

Practices From the Inside Out: What Are Spiritual Practices?

Strategic Monk

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What Are Spiritual Practices?

People talk to me about spiritual practices. Some people have questions about what they are or which ones they might want to follow. Others have strong opinions, based on their own experiences, about which practices are most helpful or enjoyable.

We each have our own personal ideas and questions about spiritual practices. Some of us have our favorite practices and some of us have practices we try to avoid.

Many of us believe there is an established list of what constitutes a spiritual practice. Some of us wonder about the differences between spiritual practices and habits and other ways we behave.

We may be familiar with practices which were part of a tradition in which we were raised. Some of us grew up going to church or synagogue or mosque.

Many of us had no religious or spiritual tradition as children. None of the practices we learn about has a familiar feeling for us.

One definition of spiritual practices describes them as actions we take to cultivate spiritual development. Some people think of them spiritual disciplines or exercises.

Many people recognize seven ancient practices from a variety of traditions. They include praying at set times during each day, following a liturgical year, seeing a Sabbath, participating in a Eucharist, fasting, offering contributions to a community, and making pilgrimages.

There are also particular contemplative practices. These include silent prayer, contemplative

reading or *lector divina*, a daily practice called *examen*, walking a labyrinth, and spiritual direction or companioning. Many people also include practices such as keeping a spiritual journal, yoga, and meditation.

But reading a list of actions is not the same as understanding what makes them spiritual practices. Why are some things we do considered spiritual practices while others are not? What if traditional practices do not cultivate our spiritual life?

When Are We Following Spiritual Practices?

There can be a certain amount of irony in thinking about spiritual practices. The term itself implies we can take practical steps to develop spiritual life in us.

Some people believe spiritual disciplines are ways to earn spiritual maturity. In the same way physical exercise helps us get stronger, they think, these practices will make us stronger spiritually.

Other people assume spiritual practices are like a checklist we can follow to grow in spiritual life. They think they must be growing spiritually if they are following all these particular practices.

I see spiritual practices differently.

We are not trying to bargain with spiritual life or force our way into growing. Our lives are not about winning a race to earn spiritual points in order to gain maturity or redemption. We are not working to show other people how spiritual we are.

Our practices are not about convincing other people of our own worthiness. Spiritual practices are about helping us become open to spiritual life which already exists within us and around us.

We practice listening to sacred stillness and praying without words, for example, to pay attention to what is there. Some of us have been told praying is how we talk to God. Our contemplative listening practices help us become open to the other side of the conversation.

In many of our everyday lives it is challenging to pay attention to what is important. We are distracted by urgencies we feel all around us. Spiritual practices help us learn ways to pay attention in each present moment.

Like in any strong relationship, our understanding of spiritual life grows as we pay attention. We listen, pay attention and are reminded we live spiritual lives.

Our practices which open us to spiritual life are spiritual practices.

How Do We Choose Spiritual Practices?

We do not want to force ourselves to follow any spiritual practices.

I know people who decide they will dedicate themselves to following a practice no matter what it takes. Based on something they read or a conversation they feel committed to a particular practice.

It is important to remember our spiritual practices are part of a relationship, not an exercise program. When I work with someone interested in a particular practice I encourage them to try it for a little while. The practical, everyday experience of a practice may not be what they expect it to be.

Sometimes people believe we are required to follow certain practices. Other people might have expectations.

There are practices, for example, some people feel guilty or ashamed about not following. Other people, for whom those practices are a better fit, might try to push them into beginning a practice.

In many ways, like in any good relationship, the entire choice is not up to us. We may experience practices which choose us instead of us choosing them.

Going Beyond Traditional Spiritual Practices

Each of us is discovering our own unique, personal relationship to spiritual life. Some of the traditional spiritual practices might help us, while some of us choose to go beyond those practices.

The spiritual practices for us are the ones which help us be open to spiritual life. There is no boundary which necessarily holds us to a list of traditional practices.

The practices people have traditionally followed have worked for many people over a long period of time. They are often a good place to begin exploring, but they are not final answers.

What are the behaviors or habits which help us appreciate and explore spiritual life? How do we cultivate spiritual life? That is where we plant the seeds of our spiritual practices.

I know people for whom taking a walk each day is a spiritual practice. For other people, reading books or talking with a spiritual companion helps them be more open to spiritual life.

The variety of ways we experience and appreciate spiritual life is as diverse as we are. There is no final correct answer we are must follow.

Each of us finds, and is found by, our own spiritual practices.

What spiritual practices are we following today?

How will we go beyond traditional spiritual practices this week?

[Image by [archer10](#)]

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