

Spiritual Practice

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Spiritual practice is as complex and varied as it is simple and singular in purpose. It can take place in solitary or group settings. It is what nurtures our spiritual development and brings us closer to the Divine.

This article explores the plethora of spiritual practices available to us. Some will seem rather mundane, like taking a walk in the forest. Others may seem almost extreme in their nature, like the ascetic practices of the Lakota Sioux and Buddhist monks.

This article does not claim to be an authoritative source for all spiritual practices in existence today. Perhaps you know of other spiritual practices that are not mentioned in this article. If so, please contact Robert to share your practices and/or experiences.

When I set out to write this article, I thought it would be the typical intellectual and literary process: conceive an idea to write about; do some research; and then put your thoughts down on paper, making reference to other peoples' thoughts and ideas where appropriate and beneficial. As I conducted my research, it became clear that given what had already been written on the subject, this article would be better served as a documentation of the various spiritual practices available for us to explore as part of our spiritual journey and healing.

One source of literature that is referenced frequently in the first part of this article is Rev. Dr. Johathan H. Ellerby's [Return to the Sacred: Ancient Pathways to Spiritual Awakening](#). His sweeping review of ancient spiritual ritual and practice documents 12 paths to spiritual awakening. Rev. Dr. Ellerby's work was not only comprehensive and ambitious, but his book accounted for his first-hand experiences of the practices which is why I have chosen to use his research and experiences liberally throughout the first part of this article.

Why Spiritual Practice Matters—The Benefits of Spiritual Practice

Before we look at spiritual practices, let us first review a few reasons why Rev. Dr. Ellerby thinks spiritual practice matters. First, spiritual practice offers healing power. In addition, it may also be a "determinant" of health. Rev. Dr. Ellerby points out that the noted physician Andrew Weil, M.D., has spoken about how spirituality is critical to a person's health, well-being and healing. Eastern and indigenous medicine incorporates subtle healing and natural powers into the understanding of illness and medicine. He also notes that it is only within the past 100 years that the term *spirit* has been "quarantined" from the medical community and mostly in Western culture.

Second, spiritual practice may reveal where all meaning comes from. Ellerby states "I've always been drawn to the necessity of spirituality in maintaining a healthy relationship with the world. A healthy spirituality becomes an orientation point for all of our choices". [p.33] He goes on to share:

Much of the despair and disease I've encountered in my work in hospitals and my counseling and healing practice is rooted in life choices that create disharmony. When people honor their deepest sense of meaning, identity, and purpose, they tend to be resilient, vibrant, and ready to cope well. When people live according to expectations, roles, and the judgments of others, a feeling of disconnection and depression often emerges. The vital force of life responds to the harmony within us, and is diminished whenever there is a loss of love and balance.

As you understand and honor your innermost sense of self, it impacts your relationships, work, and connections to the mysteries of life. When you examine and evaluate the depth and nature of your spirituality, you'll begin to encounter aspects of yourself and the world around you that you may have forgotten or overlooked. Carol Jung was fascinated by this problem and talked about the "shadow" as an important dimension of healing. The shadow self is not the "negative" aspects of self, but those aspects that are denied, unaccepted, or disowned. When you accept and explore the aspects of yourself that you've hidden, forgotten, or denied, you gain access to new reserves of energy, clarity, and freedom.

At first, much of spirituality can look like psychological healing and "personal growth". This is a significant layer of the excavation and evolution because it's about revealing limiting thoughts and feelings. Everyone can also benefit from the chance to explore their preferences and attractions. Before you know yourself well, you may be attracted to superficial pleasures because they're easy, appealing, and enforced by society. If you continue to be open to questioning and exploring your true nature, those superficial needs and desires become less satisfying as you naturally turn further inward, connecting to your spiritual essence.

As your spiritual practice reveals the value of the intangible, you'll often be surprised that your experience of the world dramatically changes. Opening your heart with the presence of compassion and connection in your choices will begin to attune you to your subtler senses and perceptions. As you release judgment and expectations, you'll experience the power of being fully present and aware. This is the beginning of spiritual experience. [p.34-35]

Third, spiritual practice can contribute to inner peace and emotional well-being. Rev. Dr. Ellerby talks about some of his research and the dramatic difference that spirituality made to inmates involved in treatments programs that included a spiritual dimension, versus those treatment programs that did not include spirituality as part of the program. Not only were inmates "more likely to complete their treatment programs when spirituality was included, but they made greater progress and were less likely to reoffend." [p. 36]

Fourth, spiritual practice offers direct psychological and health benefits. Some of the benefits Rev. Dr. Ellerby reveals include:

