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A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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We are all Spiritual Aspirants but most of us do not put enough systematic effort to attain the Goals of Life. We are fortunate to have been born during the time of Sri Sathya Sai Avatar and to be part of the Sathya Sai Organisation which enables us to develop a Value-Oriented Spiritual Culture.

Swami has said that it is the absence of spirituality which is responsible for all problems, violence, agitation and strife. He said that the spiritual path alone will rescue man from the grip of insatiable desires, endless worries and numerous troubles. Swami has guaranteed that a person who devotes his life and energy to spiritual values will automatically get worldly benefits.

There is therefore a need for us to redefine our individual spiritual goals and to develop a systematic structure to our spiritual practice. It is necessary to spend some time for spiritual practices on a daily basis.

In the present culture most of us are constrained by factors such as lack of the following:

a) Firm Faith: Firm faith could be developed by participating in Bhajans, Satsangs, Study Circles, SSE Classes, Removal of Deep-Seated Tendencies (Vasanas) by disciplined effort.

b) Clear and Unambiguous Spiritual Goals: Clear and unambiguous spiritual goals are very essential to a systematic progress in spirituality. These could differ from person to person depending on our personal belief and religious background.

c) Eagerness and True Yearning: Swami has said that lack of Eagerness and True Yearning will delay our progress in the Spiritual Path. If we eliminate bad thoughts gradually, we will discover that our willpower grows with the diminution of bad thoughts. This will help us to develop eagerness and true yearning towards spiritual practice.

d) Knowledge of Criteria of Self-Assessment: Swami has said that we can do Introspection as to whether we are practising values and exhibiting qualities that are

dearer to God. Therefore with frequent Introspection we can develop these two attributes which are essential for our spiritual progress.

e) Sufficient Time for Spiritual Practice: We need to prioritise our daily chores and allocate some time for our spiritual practice. For those of us faced with time-poverty, Swami has recommended to carryout Intro-vision though ever participating in external actions.

This short talk encapsulates a framework which I developed to refocus my Spiritual Goals and Pathways in using a systematic approach using the **SMARTER** principle. The milestones I developed for my spiritual practice are:

- 1. Purify the Heart**
- 2. Sharpen the Intellect**
- 3. Control the Mind**

The tasks I had chosen under the above milestones are given below.

1. Purify the Heart

- 1.1 Practice of all five human values and sub-values
- 1.2 Speak sweetly and softly
- 1.3 Speak obligingly even if you cannot oblige
- 1.4 Love all, serve all
- 1.5 Love God and hold onto him
- 1.6 Chant God's Name, Prayer
- 1.7 See the God in every person
- 1.8 Spread the message of God
- 1.9 Develop Self-Knowing
- 1.10 Remove Deep-Seated Tendencies (Vasanas) by Disciplined Effort.

2. Sharpen the Intellect

- 2.1 Look within
- 2.2 Inquire
- 2.3 Discriminate
- 2.4 Practice Detachment
- 2.5 Practice Discrimination
- 2.6 Practice Renunciation
- 2.7 Manage Anger & Desire

3. Control the Mind

- 3.1 Awareness
- 3.2 Mindfulness
- 3.4 Meditation
- 3.5 Constant Integrated Awareness
- 3.6 Selfless Service (Sua-Dharma)

I am currently in the process of undertaking two pilot tasks after the completion of which, I will set realistic timelines for my spiritual goals. I wish to emphasize here that what I am

presenting here is a spiritual path which I developed for myself and it would not necessarily be adopted by the others. Each person should choose the spiritual path that suits him/her better. Once the spiritual path is decided, clear and unambiguous Spiritual Goals have to be developed by using the **SMARTER** principle i.e. **S** – Specific; **M** – Measurable; **A** – Achievable; **R** – Realistic; **T** – Time-bound; **E** – Empowering and **R** – Recorded. The goals have to be measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound, empowering and recorded.

I could provide the goals I developed for my two pilot tasks as examples for using the **SMARTER** principle.

Pilot Task 1: The goal in this pilot task was to reduce my anger from the previous level of (an average of) two times a day to (an average) of one time per fortnight within a period of one year using tools such as mindfulness and meditation. Although I was successful to a limited extent in practicing mindfulness, I was not successful in meditation and the timeline set for this task needs to be extended.

Pilot Task 2: The goal in this pilot task was to reduce my time of television viewing from previous level of (an average of) two hours a day to (an average) of one hour per fortnight within a period of one year. I was successful in accomplishing my second pilot task i.e. reducing the time of television viewing from previous level of (an average of) two hours a day to (an average) of one hour per fortnight within a period of one year by switching over from television viewing to radio listening.

It is up to each of us to choose or select what suits us and thereafter set a reasonable timeframe for achieving these tasks. We need to choose clear and unambiguous goals. We should have steadfastness and commitment to implement these goals in an organised and systematic manner. The first step is to find out where we are with respect to the chosen goals and develop a plan to achieve the chosen goals and milestones. It is necessary to identify the critical path in this journey and to set appropriate timelines. This is analogous to managing a project. All of us have managed various projects and accomplished the desired results – sometimes unknowingly. We could manage our spiritual practice like a project. We need to carryout regular introspection and self-audit to track our path and the progress. This will basically involve the management of scope, time, quality and risk. After having set the goals and developed a mechanism to managing our spiritual progress, it will be easy to achieve rapid spiritual progress with steadfastness and commitment.

I thought of sharing with you the systematic approach I recently started to adopt so that it could benefit you as it has been to me. It also has another motive as embodied in the “hundredth monkey” principle. The hundredth monkey effect is a phenomenon in which a learned behaviour spreads instantaneously from one group of monkeys to all related monkeys once a critical number is reached. Spiritual awakening of a critical number of aspirants on a genuine and systematic spiritual path will promote a new value-oriented spiritual global culture illustrated in the leap of consciousness embodied in the “hundredth monkey” principle.

The impact of this systematic approach to spirituality could be spectacularly enhanced in the new civilisation through the remarkable advances in the communication that enables connection of “communities of practitioners” in a manner that has not been possible in the past.

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