The Most Important of All Possible Spiritual Topics

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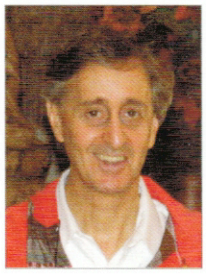

(Taken from a dharma talk given at Spirit Rock, April 9, 2014.)

Today, I would like to talk about the most important of all possible spiritual topics. What do you think the topic is? *[Listeners respond: Love . . . Compassion . . . Awareness . . . Joy . . . Impermanence . . . Action . . . Meditation . . . Balance . . . Humor.]*

Those would all be great topics—however, the winner is . . . sustaining and deepening our practice in our everyday lives in this culture. Like many of you, I've often felt a strong intention to have my daily life approximate the level of depth and insight that I find in retreats. Yet there are many challenges—one cartoon I've seen shows a spiritual seeker at a crossroads, noticing one sign pointing toward Enlightenment, and the other sign pointing in the opposite direction, toward Daily Life. Sometimes the two can feel far apart.

I'll talk about three levels of daily life practice—foundational, intermediate, and advanced. For each level, I'll suggest several practices (I'll no doubt be a little arbitrary in terms of how I group the practices). I'd like you to listen for the one or two practices that might resonate the most with you, on whatever level, and that you could commit to during the next week.

"Foundational" practices are familiar to most of us. I'll name four. The first is having a regular daily "formal" practice, having a protected time and place for training. The second is to develop a sense of the basic framework of practice, a greater clarity about what we're doing, and why we're doing it. The third is to ground ethically, following the five basic precepts of non-harming, not taking that which is not given, and giving care to our sexuality, speech, and use of substances that shift our consciousness. A fourth is being part of a community or group, whether in person or electronically, so that one feels connected and not alone.

At the "intermediate" level, we start to have a more differentiated set of practices, cultivating not just mindfulness, but also regular "heart practices" like loving-kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and joy, as well as wisdom and psychological insight. We also bring our practice more explicitly into our work, our relationships, our lives in the community, and the flow of daily life—driving, washing the dishes, responding to emails, finding many small ways during the day to come back to presence. A third practice is to look more carefully at the priorities of one's life: How am I using my time? Is it in service to my deeper values? Am I "too busy" for practice? What might I let go of? Hafiz says: "Run my dear/From anything/That may not strengthen/Your precious budding wings." A fourth is working with intentions. We regularly touch our deeper aspirations and values in our lives, perhaps in reflection at the end of a meditation period. Then we can also clarify and follow intentions for specific activities, saying, "I intend to use skillful speech during this meeting," or "I'll remember compassion in what may be a difficult conversation."

A further practice—taking challenges as opportunities for learning and practice—bridges the intermediate and advanced areas. In the Tibetan Lojong teachings, it's said, "Take all obstacles as the path of practice." When we start to do this, when we have interest in what is difficult, how we get stuck and suffer, learning accelerates. The Buddha often invited us to accept challenges, in part as a way of seeing more clearly our state of development. One practice that I love is to take a difference in views with another person as a starting point for inquiry rather than for war.

I'll mention briefly three further "advanced" practices. First is taking our communication much more fully as practice—suddenly some of us have 5-10 hours for spiritual practice a day! A second and related practice is to ground in awareness of the body such that we increasingly have a kind of default body awareness in all or most situations. This is so crucial in an increasingly "mental" culture. A third is taking a "Sabbath" day (or half a day) once a week for meditation, study, reflection, slowing down, and disconnecting from electronics.

May these practices support the deepening of insight and compassion for all of us.