

By Swami Jyotirmayananda



Spirituality Demands Practicality

The term “practical” has many implications. Basically, when the term “practical” is used with reference to those who are following a spiritual path, it implies not being satisfied with the theoretical grasp of scriptural learning. What has been learned is to be expressed in life. When you are not practical, you are not utilizing your intellect, and therefore there is confusion and imbalance. There is a great deal of impracticality in many religious movements. People have even developed the idea that to be religious or spiritual implies not to be involved in any activity in the world. That is not an accurate picture of a genuine spiritual movement. Rather, one should be highly integrated. Your personality must be of great use to the society in which you live. There must be an expression of immense dynamism through your personality as you utilize your talents and knowledge.

To give you a simple illustration, there lived a great scholar in the Himalayas who was considered to be an extraordinary authority on the studies of Vedantic philosophy. However, he did not involve himself in any type of activity. He followed this belief to such an extreme that if he bought some ripe bananas, he would not give a single banana to his servant, even if the bananas were all going to spoil. Additionally, if a follower approached him for advice with tears in their eyes, he would just stare at the person with vacant eyes, responding with ridicule, “This world is an illusion.” There is an important saying: “An ounce of practice is worth more than tons of theory.” You may have an abundance of knowledge on great philosophies, but may not practice even a bit of it.

If you are practical, you may lack theory, and yet you express what you know in your day-to-day life. That is far better than thousands of people who are able to expound on many philosophies and do not apply that knowledge in their life. This is the basic perspective of practicality. Being practical implies gaining a clear insight into the message of spiritual texts, but not remaining satisfied on merely an intellectual level. Bring it down to earth!

Suppose, for example, that you are able to quote the teachings of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Shankaracharya or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu on the topic of mantra, from one book after another, and yet you never recite mantra. That is not practical. You should be motivated by what you learn — how the mind can be controlled, how a bad temper can be transcended. But to actually reach that goal, you should demonstrate the truth of the teaching when interacting with others. It is by using your common sense that you advance faster and with greater confidence. Without the practical application, no matter how much you know, that knowledge will not help you.

There have been people who have written great books on the Absolute and about the great truths of life, yet at the time of death, their minds were completely bewildered and confused. A person may

continue to repeat, “I am not this body,” but when encountering illness or some type of misfortune, their mind becomes completely confused and upset. You may give advice to others to be fearless, however that fearlessness should be expressed first within your own personality. This is what it means to be practical.

In the field of Yoga, to be practical implies being very dynamic. A spiritual seeker develops an insight into the various fundamentals in life. If you see that someone has cut his finger, you cannot at that time say to the person, “Look, you are not the finger. You are *Brahman*, the Self.”

You are not a spiritual aspirant if all you know how to do is to sit down and meditate. Students of Yoga or of any spiritual field should have more common sense than people entrenched in the world. They should have more qualities of the head and heart and more of an ability to serve than anyone in the world. A worldly person learns those things even in the midst of so many conflicts and confusions occurring in his life. Yogic students who have the possibility of maintaining a sense of freedom within the unconscious should be able to learn many more ways of helping mankind. A

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Yogi is a servant of God by his service to humanity. Therefore, never feel, “Since I am a Yogi, why should I help that suffering person? All I should do is close my door and be with God, the universal Consciousness.”

Unless your sentiments mature into universal love, unless your thoughts and feelings become sublime enough to understand the problems of others, unless your consciousness rises to the level that includes others as well, you cannot attain Self-realization. You may have intellectual understanding—but not Self-realization. Intellectual understanding is like knowing various facts about the highest peak in the Himalayas, and feeling great satisfaction about having collected those facts. However, you don’t really know anything about Mount Everest—what it is to conquer the cliffs and stand on its peak. That is first hand experience.

Similarly, a spiritual aspirant should not be satisfied with data such as knowing that there are seven stages of wisdom or *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* is higher than *Savikalpa Samadhi*. This form of thinking is not really helpful. This is not firsthand experience—wisdom. Therefore there is an emphasis on using the guidance you have received and the knowledge you have acquired by serving humanity. That becomes direct experience in your day-to-day life. Without that spiritual mission, all the studies of Yoga or spiritual philosophy will be academic. To be pragmatic, apply what you know in your daily life for your own and others’ benefit.

