

Spiritual Postures

“And what I say to you I say to all: keep awake.”
(Mark 13:37)

“We must not wish anything other than what happens from moment to moment, all the while, however, exercising ourselves in goodness.” St. Catherine of Genoa

“Direct knowledge of God cannot be had except by union, and union can be achieved only by the annihilation of the self-regarding ego, which is the barrier separating you from God.” Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*

To be fully awakened has been called *puritas cordis*, or purity of heart, by the church Fathers. It’s the true self, the soul, unfettered by the bonds of a dysfunctional ego, living a life that it was meant to live. This is our objective, this is enlightenment. Enlightenment isn’t something only to be achieved by a select few, but it’s the natural state for all of us, given to us in Eden.

The awakening process can be facilitated by using five key techniques discussed below. These techniques are spiritual “postures” that we can take as we travel through each moment of the day. The spiritual postures are attitudes and positions of *consciousness* that are centered in the soul. These five postures will be discussed in the sequence that they generally occur in the awakening process:

- 1) Ego Awareness
- 2) Present Moment Awareness
- 3) Acceptance
- 4) Detachment
- 5) Presence of God

It is important to remember that spiritual development isn't a solitary journey. We do it together. Depending on the strength of your ego, you may need professional assistance in applying these spiritual postures. In any case, we all need to have a team of supporters around us: friends, counselors, pastors and spiritual directors. Find those people who have your interest in mind and work with them.

SPIRITUAL POSTURE 1 – EGO AWARENESS

The first thing that has to happen in the process of awakening is for us to have some change in consciousness. There has to be a realization, either sudden or gradual, that our behavior and thoughts are not really who we are or who we want to be. We may realize that we are “not our self,” or that we are “beside our self.” There is often a sudden awareness that there are actually two entities struggling for control of our consciousness. This realization has been called a shift in consciousness or the initial point of awakening. This is the time when we recognize that we

have been under the influence of the egoic mind (the dysfunctional ego) and we need to break free. We understand that there needs to be a separation of our self from our thought processes. It's a disidentification with the mind. The goal isn't to get rid of the thinking mind, but to put it back into its proper position relative to the soul. This is spiritual posture 1 – ego awareness. Eckhart Tolle emphasizes this by writing:

“The greatest achievement of humanity is not its works of art, science or technology, but the recognition of its own dysfunction, its own madness.”²¹

Ego awareness begins by understanding and being aware of the actions of the serpent ego as they occur or are about to occur. Being *aware* of what is happening when we come under the influence of the serpent is one of the biggest steps in taming it. With a little practice, we can see and feel when the ego moves in. What are some of the symptoms of its impending approach? Any of the following *could* be a sign that our true self, the self that is connected with God, is being threatened:

- Fear
- Anger
- Shame
- Bias
- Greed
- Envy
- Gossip
- Irritation
- Worry
- Guilt
- Prejudice
- Lust
- Confusion
- Hatred
- Anxiousness
- Restlessness

Any behavior that diminishes us, other people, creatures, nature or property is probably a good indication of the presence of a dysfunctional ego. Because our dysfunctional ego isn't really part of our true self, we can gain an advantage over it by recognizing it as being separate from us. We can begin to distance ourselves from the serpent ego by observing, in the moment, how we're feeling, how we're behaving, how we're reacting to other persons or situations. To begin to create this separation from our ego, we can ask ourselves questions such as:

“Why did I say that?”

“What am I feeling about that right now?”

“How would I describe what just happened to me?”

These and similar self-examining questions help us to begin to separate ourselves from our dysfunctional ego. Our true selves would not have behaved poorly, but while we're under the spell and control of the ego, we behaved in a way that will either protect our ego from threats or that manipulated other people to help our own ego grow and thrive.

So we begin to separate ourselves (the 'observer') from the feeling or action (the 'observed'). When we first practice this technique, we may not be able to remember to ask these questions of ourselves until later. We may have to begin by taking some time at the end of the day to reflect on the events of the day. This

can help us to begin developing the skill of being an observer of our own feelings and reactions. Journaling is one way to do this.

Perhaps something happened during the day to make you feel slighted or angry. There are a couple of ways to reflect on the incident. The first begins with writing the phrase in your journal, “I was angry because so-and-so said this to me.” This approach shows that you have *identified* with your anger – the serpent ego and you are one. Someone attacked your dysfunctional ego, so *you* are angry.

