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PUBLISHER'S DESK

A 10-Minute Spiritual Workout

An abbreviated daily regimen designed for those who find that today's busy life allows little or no time for introspection

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NOWADAYS THE IDEA OF PERFORMING a daily physical workout is widespread. Nearly everyone appreciates the need to stay fit and healthy for a productive,

contented life. Three types of exercise are recommended: endurance, flexibility and strength. Each has specific benefits. Endurance activities, such as walking, running and swimming, increase vitality and keep the heart, lungs and circulatory system healthy. Flexibility activities, such as hatha yoga, Tai Chi and dancing, keep the muscles relaxed and the joints mobile. Strength activities build muscle tissue and keep the skeletal system strong. These include calisthenics, weight/resistance exercises and climbing stairs.

Taking care of our physical body is essential; but for optimum performance in life, all dimensions of our being need attention: physical, emotional/intellectual and spiritual. Each is important and deserves its share of attention. Of the three, the spiritual, or superconscious, dimension is typically the most neglected, even though it is the core of our being, our real identity. My Gurudeva wrote: "We have to adjust our subconscious to the idea that we are a superconscious being, rather than an instinctive being or an intellectual being driven by the impulses of the five senses. Awareness is the core of us."

We maintain physical health through exercises. We nourish our intellectual/emotional nature through learning new things all through life, expanding and strengthening our mental abilities. The emotional nature is sustained by tending closely to interpersonal relations, practicing surrender and acceptance, by striving to build good character qualities, serving others and living a balanced life.

We give time to our spiritual nature by performing daily religious activities. I like to call this a spiritual workout. During this time, we are reminded that life's inner purpose is to make spiritual progress, moving forward toward the ultimate goal of experiencing God, Self Realization, and subsequently moksha, liberation from the cycle of rebirth. It is not so much a matter of exercising our spiritual nature as it is taking time to experience it. The scripture Tirumantiram shares: "Step by step, practice withdrawal of the mind and look inward. One by one, you will witness the myriad good things within. Now and here below, you may meet the Lord for whom the ancient Veda still searches everywhere."

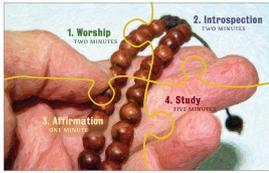
Generally we are so wrapped up in our outer nature that we are hardly aware of our true, glorious inner reality. This can go on life after life, as it does for many people, who only begin to think of greater realities when nearing the point of death.

The benefits of such times of quiet retreat from life's hustle and bustle are underrated and overlooked, as life in the 21st century becomes more and more hectic and externally demanding. Many orthodox families living in India still manage to reserve time for their spiritual being by performing an early morning puja in their home shrine, followed by repetition of a mantra while counting on japa beads.

The predominant trend in India and other countries, however, is that fewer and fewer families follow such disciplines. Sitting with me, so many say the same thing: "We just can't seem to find the time for puja, japa or meditation." Time devoted to employment, transportation, eating, entertainment, physical exercise and spending time with family and friends takes up the whole day. The traditional one-hour daily religious workout is proving to be too long and, because the benefits are not well understood, it is commonly skipped altogether. My Gurudeva spoke of those benefits, "As a result [of your daily religious practices], you will be able to brave the forces of the external world without being disturbed by them and fulfill your dharma in whatever walk of life you have chosen. Because your daily sādhana has regulated your nerve system, the quality of your work in the world will improve, and your mood in performing it will be confident and serene."

So, what's the solution? I focus primarily on the youth, for their patterns are not too rigid to change. I devised a ten-minute program consisting of four activities that can be performed whenever time is available. Hopefully, the brevity and flexibility of the time of day, along with a clear sense of the spiritual benefits, will motivate students to adopt this workout or, equally as good, customize a routine of their own. I suggest this practice be taken up around age fifteen and maintained throughout high school and university. After schooling, it is hoped that those serious about their spiritual life will increase their workout to half an hour.

The spiritual workout consists of four activities: worship, introspection, affirmation and study. The worship portion involves repeating a mantra to a chosen Deity or reciting nine or more names of the Deity, offering grains of rice to a murti or picture with each repetition or name. For example, if worshipping Lord Ganesha, one might intone the mantra Aum Sri Ganeshaya Namah or another of your choice or lineage. Alternatively, a short bhajan can be sung while looking at the Deity's picture or murti. Devote two minutes to this simple expression of reverence and gratitude.



SHUTTERSTOCK/ALIEN SKIN

The introspection portion consists of chanting the mantra Aum nine times with eyes closed. For Aum japa to be effective, the mantra must be pronounced correctly. The first syllable is A, pronounced as the English word *awe*, but prolonged: *aaa*. The second syllable is U, as in *roof*, pronounced *oo*, but prolonged: *ooo*. The third syllable is M, pronounced *mm* with the front teeth gently touching and the sound prolonged: *mmm*. Each repetition is sounded for about seven seconds, with two seconds on A, two seconds on U and three seconds on M, with a silence of about two seconds before the next repetition. The three syllables are run together: AAUUMM (silence), AAUUMM (silence), AAUUMM (silence). On the first syllable, A, we feel the solar plexus and chest vibrating. On the second syllable, U, the throat vibrates. The third syllable, M, vibrates the top of the head. Devote two minutes to this.

Affirmations are statements repeated to oneself to place specific impressions in our subconscious mind to produce positive results in the future. This portion of the workout consists of repeating nine times the affirmation *I am alright right now*. Two other affirmations that can be used are *All my needs will always be met* and *I can, I will, I am able to accomplish what I plan*. The three-fold key to effectively utilizing affirmations is: 1) keep the mind focused on the meaning of what you are saying, 2) hold in your mind a visualization that shows the result you want to achieve and 3) feel in the present how you will feel later, when you have achieved what the affirmation describes. Devote one minute to this.

The study portion consists of reading a sacred Hindu text that provides you new knowledge and insight. It is important to choose a work that you find clear and inspiring, avoiding those that seem obscure or technical. Devote five minutes to this.

What are the benefits of these four religious practices? The benefit of the worship portion is that it increases our devotion to the Deity, enhancing our relationship with Him or Her. It is a natural first step toward eventually performing a full rite of worship (atmartha puja). The introspective practice of chanting Aum produces a calming effect on the mind and raises our energies into the more spiritual part of the mind, moving you into the higher chakras. It provides a natural first step toward the deeper practices of meditation, such as regulating our breath (pranayama) and withdrawing energy from the senses (pratyahara), focusing the thought process (dharana) leading to experiencing our inner soul nature (dhyana and samadhi). Repeating an affirmation each day helps us become more positive and self-confident, making us more successful in everything we do. Affirmations are also a great antidote to worry. The study of sacred texts increases knowledge of our faith and catalyzes insights into Hindu philosophy and practices.

It is important to keep in mind that the amount of spiritual advancement we make toward our ultimate goal of experiencing God, Self-Realization, and the subsequent liberation from the cycle of rebirth, or moksha, is directly related to the amount of time we devote to religious practices.

Sage Patanjali mentions this in his Yoga Sutra (1.21; 22): "For those who have strong dedication, samadhi is near. Whether one's practice is mild, medium or intense also makes a difference." The sage is indicating that spiritual progress is not based only on how much time we devote to our practices, but also on how much dedication, energy or effort we put into it. His third verse on this topic (1.23) states: "Samadhi may also come through -devotion to Ishvara." This means that effort and dedication can be supplemented by the blessings or grace we receive due to our intense -devotion to God.