say our reality is a projection of how we identify ourselves. Hari Dass, my yoga teacher at the ashram in India, once wrote on his chalkboard, "If a pickpocket meets a saint, all he sees are his pockets." In *The Lazy Man's Guide to Enlightenment*, Thaddeus Golas says, "You never have to change what you see, only the way you see it."

Gurdjieff, a great spiritual teacher who taught in Europe and America in the early decades of the twentieth century, noted that if you think you're free and you don't know you are in prison, you can't escape. Gurdjieff saw us as being in a prison of our own habits of mind. Unless we understand how we are conditioned by our desires, we remain stuck in the reality they create, like a television program with an ad that keeps repeating over and over, implanting a subliminal message while we watch the show.

BEYOND THOUGHT

In the West we get rewarded for rational knowledge and learning. But only when you see that the assumptions you've been working under are not valid, when you despair of getting there through your rational mind, does the possibility of truly changing your mind arise. Albert Einstein said, "A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels." He also said, "The mind can proceed only so far upon what it knows and can prove. There comes a point where the mind takes a leap—call it intuition or what you will—and comes out upon a higher plane of knowledge, but can never prove how it got there. All great discoveries have involved such a leap."

In the Vedic lore of India, the ancient sages say there are three ways to acquire spiritual knowledge:

- First and most direct is through your own experience.
- Second, you hear about it from somebody you know who knows, and they tell you.
- Third is to study or learn from books like this with your logical mind.

What about other ways of knowing or experiencing life, ways that resonate with an inner validity and that feel intuitively right? Einstein said, “I didn’t arrive at my understanding of the fundamental laws of the universe through my rational mind.” He got there through intuition. Intuition is something we really don’t understand, though we use it all the time. We say someone knew something intuitively. They have entered into a subjective rather than objective way of knowing. In fact, there are ways of knowing other than through the senses and through the thinking mind.

In 1906, William James wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

Our normal waking consciousness . . . is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application. . . . No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question. . . . They may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.

People first awaken to a spiritual dimension in their lives in an incredible variety of ways. Some people seem to open up to it through traumatic experiences, as people describe when they’ve come near death or at another moment when they touch something much deeper than the usual way they thought about things. Other people awaken through meditation or through religious experiences. Others arrive at it through sex or through drugs.

I remember lecturing in a hall once, back in the early ’70s. Most of my audience at that time was young, and they tended to wear white and smile a lot and wear flowers. I wore my mālā and had a long beard. In the front

row there was a woman of about seventy, who had on a hat with little fake cherries and strawberries and things like that on it. She was wearing black oxfords and a print dress, and she had a black patent leather bag. I looked at her, and I couldn't figure out what she was doing in the audience. She looked so dissimilar to all the rest.

These talks were like a gathering of an explorers club, where we would come together and just share our experiences. I started to describe some of my experiences, some of which were pretty far out. I looked at her, and she was nodding with understanding. I couldn't believe that she could understand what I was talking about. I was describing experiences that I had using psychedelic chemicals, experiences that involved other planes of consciousness. I'd look over at her, and there she was, nodding away. I began to think maybe she had a problem with her neck and maybe it had nothing whatsoever to do with what I was saying. I kept watching and getting more and more fascinated and getting more and more outrageous, and she kept nodding and nodding.

At the end of the lecture, I just kind of smiled at her so intensely that she just had to come up and speak to me. She came up and said, "Thank you so much. That makes perfect sense. That's just the way I understand the universe to be."

And I said, "How do you know? I mean, what have you done in your life that brought you into those kinds of experiences?"

She leaned forward very conspiratorially, and she said, "I crochet."

And at that moment, I realized that people arrive at spiritual understanding through a much wider spectrum of experience than I ever anticipated.

Part of the process of awakening is recognizing that the realities we thought were absolute are only relative. All you have to do is shift from one reality to another once, and your attachment to what you thought was real starts to collapse. Once the seed of awakening sprouts in you, there's no choice—there's no turning back.

Actually, we all know that reality is relative; we have known it since childhood: "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream." Life *is* a dream.