If you are highly practical you will excel in your work. If, for example, you have a difficult project before you and know it is going to require a long duration of time, learn how to handle your feelings of being overwhelmed. Divide the project into smaller sections so that you are able to sustain your effort on a day-to-day basis. If necessary, adjust your work so that it becomes more accommodating and interesting. Do not be led by an overemphasis of high expectations. Keep your feet on the ground. Look up occasionally but not constantly. Be aware of where you are going.

Although your intellect should understand the ultimate spiritual goal, maintain a sense of reality with an acute awareness about your environment, the people around you, where you live, and your day-to-day circumstances. Learn to be adaptable; express yourself through compassion, control of mind and a sweetness of nature. This promotes harmony.

Although at times you are not feeling inspired, live your life with patience. Realize that although you are not working on anything creative or inspirational at the moment, you have a schedule, a process. For example, suppose you are building your own home and there arises within your mind a vision of the entire building. If you are down to earth, you put your ideas on paper in black and white. However, if by the time you have completed your drawing your inspiration or vision has departed, it doesn’t matter. You now have something to work with—concrete, wood and building materials. You follow your plan step by step. It is not necessary to feel enthusiasm at every moment. Your project will gradually come into focus again and your ingenuity will return by simply following your plan.

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A realistic, practical person is able to complete his various responsibilities in a shorter period of time with greater efficiency. If you have several projects before you, the art lies in focusing on the simpler projects first. This gives you confidence in tackling what is more difficult. By the time you have finished the easier projects, your mind will have cleared, and you will be able to complete the more challenging tasks. You will do what you thought was not possible.

Therefore, live your life in such a way that the mechanical aspects of life become connected to your motivation. That is the art of Karma Yoga. Do not allow your time and energy to be wasted. Simply because at times you find that your mind is upset, continue with your strategy. In the course of time your ambition will return, and your activities will become important in your life.

Religion or spiritual practice should not be merely theoretical. It must be brought into one's daily life. Even a small job will have a great influence on the whole world. Develop enthusiasm in preparing yourself for various types of activities so that you can be independent. Learn how to cook so you can help yourself when others are not around. Know what to do in case of sickness. You will save time, expense and energy. You will widen your horizons, enrich your own life and enrich the lives of those around you.

Maintain a vision before your mind of what would be a perfect personality. Endeavor to achieve that each day. Avoid allowing your mind to become dejected and negative. Realize that the clouds in life will eventually pass and the sunlight will again become visible. Through patience and persistence, greater possibilities of the head and heart unfold.

Ultimately, being supremely practical implies moving towards Self-realization. The Self, the Essence of every person, is infinite with boundless potentiality. You will discover endless resources of energy and potentiality within yourself, and you will help others to do the same.



FROM SWAMIJI'S KITCHEN

Mixed Vegetable Sabji

- 1 medium zucchini or eggplant, cut into pieces
- 2 large potatoes, cut into pieces
- 1 large tomato, chopped
- 2 cups cauliflower pieces
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 Tbs. vegetable oil
- 1/4 tsp. cumin seeds
- 1 or two whole small dried chilis
- 1/2 tsp. turmeric
- 1 tsp. or more curry powder, garam masala, or chat masala (spice blends available in Indian groceries)
- salt to taste

Fry cumin seeds and chili in oil just until they sputter. Then add potato and onion and stir. Cover the pan and fry on high heat until onion is translucent. Add curry powder and turmeric (or spice blends of your choice), stirring until vegetables are well coated with the spices.

Now add all the other vegetables and salt. Fry for five minutes and then add three cups of water. Cover and cook. You may add 1/2 cup of buttermilk, but it is optional. This adds a different flavor. When potatoes are tender, *sabji* is ready. Serve hot with bread or any rice or wheat preparation.

This is the typical method of preparing vegetables in India. Various vegetables can be cooked together according to your choice.