- Community support and promotion of a healthy lifestyle

- Social support, which reduces the impact of stress and isolation
- The physiological benefits of positive emotions (such as love, joy, and connection)
- Conscious choices in physical activity and lifestyle
- The influence of positive attitude (such as hope, optimism, and positive expectation)
- The healing influence of bioenergies activated through spiritual practices and spiritual states of consciousness
- The activation of psychosomatic healing mechanisms
- The activation of a nonlocal healing intelligence and energy (Higher Power / God)

In addition, Rev. Dr. Ellerby states that research reveals spiritual practice as being associated with helping:

- High blood pressure
- Hypertension
- Cardiac arrhythmias
- Chronic pain
- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Muscle tension
- Mild to moderate depression
- Infertility
- Erratic brain waves
- Postoperative anxiety
- Premenstrual syndrome
- Migraine and cluster headaches
- Low self-esteem
- Symptoms of cancer and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)
- Wound healing

Tips and Guidance for Your Spiritual Practice

As with any activity we engage in, it is prudent to consider any risks or precautionary measures we should take before we set off on our adventures. For example, if we decided to take up back-country skiing (i.e., skiing in remote areas with no groomed trails or patrols), we may want to learn about changing weather conditions and avalanche threats. We may want to learn basic first aid and survival techniques in the event we got lost. We may also be well advised to always ski with a buddy or trained guide. While most spiritual practices are not as risky as back-country skiing, there are some things to consider before you venture into your spiritual practice.

Rev. Dr. Ellerby offers four things to consider when engaging in any spiritual practice. First, nature is a powerful partner. Invite nature into your spiritual practices. Second, some spiritual practices may involve risk. Until you have acquired a sufficient level of competency, consider having a supervisor or coach for those practices you feel involve a level of risk in which you are not comfortable. Third, while most spiritual practices should have a daily component, also try and include weekly and seasonal dimensions. Lastly, consider joining a community of people in your practice (whatever the practice may be). Solitary spiritual practice may require an extraordinary level of discipline and

joining with a community of people for a given spiritual practice can not only add fun to your routine but can also add much needed support.

There are eight attitudes Rev. Dr. Ellerby suggests be your companions for spiritual practice:

Compassion: No Harm. Be kind, patient, and forgiving to yourself and others as they engage in spiritual practice. “Let love be your compass, helping you make all decision.” [p.72]

Optimism: No Fear. Rev. Dr. Ellerby suggests asking yourself, “What can I learn from this moment? What am I grateful for?” Stay positive and look for the lessons in what you experience and learn.

Observation: No Judgment. Be self aware during your practice but do not criticize or judge yourself, or others. Judgment creates an energy that blocks healing and growth.

Contemplation: No Striving. Take the time to reflect on what you learned about yourself during your practice. Take the time to learn from your experience. “Insight can’t be forced”. [p.73]

Dedication: No Procrastination. Stay committed to your practice. Some days will be a challenge but that challenge is part of your practice. Dedication and commitment are required in order for your soul to mature and grow. Rev. Dr. Ellerby suggests that avoiding your practice diminishes the power of your soul.

Humor: No Ego. Have fun with your practice and do not forget the healing that can accrue from leaning to laugh at yourself.

Surrender: No Attachment. Learn to give up control. Let your higher power guide you during your practice. Avoid setting too rigid of expectations that will block your flexibility and openness.

Intention: No Doubt. Intention, rather than expectation, should provide you with a clear, unwavering path for your practice. Rev. Dr. Ellerby suggests that intentions are pure and deep heartfelt feelings come from our soul. Focus on your intentions to “focus your energy and strengthen your energy”. [p. 74]

The 12 Master Paths or Spiritual Practices

The first set of spiritual practices I want to share with you come from Rev. Dr. Ellerby book previously mentioned. He groups his 12 master paths (or practices) into one of four orientations: body-centered practices; mind-centered practices; heart-centered practices; and soul-centered practices. Within each orientation are three spiritual practices. For the purpose of this article and the benefit of the reader, the orientations and practices are summarized in the tables on the following pages. Please note that some of the examples within the spiritual practice categories are not taken from Rev. Dr. Ellerby’s work.

Body-Centered Practices:

These practices focus on the body; they often incorporate physical movement and include: ceremony and ritual; movement; and sounds/music.

| Practice | Description | Examples |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ceremony and Ritual | Practice to help us strengthen our relationship among our self, our community and the Sacred. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Native American Sun Dance ▪ Indigenous Vision Quests ▪ Smudging ▪ Japanese Tea Ceremony ▪ Catholic Baptism ▪ Christian Confirmation ▪ Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat), Passover (Seder), Holiday of Harvest (Sukkot), Bat Mitzvah and Bar Mitzvah ▪ Hindu Sacred Thread Ceremony |
| Sacred Movement | Practice to refine concentration, prepare the body for meditation and/or awaken vital energies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Yoga (physical yoga) ▪ Qigong ▪ Tai Chi ▪ Alexander Technique ▪ Feldenkrais Method ▪ Walking Meditations ▪ Jewish Ophanim ▪ Native American Ceremonial Dance |
| Sacred Sound and Music | Practice using sound and vibration to turn our attention to the Sacred. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Crystal and Tibetan Bowls ▪ Tingshaw (Tibetan Prayer Bells) ▪ Drumming ▪ Chanting (e.g., Monks, Hindu, Tamal, and Sikh) |