LOSE YOUR MIND TO GAIN YOUR SOUL

One reason to practice purification is to cool out, so we're not creating so much heavy karma for ourselves. We are constantly preoccupied with the creations of our minds. Einstein again: "The true value of a human being can be found in the degree to which he has attained liberation from the self." What we strive to be liberated from are our habitual thought patterns about ourselves and the pull of our sensory experiences. Lightening up in these areas allows us to refocus on centering and calming the mind with meditation, mantra, or the practices of bhakti yoga. As these practices deepen, the higher wisdom comes.

Taming the mind is fraught with paradoxes. You have to give it all up to have it all. Turn off your mind. There is a place in you beyond thought that already knows—trust in that. Jesus tells us that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. That child mind, sometimes called beginner's mind in Zen, is the innocence of pure being, of unconditional love.

If we are to live in that state of pure being, something within us must die. It's like when a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. The caterpillar does not become a flying caterpillar; it morphs into a butterfly.

This is the pathless path. Where the journey leads is to the deepest truth in you. It is really just returning to where you were initially before you got lost. Shedding the layers of the mind is like taking layers off of an onion. You peel them all away until you come to your essence. The spiritual journey is not about acquiring something outside yourself. Rather, you are penetrating the layers and veils to return to the deepest truth of your own being.

What you seek is already within you. This reality is subjective, not the outer objective reality. You may experience it as focused in the center of your chest. It can be called the soul, or in Hinduism the *Atmān*, or in Buddhism the pure Buddha-Mind. Jesus Christ said, "The kingdom of God is within you." This is the space of full awareness that is in harmony with the universe; this is wisdom itself. The full spirit of God is inside each of us. When you want to approach God, go inward.

ENLIGHTENING UP

Offering up or cleaning up the ego stuff that distracts you from the spirit is called purification. Purification is an act of letting go that is done out of discriminative awareness—that is, you understand that you are a soul passing through a life in which the entire drama is a script for your awakening and that you are more than just the drama. You are a spiritual being having a human experience. Your life experience is a vehicle for coming to God, for becoming conscious, for becoming liberated. Ultimately that's what you are doing here. This awareness helps you discriminate between thoughts, feelings, and actions that bring you closer to God, to your own freedom, and those that take you away from it.

Instead of filling your mind with the daily news, fill it with stuff that helps you become more conscious, that liberates you. As you become more aware of what gets you to God and what doesn't, you will naturally let go of what doesn't. That's purification. You do it to get to God, not for the sake of being pure.

So how do you become conscious of all these unconscious influences? Go within to your spiritual heart, your *hridayām*, and watch the drama that is your entire life. When you quiet your mind enough to transcend your ego, you can begin to hear how it all is. Then you watch with unbearable compassion for yourself and all beings. Watching involves what you may call the witness consciousness, which comes from your soul plane. It is another way of polishing the mirror, to connect your thinking mind with your spiritual heart.

You observe your behavior and thoughts, enhancing your ability to live fully in the moment, to be here now. Then, when you are with a candle flame, you *are* the candle flame and the watcher. When there is a task to do, you *are* the task and the observer of the task. It's not that you do it—it's *how* you do it, where you are coming from as you act.

WATCHING THE WATCHER

The witness doesn't evaluate; it doesn't judge your actions. It merely makes note of them. It's a subtle thing, the watcher watching him- or herself

watching. It's actually two planes of consciousness simultaneously, the witness and the ego. The witness is connected to the soul plane.

At first, you may be distracted and remember to witness only now and then. Later you'll notice that although you still fall asleep and lose the witness, you start to remember to witness again sooner. Just notice. You don't have to change anything. Eventually things will change naturally. After some practice, it gets more subtle, and throughout the day you remain centered in the witness, watching life's drama unfold. The witness is always here and now. It resides in each instant of living.

You ask yourself, "How do I use my every moment to get here?" The attitude is not heavy or tight, like "I've got to be careful; I might make a mistake." Relax, be light, dance through it all, trusting, quieting, flowing. Your witnessing lives in the flow of your love and the quietness of your mind. Women in Indian villages talk and gossip as they walk back from the well, but they never forget the jugs of water on their heads. The jug of water is what your journey is all about. So do what you do in your life, but don't forget the jug of water. Don't forget what it's all about.

The illusion keeps pulling you back into forgetting. Lost in your melodrama, you keep forgetting into it. Sometimes you spill the water. You will keep forgetting and remembering and forgetting and remembering. And every now and then, *you remember*. Keep your eye on the mark.