The other way keeps us in a better position, and begins to pry the serpent’s coils from around our soul, allowing the power of God to begin to flow back through our true self. In this approach we would begin by writing, “I *felt* anger because so-and-so said this to me.” We have now placed the anger out in front of our self where it can be examined more carefully. We will soon discover that our dysfunctional ego was injured by the incident, not our true self. As soon as we realize this, the anger dissipates because it’s exposed for what it really is. It can’t stand against the light of truth. Our true self can’t be harmed by the words fired at us from another person’s ego (remember that *their* true self would never say such a thing!). We realize that the incident was an ego-to-ego exchange, the other person’s ego was protecting itself by trying to diminish our ego. The true selves of the people weren’t even involved. They were buried under tons of serpent scales.

So, here is the subtle, yet all-important difference:

“*I feel* anger;” versus “*I am* angry.”

“*I feel* frustrated;” versus “*I am* frustrated.”

“*I feel* fear;” versus “*I am* afraid.”

This technique can be a great tool to realize that we can separate our self from our ego feelings. This creates ego awareness. This separation will begin to show us that in most cases it’s our ego that has been hurt and not us. This will allow us to have more compassion for our self, *and* for the other person who may be totally unaware that his or her dysfunctional ego is in control of him or her. Incidents of the day that used to really upset us can now be an opportunity for further learning and spiritual growth. These incidents are no longer assaults, but gifts! They teach us more about our self and our dysfunctional ego that’s now on the way to dissolving. Don’t resist them or renounce them, just observe them. This begins the process of reclaiming our soul, our connection with God. Eckhart Tolle said:

“The single most important step in your journey toward enlightenment is this: learn to disidentify from your mind. Create gaps in the stream of the mind.”²¹

As you practice this technique, eventually you will be able to create this ego awareness closer and closer to the actual incident itself. You won’t need to wait until the end of the day to realize that the feelings that have arisen in you are the result of a wounded

ego, and not your true self. Eventually you catch the ego before it has a chance to act.

Rarely in life, except in emergencies where danger is imminent, do we have to respond as quickly as we think we must. There is usually time to think before we respond. But cultural conditioning often demands an immediate response in many situations. Pausing to think and craft an appropriate response is generally viewed poorly as a sign of dullness or a product of low intelligence, or of being unprepared in a fast-paced society. “Time is money,” “If you snooze, you lose,” and other slogans remind us not to waste time, even a moment, or you’ll get behind and start to lose ground. But this is short-term thinking, invented by egos, the kind of thinking that often gets us into big trouble. The truth is that if we take more time up front than the “fast thinker,” the person who is good at “thinking on their feet,” we end up better off in the long run. Taking time to process and make good decisions creates fewer mistakes, strengthens relationships, and generally improves the quality of life. Pausing pays off in many ways! The soul is not in a hurry. The ego is in a race.

It’s only through awareness, and not just thinking, that we come to learn the difference between fact and illusion. Illusions belong to our ego and not to the real self. Illusions will diminish when we bring them into the light of awareness, the light of truth.

Once we have space between our true self and illusions, we will be able to respond appropriately to the situation at hand.

SPIRITUAL POSTURE 2 – PRESENT MOMENT AWARENESS

Once we have become aware of our ego, we can begin to look at each moment of our lives differently. The awareness developed to see our own dysfunctional ego can now be turned outward to the world around us. Each moment of life can now be viewed with fresh perspective. This is spiritual posture 2 – present moment awareness.

The present moment is that little bit of time and space that exists between the past and the future. It's what is happening right now at this very moment. The present moment isn't as long as a day, an hour, or even a minute. It's a continuous flow of very short time segments through the space around you, within your field of awareness.

Consider any action, such as walking. As you walk, think of every single step you take as being the present moment. The last step you took is already in the past, and the next step you take is still in the future, even though it's just moments away. The most important step you take is the one you are taking right now, this very moment.

“Time is measured by a threefold division, past, present and future... If you consider the present, it is through Him

[God] that you live; you, however, are master only of the present.” Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s Prayer*

The challenge we face with the present moment is that although our bodies and souls live in the present moment, our egos thrive on the past and the future. Egos cannot survive in the present moment. They cannot survive in the light of awareness and truth. They thrive on the pain of the past and the worries of the future. This is what gives them their identity.

