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Publisher's Desk

Improving Our Character

If we start at the beginning and work systematically, we can replace undesirable qualities with their opposites

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Spiritual life is not different from the rest of life, it is just the best of life. Imagine a woman hears that Ramakrishna saw God as clearly as we see an apple in our hand, or a man hears of great yogis who realize the Truth of the universe in a life-transforming avalanche of light culminating in a sense of the oneness of it all. Seeing this, the man or woman might decide to meditate for days under a tree or in a cave. Or they might fast for days, go on arduous pilgrimages and practice mystic mantras for hours on end. Would they succeed by these efforts? Experience says probably not.

Real life offers a key for their journey. Imagine someone who goes to a piano concert and hears the world's greatest artist. The music is mesmerizing, the pianist's skill is flawless, soaring, perfect, and our listener decides, "This is my path. This is what I want to do." He sits at the piano, attempting to equal the master's work, but great music does not resound. No matter how many hours are spent, no matter how sincere the effort, he cannot achieve what he heard at the concert.

Why? He does not realize the work required to reach that level of expertise. To be successful, it is vital to start at the beginning of the path, not in the middle or at the end. If the fundamentals are skipped, our efforts will not yield sustainable spiritual progress. In the case of the pianist, the fundamentals are music theory, neural and muscular training, development of memorization, cultivating an interpretive ear and practice, practice, practice. It is no different in spiritual life. The great ones did not sit in a cave and in a short time attain enlightenment. They worked on themselves for years, decades. They did sadhana, they changed their habits, their desires, their reactions, their very character. If we wish to achieve what they achieved, we must do the same. We must work for it.

The fundamentals, the foundation upon which our spiritual growth rests, is our character. What exactly is character? Character is the sum total of mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual. On the spiritual path, the first phase of effort is to build, improve and transform our character. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniaswami, observed:

"It is true that bliss comes from meditation, and it is true that higher consciousness is the heritage of all mankind. However, the ten restraints [yamas] and their corresponding practices [niyamas] are necessary to maintain bliss consciousness, as well as all of the good feelings toward oneself and others attainable in any incarnation. These restraints and practices build character. Character is the foundation for spiritual unfoldment. The fact is, the higher we go, the lower we can fall. The top chakras spin fast; the lowest one available to us spins even faster. The platform of character must be built within our lifestyle to maintain the total contentment needed to persevere on the path. These great rishis saw the frailty of human nature and gave these guidelines, or disciplines, to make it strong. They said, 'Strive!' Let's strive to not hurt others, to be truthful and honor all the rest of the virtues they outlined."

Swami Chinmayananda, founder of Chinmaya Mission, directly related spiritual growth to character transformation: "If we organize our life in such a way so as to discover the great potential within us, and if we order our behavior so as to nurture and nourish that potential, our life will be well spent. Our success lies in the amount of transformation we can bring about in our character and behavior."

My guru explained, "To build character, to act in accordance with the yamas, a person has to realize that, having acted instinctively, he experienced consequences

that he does not want to experience again; so, now he realizes that he should follow these restraints and not go through those consequences again. This is the foundation; without this foundation there is no spiritual growth, no fruit. Trying to realize the highest realizations before laying this foundation would be like taking a lime tree that was cut off from its roots and putting it into a bucket and expecting it to bear fruit. Of course it will not."

Each of us has many character qualities. A character quality is a habit, a usual pattern or way of thinking, speaking or acting. Most people have a mixture of positive character qualities (such as being enthusiastic, punctual, dependable, kindly or sincere) and negative qualities (such as being sarcastic, lazy, tardy or deceptive).

We have all heard the common excuse for negative character qualities: "That's the way I am. What can I do about it? I'm simply a lazy person." Hinduism teaches that the character we are born with in this life is the result of the sum total of our actions in previous lives. Some individuals are clearly pious from birth, others are of a mixed nature and still others are self-centered and devious. However, Hinduism also teaches that we can change the character qualities we are born with through self-reflection and self-effort, by observing and controlling how we think and act in the present, particularly by the repetition of positive thoughts and actions. The more often we express and reflect on the character quality we desire to cultivate, the stronger it will become.

Accepting the idea that we can change a negative character quality, such as laziness, is a necessary first step. Once that perspective is held, the following four-step approach to developing the opposing positive character quality is helpful:

1. Understand the positive quality
2. Cognize its expressions
3. Realize its benefits
4. Practice its expressions

In utilizing this process, we can keep in mind the following principle from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras: "For the repelling of unwholesome thoughts, their opposites should be cultivated. Unwholesome thoughts, such as harming someone and so

forth--whether done, caused to be done, or approved, whether arising from greed, anger or infatuation, whether mild, moderate or extreme--never cease to ripen into ignorance and suffering. This is why one must cultivate their opposites."

Let's see how this four-step process can be utilized to replace laziness with industriousness.

First: Understand the Positive Quality. Make sure you have a clear understanding of the character quality you wish to cultivate. A good way to approach this is to define it in your own words. Let us define industriousness as "hard-working, willing to work long hours to finish a project." Its opposite, laziness, is "a disinclination to work hard, preferring to remain idle." Then meditate on the positive quality.

Second: Cognize its Expressions. Make a list of thoughts, words, attitudes and behaviors that are representative of people who possess the positive quality. Then make a parallel list for the opposite trait.

Industriousness:	Laziness:
Do the task now	Postpone the task
Work late to finish	Stop as early as possible
Maximize productivity	Do the minimum

Third: Realize its Benefits. List the benefits of having the quality. This can include insights into the problems caused when its opposite is followed.

- Industriousness:
- Greater ability to serve family and community

- Opportunities for career advancement
- Appreciation from associates
- Enhanced self-esteem
- Avoid criticism

Scripture can provide insights. The Tirukural offers valuable thoughts on industriousness, saying, "Good fortune of its own accord ferrets out and finds the man of unflagging energy." Of laziness it warns: "Procrastination, forgetfulness, sloth and sleep--these four shape the ship bearing those destined for ruin."

Fourth: Practice its Virtues. Begin to regularly practice the actions that will develop the habit pattern of the positive character quality. Observe closely as to begin to experience the benefits that result. Set realistic goals. Be careful not to set the goal too high, lest you fall short, become discouraged and give up the effort. For the quality of industriousness, focus on increasing your productivity for the day by five percent. This can be accomplished by working faster, working longer or a combination of both.

Slowly, character will evolve and the many traits that define you will be transformed, bringing a deeper spirituality and a more secure material existence to your daily life. Remember: Consistency is the key to the conquest of karma.