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Behold the Sacred Lotus Flower

Progressing from our instinctive to intellectual to spiritual nature, our soul unfolds to resplendence like a beautiful lotus

By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

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The Hindu viewpoint is that the seed of Divinity is within everyone. My guru's guru, Siva Yogaswami of Sri Lanka, had a down-to-earth way of expressing this idea. "See everyone as God. Don't say, 'This man is a robber. That one is a womanizer. The man over there a drunkard.' This man is God. That man is God. God is within everyone. The seed is there. See that and ignore the rest." It is definitely reassuring that there is no one who isn't a divine being--that no one ends up in an eternal hell. Rather, it's just a question of when an individual's divine essence will express itself. It may be a few more lives before it does. After all, spiritual unfoldment is a slow and inexorable process.

My own guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, chose an insightful analogy for the process of spiritual unfoldment, which in Sanskrit is called adhyatma vikasa. He spoke about the lotus, how its seed starts in the pond's dark mud. Its roots give rise to a stem that reaches up through the water into the air. From the stem evolves a bud, tiny at first, which grows into a flower that slowly opens its exquisite petals to the sun, the central nectar and pollen calling to the bees. Gurudeva compares that process to man's nature and spiritual unfoldment. The mud is the instinctive mind. We all start out in the mud in one lifetime or another. In our early evolution we are

crude and unkind. We tend to hurt other people and think more of ourself than others. Maybe we even end up in jail. We all start down there, in the roots, immersed in the darkness of the instinctive mind, crashing around like a bull in a china shop.

Life follows life as we live and learn. Finally we get some control over our instincts and move up into the water, which is the intellectual mind. We become a thinking person, someone who is able to make decisions logically, someone who has basic control over the instinctive emotions so that when threatened he or she doesn't automatically become angry and fight.

At this point we are an instinctive-intellectual person, living partly in the mud of our animal nature, partly in the water of our intelligence. Such a person has no sense of God and the sacredness of life. The world is full of people like that, the atheists, materialists and existentialists. They are oblivious to the spiritual purpose of life, a purpose that goes beyond this incarnation.

Then what happens? The stem rises above the water's surface. It rises out of the water into the air, which represents intuition, our spirituality or some sense of the existence of God. We start to think about religion; we start to think about spiritual practices. Just being an instinctive and an intellectual person, just pursuing ordinary things, worldly pursuits, no longer satisfies us. But the bud is closed, yet to mature and open. The closed bud knows God is out there but has had no direct experience of Him.

What causes the bud to open? Learning and maturing life after life, grace of enlightened beings, blessings of the Deity and spiritual practice. To open the bud, we have to consciously strive.

Hinduism gives us religious practices that can be grouped into four categories. The first is simply good conduct, character building, charya. It is the foundation for deeper practices. Second is selfless service, seva or karma yoga--doing things for other people we don't have to do. That's how I define it. If in our place of work we do something for someone else out of the goodness of our heart, that counts as seva. Seva doesn't have to be done at a temple or an ashram. If we go to work and only do what we're paid for, no seva is taking place.

The third category of practice is devotion, bhakti, which we express at a temple as well as at the temple we have in our own home. Maintaining a home shrine and worshiping there daily is an essential practice. The fourth is meditation, dhyana. Meditation is a bit advanced and requires a teacher's help to do well at it. Most people I speak with say, "I try and meditate but I can't control my thoughts." They don't have a teacher. They haven't had someone personally explain the art of meditation to them. It's an unusual person who can learn meditation by himself.

Thus, the four categories of practice are good conduct, service, devotion and meditation. What happens when you take up some of these practices and perform them on a regular basis? The bud slowly opens. Your Divinity, which waited silently in the seed, blossoms.

Many Western ideas and goals are based on the underlying attitude that there is only one life--or there may be only one life--so we had better do everything we can in this life. We had better achieve God Realization in this life, just in case. The Hindu attitude, based on the confidence that we live many lives, is: "I know I'm coming back; no rush. I will do as much as I can in this lifetime, and there will be ample time for further advancement." The Hindu approach is to make spiritual progress in every lifetime--open the bud a little bit more. We are content to move forward by consistent practice, with whatever intensity we can sustain, without rushing, without fear of falling short. We rest assured that the seed of Divinity resides within each of us.

Hinduism takes that idea one step further: eventually each of us will have the realization of God, our indwelling Self. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad states, "He who with the truth of atman, the soul, unified, perceives the truth of Brahman as with a lamp, who knows God, the unborn, the stable, free from all forms of being, is released from all fetters." This is quite different from the concept, prevalent in Western faiths, that God is in heaven and cannot be experienced by those living on Earth. Gurudeva often spoke of the immediacy of this divine presence: "God is so close to us. He is closer than our breathing, nearer to us than our hands or feet. Yes, He is the very essence of our soul."

Back to our analogy of the lotus flower. When the lotus flower is sufficiently open, we begin living consciously in our spiritual or intuitive nature. Let's ask the question, "What is it that makes spiritual progress? What is it that unfolds?" It is the soul. In thinking about spiritual unfoldment, it is helpful to understand the nature of

the soul. We distinguish between the soul body and its essence. The essence is two-fold: unchanging pure consciousness and transcendent Absolute Reality, beyond time, form and space. The soul body is a human-like, self-effulgent being of light which evolves and matures. This immortal soul body is referred to in Sanskrit as anandamaya kosha (sheath of bliss). It is the soul body that, like the lotus flower, unfolds. The soul's essence is eternally perfect, identical with God.

Just as our physical body matures from an infant to an adult, so too does this self-effulgent body of light mature in resplendence and intelligence, evolving from life to life, gradually strengthening its inner nerve system, progressing from ignorance of God to God realization.

Gurudeva shared his own mystical experience of the soul body in Merging with Siva: "One day you will see the being of you, your divine soul body. You will see it inside the physical body. It looks like clean, clear plastic. Around it is a blue light, and the outline of it is whitish yellow. Inside of it is blue-yellowish light, and there are trillions of little nerve currents, or quantums, and light scintillating all through that. This body stands on a lotus flower. Inwardly looking down through your feet, you see you are standing on a big, beautiful lotus flower. This body has a head, it has eyes, and it has infinite intelligence. It is tuned into and feeds from the source of all energy."

There is another aspect to spiritual unfoldment. Choose the one Hindu saint, swami or yogi, living or passed on, who you feel achieved the greatest spiritual attainment. Now imagine and accept the idea that his or her attainment is your own potential. That is the surprising truth. The potential to achieve what anyone else has achieved spiritually lies within you to be manifested at some point in your future. Perhaps that thought will motivate you to put just a bit more effort into those spiritual practices! Visualize the lotus flower in full, magnificent bloom--that is the symbol of your full, resplendent spiritual potential.

Of course, that potential only becomes practical when you strive. If you are serious in your seeking, ask yourself a series of questions: How am I applying the four kinds of practice in my life now? Good conduct? Seva? Bhakti? Meditation and yoga? Which areas are most in need of my attention and increased effort? What do I need to do in order to improve? Then do it.