Consider the walk we are taking. We may see an obstacle ahead of us which may generate concern or fear, or we may remember how we stepped on someone else’s toes a few steps ago (carrying from the past guilt or the shame of our clumsiness). The warning of the danger ahead or the memory of the past event becomes part of our ego’s identity in the present moment. The ego uses these events to affirm its illusions about life and the necessity for it to maintain control. How we deal with these past and future images in the present moment makes them either debilitating baggage or benevolent gifts. They will either block our sense of the present moment and our connection with God (thereby feeding the ego), or they will be used to develop a better understanding of ourselves and others (thereby reestablishing our connection with God).

The present moment is the only period of time when we’re truly conscious. If we’re thinking about the past or the future, then

we're not truly conscious to life. The connection we make with God and to His kingdom only happens now, in the present moment. As Anthony de Mello writes:

“To find the Kingdom is the easiest thing in the world, but it is also the most difficult. It is easy because the Kingdom is all around you, and within you, and all you have to do is reach out and take possession of it. It is difficult because if you wish to possess it you may possess nothing else.”²²

Present moment awareness holds the key to enlightenment, to releasing us from the grasp of the dysfunctional ego. Spiritual consciousness brings us this light of awareness; consciousness is only possible in the present moment – not in the past or the future.

Present moment awareness is the key to living a full life. It's the essence of being. Everything real that happens to us happens in the present moment. Our connection with God only occurs in the present. Our connection with others and with the earth only occurs in the present. Our presence in the present moment links us into the field of all possibilities; it's where we connect into the spiritual Internet, allowing our prayer power to flow out to others, and where we receive the flow of love and blessings.

Living in the present moment does not mean we forget the past or ignore the future. What it means is that we use these other two time frames in the proper way. Our past experiences are great teachers, and we must learn from them. But we avoid dwelling on

them to the point that they interfere with our present moment. Planning for the future is important, too, but the steps to get to the future all happen in the present moment, one at a time. Now is when the future is made.

How can we live in the present moment? The first of two techniques is to practice spiritual posture 1 – ego awareness, to become the observer of our thoughts and how we’re spending our time. This will alert us to when we’re not in the present moment. By catching our self dwelling on the past or the future, we immediately return to the present moment. The ego disappears and our true self is able to function freely.

The other key technique involves becoming more aware of the physical world around us. It’s using our five senses with intentionality. We go slowly through each moment of life with the curiosity of a child, noticing things around us. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3) This awareness includes paying attention to our own breathing, or feeling the movement of our limbs as we walk, or watching the flight of a bird, or seeing all the shades of a color where before we thought we saw only one. Listen for the voice of God in the wind, and in the words of another person. Feel the grass or the leaf of a plant. Treat objects as sacred gifts of God. Look at people as

temples of God. Consider each of your movements as a sacrament to God.

SPIRITUAL POSTURE 3 – ACCEPTANCE

Awareness of the existence of our ego opens the way for us to accept who we really are and the situation we find ourselves in. We come to realize that almost all of the struggles we have with ourselves have come from either our own ego or from the ego of other people. Acceptance is an important piece for our spiritual journey as it allows more of the light of truth into our lives.

Acceptance of who we are and where we are in life means that we accept our present situation and condition for whatever it is at the moment, without attaching any labels to it, such as good or bad. We don't argue with what is, because that will have absolutely no value in changing it. Resisting the present moment actually returns power back to our ego, which is never satisfied to begin with. We lose our grasp on the present moment when we attempt to renounce, resist or refuse to accept the present moment and our place in it. The simple phrase "It is what it is," helps us to remember that each moment is a result of all the previous moments that led up to it – a result of many more things than we could ever control. So, there is little point in arguing about what exists in this moment.

Acceptance is the spiritual posture we take *within ourselves* relative to who we are, or what is happening in the moment we find ourselves in. It's not necessarily the outward posture we take when there are situations that are clearly not tolerable or where there is imminent threat to life or property. We don't outwardly accept, for example, living in an abusive situation, cruelty to animals, or staying in the path of an oncoming storm. These are things where action must be taken. But, the action taken will be most effective if we avoid labeling it, judging it, or losing our true sense of self as we act. We must act from the soul and not the ego.