BREATHING IN, BREATHING OUT

Eventually the balance shifts. You allow your life to become simpler and more harmonious. Less and less you grab at this and push away that. You listen to hear how it is rather than imposing a structure. Imposing structures doesn't set you free. Your romantic attachment to your own story line and how it comes out fades. "Who am I becoming?" and "What will I be when I grow up?" are irrelevant when you are just *being*. All of these models just fall away. You start to sit simply, live simply, just be where you are, just be with whomever you're with when you're with them. You listen for your *dharma*, the spiritual way of living your life.

Aldous Huxley reminds us, “The body is always in time, the spirit is always timeless and the psyche is an amphibious creature compelled by the laws of man’s being to associate itself to some extent with its body, but capable, if it so desires, of experiencing and being identified with its spirit.”

Your whole life becomes a meditative act. It’s not just sitting on your meditation pillow, your *zafu*. All of life is a big *zafu*, no matter whether you’re driving or making love or whatever you’re doing. It’s all meditation. It is the practice of being here now.

When you meditate, you begin to develop the power of your mind through concentration, through one-pointedness, by following the breath or repeating a mantra. You develop the capacity to put your mind on one thought and keep it there and let everything else flow by. You don’t stop your mind. You let it flow. But you bring one thought constantly to the surface. You keep coming back to one thought. “Breathing in, breathing out,” or “Rising, falling.” Or you use your mantra, “Rām, Rām, Rām, Rām, Rām . . .” Whether you are eating, sleeping, making love, “Rām, Rām, Rām . . .” keeps going. You spiritualize your life. You convert it all by maintaining a frame of reference that has the dual capacity of centering you and increasing the power of one-pointedness. Maharaj-ji told me, “Bring your mind to one point and wait for grace.”

A GUIDED VISUAL MEDITATION

Sit straight, so your head, neck, and chest are in alignment. Start by focusing in your heart area, in the middle of your chest, where the *hridayām*, the spiritual heart, is located. With your mouth closed, breathe in and out of your chest, focusing on your heart as if you were breathing in and out through your heart. Breathe deeply.

Because of the purity of your seeking, many incredibly high beings are present, and with them comes the spiritual substance out of which all form derives. You can imagine that substance as a golden mist that fills the air. With every breath, don’t just breathe in air; imagine you are pulling into yourself this golden substance. Fill with it; let it pour through your entire body.

Breathe in the energy of the universe, the *shakti* of the universe. Breathe in the breath of God. Let it fill your whole body. Each time you breathe out, breathe out all of the things in you that keep you from knowing your true Self; breathe out all the separateness, all the feelings of unworthiness, all the self-pity, all the attachment to your pain, whether it's physical or psychological. Breathe out anger and doubt and greed and lust and confusion. Breathe in God's breath, and breathe out all the impediments that keep you from knowing God. Let the breath be the transformation.

Now let the golden mist that has poured into your being focus in the middle of your chest; let it take form as a tiny being, the size of a thumb, sitting on a lotus flower right in the middle of your chest. Notice its equanimity, the radiance that comes from within. Use your imagination. As you look upon this being, see that it is radiating light. See the light pouring out. As you meditate upon it, experience the deep peace that is emanating from this being. Feel, as you look upon this being, that it is a being of great wisdom. It's sitting quietly, silently, perfectly poised in your heart. Feel its compassion and its love. Let yourself be filled with its love.

Now, slowly let that tiny being grow in size until it fills your body, so its head fills the space of your head, its torso, your torso, its arms, your arms, its legs, your legs. So now in the skin of your body sits this being—a being of infinite wisdom, a being of the deepest compassion, a being that is bathed in bliss, a being that is self-effulgent: a being of perfect tranquility.

Let this being begin to grow in size. Experience yourself growing until everything in the room around you is within your body. All of the sounds, all the sensory experiences are coming from inside you.

Continue to grow. Feel your vastness, your peace, your equanimity. Your head extends into the sky. Expand until your town, your environment, and all those beings within them are contained within you. Experience the human condition; see the loneliness, joy, caring, violence, paranoia, a mother's love for her child, sickness, fear of death—see it all. It is all within you. See it with compassion and with caring and, at the same moment, with equanimity. Feel the light pour through your being.