Acceptance is not passive. We acknowledge the moment for what it is, and accept who we are at this moment in time. Acceptance of the moment releases opportunities that would otherwise be invisible. Acceptance of the moment allows us to gain the best understanding of a situation without the interference of past baggage or future worry.

“Accept whatever comes to you woven in the pattern of
you destiny, for what could more aptly meet your needs?”
Marcus Aurelius

Once we have accepted the totality of the moment for what it is, we can effectively choose the proper course of action. Usually there are only three choices. We can either:

- 1) Change the situation; or
- 2) Leave the situation for something different; or
- 3) Accept the situation if we can not change it or leave it.

Failure to do any of these three will result in suffering, which, I suppose, is actually a fourth choice many people take.

Acceptance is our realization that our true self is made in the image of God, and that He accepts us as he made us. This doesn't mean we're finished growing, that we have "arrived." It does mean, however, that we are where we are supposed to be at this moment, and all the resistance, non-acceptance, judgment by us or others is totally useless in helping us along. God is our judge and guide, and He is the only one with a complete understanding of who we are and how we're going to grow. Who else has God's vision? It's nice if people appreciate who we are and what we have done, but specifically seeking this from other people can turn us into slaves of their opinions. God accepts you, so that means you can accept you, too.

SPIRITUAL POSTURE 4 - DETACHING

As discussed earlier, an attachment is a persistent demand our dysfunctional ego makes on us to satisfy a specific desire to the point that it becomes part of our identity. Attachments begin as desires and eventually grow into obsessions. The attachment may be to a particular career, title or position; it may be to one's wealth or social status; it could even be to another person. Each attachment leaves a psychological residue that uniquely reflects the nature of the ego's demand and degree to which it enshrouds the

soul. For example, an attachment may ultimately cause a person to become irritable, paranoid, envious, worrisome, shameful or prejudiced, to name a few.

These ego residues are usually more visible to others than they are to the person with the attachments. This is because the ego is skilled at using defense mechanisms, such as denial or repression. It's not until the ego-possessed person awakens to his or her ego that the cost of having the attachment is realized. The truth of the matter is that for every attachment we have we pay a price in peace and happiness. Why? Because each attachment drains us of time, energy, money and relationships. At some point we finally say, "Enough is enough!" We begin to seek freedom from the prison that the attachments have built around us. When we realize this, spiritual posture 4 can be helpful.

Detaching does not mean we disassociate from people or things, but we begin to view them differently, in a way that brings greater respect and love to relationships with people and stewardship of things. As with taming our serpent ego, we cannot get rid of attachments through direct confrontation. Resistance and renunciation will not work. Judging them as bad or evil will not work. The ego is well-prepared for these tactics, and is a master at defeating them. So, a different approach is needed.

As with the ego, bringing attachments into the light of truth will begin to dissolve them. The two sides of this spiritual posture

including seeing the attachment for what it really is, and feeling what life is really like without its burden. It feels good!

Begin by observing what the attachment really is and what it's really doing to us. See it for its cost, the suffering it brings. Attachments simply don't provide the value or the happiness the ego wants us to think they have. They can't sustain the happiness they promise. Attachments rob us of reality – of life itself. Our true happiness comes from within the soul, not from some external object, person or situation. The things of this world were given to us to care for and enjoy; they were not meant to possess us.

As we begin to shed the bonds of attachments, we will begin to feel life as it was meant to be. The feelings of inner peace and joy, however small at first, provide us with a sense of what life is really like without attachments. It is our natural condition, what God intended for us. Experiencing and remembering this sensation will help us to shed other attachments and keep us from developing new ones.

All physical things, including our bodies, are impermanent. As part of the physical world, they eventually change into something else. That is the nature of objects which are basically solid energy. Energy has to move, so it cannot remain confined in the boundaries of an object for long. But with this realization comes the understanding that there are parts of us that *are* permanent – our souls are pieces of God Himself, spirit matter,

which are connected with Him now and forever. The breath of life comes from God and will return to God, but will always be.

SPIRITUAL POSTURE 5 – PRESENCE OF GOD

Spiritual posture 5, the presence of God, is learning to feel and see His presence in each and every moment of our lives. This is what we experienced in the garden of Eden, and this is what we can experience again with practice over time. When our egos flee from the light of truth we will have plenty of room for God once again. The gates to the Kingdom swing open.

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” (Rev. 3:20)

The presence of God is the grace of God. Thomas Merton defines grace as “... the power and light of God in us, purifying our hearts, transforming us in Christ, making us true children of God, enabling us to act in the world as His instruments for good and His glory.”²³ He goes on to say that the presence of the Holy Spirit within us changes us from carnal beings to spiritual beings.²⁴

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple, and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ... For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” (I Corinthians 3:16)

God isn't someplace else in a far-off castle. He is right here with us; He is right here in us. “ ‘...and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God is with us.’ ” (Matthew 1:23) But besides knowing that God is with us, that He is a part of us, it's still necessary to make a connection with Him in our life. How can we do this?

Much of the training and indoctrination we received as we went through life was based on concrete observations and thought. We were taught to see things for what they physically were: That thing you sit on is a chair; that flower is a plant; fire is combustion of materials; light is made up of photons racing through space; gravity holds things together. We were taught names and dates of things that happened in the past, and we were taught our multiplication tables. Much of what we were taught was based on our scientific understanding of the physical world, but we were also shaped by cultural norms that supported corporate profits and individual independence. This led us to a mentality of scarcity and materialism that made some rich and others poor. All of this cultural formation proved to be fertile ground for individual and collective egos, leaving little room for spiritual understanding and growth.

As the light of truth reenters our lives, the ego melts away taking with it the false principles and values that have served only a select few people to the detriment of others. We still know that

that thing we sit on is a chair, but now we see it as a gift of God, something to rest on, something to use to sit down and talk with someone else, something to pull up to a table and share a meal with another person. We begin to look at people, things and our behavior much differently. As Aldous Huxley describes it:

“The person who has learned to regard things as sacred symbols, persons as temples of the Holy Spirit, and actions as sacraments, is the person who has learned constantly to remind him/herself who they are, where they stand in relation to the universe and God, how they should behave toward their fellows and what they must do to come to their final end.”²⁵

When we allow the presence of God into our lives we begin to see things in at an expanded level: We see things as being much more than their physical nature; we see people as much more than just another human being; we see our every movement as an act of God’s love. This is how we connect with God; we let Him be in us and become us. Our eyes become His eyes, our hands become His hands, and our voice becomes His voice.

The tasks we do during the day, either as part of our occupation or household chores, become the means by which God moves among His people looking for ways to help and make the world better, even in the smallest of ways. It may be holding a door open for someone else, picking up an object off the street that may hurt someone else, or offering a smile to someone else in need of one. Making the day a little nicer for someone else is an act of

great value to God. Man's world may put little value on these actions, but they warm the heart of God.

The voice of God speaks to each of us all day long. What does He sound like? He sounds like every person asking for help, or saying thanks, or offering a compliment. He is the sound of a child playing, every person laughing, every bird singing; He sounds like a busy city street or a symphony orchestra; we hear him in the hammering of a house being built, or in an ambulance siren; He's the sound of a clock ticking or a phone ringing; His voice is the sound of a storm wind or a gentle breeze. When you see a flower He is asking you to see more than just a plant – He is speaking, "See the beauty in the world? Share it and enjoy it!" God's voice is the sound of life, moment by moment.

So, if you're waiting for a message from God, He's waiting for you to hear the ones He's already sending you. Jean-Pierre de Caussade notes:

"You are seeking God and He is everywhere. Everything reveals Him to you, everything brings Him to you. He is by your side, over you, around and in you. Here is His dwelling and yet you still seek Him."²⁶

Armed with these five spiritual postures, we're ready to explore our outer purpose – who we were made to be, and how we can serve Our Lord in our own unique way. Take your time on this spiritual journey. There is no rush. Be sure to allow yourself

room for growing at your own pace. Be compassionate with yourself on your journey.

“This treasure of the Kingdom of God has been hidden by time and multiplicity and the soul’s own works, or briefly by its creaturely nature. But in the measure that the soul can separate itself from this multiplicity, to that extent it reveals within itself the Kingdom of God. Here the soul and the Godhead are one.” Meister Eckhart

Endnotes

21. Eckhart Tolle, *Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (New World Library, CA., 1999), p.21

22. Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love*, (Doubleday, New York, 1991), p.162

23. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness*, p.7

24. Ibid. p.30

25. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p.271

26. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present Moment*, (Harper San Francisco, 1966), p.18