Mind-Centered Practices:

These practices focus on the mind; they are meditative and sedentary in nature and include: prayer; meditation; and sacred study.

| Practice | Description | Examples |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Prayer | Practice to “connect us with the capacity and potential in ourselves that can move spirit and energy and influence the world.” [p. 109] | Most every culture, religion and faith around the world engages in prayer. It is a powerful practice to help us connect to the Sacred. |
| Meditation | Practice to help quiet the mind and connect with the Sacred. “Meditation is universal and practiced by followers of religions as diverse as Judaism, Islam, Taoism, Sikhism, Christianity, and Baha’i”. [p. 122] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sitting ▪ Walking ▪ Visualization ▪ Breathing Patterns ▪ Contemplative Prayer <p><i>Meditative practices may also incorporate sound.</i></p> |
| Sacred Study | An intellectual practice to open the heart and mature the mind. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sunday School or Bible Study ▪ Christian Bible ▪ Jewish Sefer Torah ▪ Taoist Tao Te Ching ▪ Islam Koran |

| Heart-Centered Practices: | | |
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| <i>These practices focus on the heart; they represent a deep gratitude and appreciation for the presence of the Divine or Sacred in our lives and include: devotion; sacred service; and guru-guidance.</i> | | |
| Practice | Description | Examples |
| Devotion | Practice to show or express reverence to the Divine or Sacred. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Christian worship of Jesus ▪ Buddhist worship of Buddha ▪ Muslim worship of Allah ▪ Indigenous peoples' worship of the spirit world |
| Sacred Service | Practice to honor the Sacred in this human condition by committing to help and heal others. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Chaplain ▪ Priest or Minister ▪ Rabbi ▪ Missionary ▪ Volunteer working with poor and/or homeless ▪ Volunteer working in poverty- or disaster-stricken areas |
| Guru-Guidance | Practice of working with a master spiritual teacher. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teacher-guru is an experienced and evolved spiritual teacher you entrust with your training and development. ▪ Divine-guru is someone who is deemed to be spiritually extraordinary, a prophet. Examples may include: The Pope, Dalai Lama, Mohammed, Jesus, Sai Baba, etc. |

| Soul-Centered Practices: | | |
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| <i>These practices focus on the soul; they may involve deprivation, renunciation, endurance, abstinence, and extended periods of isolation and include: ascetic practices; death practice; and life path.</i> | | |
| Practice | Description | Examples |
| Ascetic Practices | Practice of profound experience, often transformative—usually resulting in touching the Spirit that resides in all of us. “An ascetic practice is one that typically rejects ordinary behaviors in order to contemplate the spiritual and metaphysical”. [p. 193] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wiwangwacipi, the Sundance Ceremony of the Lakota Sioux; other indigenous peoples who reportedly participate in similar practices include the Dakota, Nakota, Anishinabe and Menominee. ▪ Hanblecha or Vision Quest |
| Death Practices | Practice of being with persons as they pass on from this human existence / condition. It involves being with the dying during their final hours. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Volunteer at a hospice. ▪ Train as a Chaplain. ▪ Go fearlessly to the bedside of friends and family members when they are ill and/or dying. |
| Life Path | Practice of embracing life which brings about profound changes in us and the world. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Any extraordinary story of faith, seemingly supernatural metaphysical talents or spiritual discipline and practice. All of the other Master paths and practices discussed above lead to the Life Path practice. |

Other Spiritual Practices

There are other spiritual practices that have not been mentioned previously but that are worthy of note. These include:

- Guided imagery
- Labyrinth
- Channeling
- Crystals and Gemstones
- Animals
- Poetry
- Fasting
- Nature
- Sacred Space
- Psychotherapy, Psychoanalysis and Counseling

Guided imagery is a powerful tool for healing and bringing peace into your life. The practice uses primarily the imagination in visualizing a condition, feeling, state or place that will bring us to a more positive and/or peaceful space. The result can be powerfully healing, relaxing, nourishing and refreshing. Guided imagery can be used for everything from stress-reduction, to enhancing energy and physical/athletic performance, to healing chronic illness and disease, to improving one's emotional state.

The labyrinth is an ancient mystical tool that has the power to shift consciousness. A labyrinth is typically circular in formation—the universal symbol for unity and wholeness—and possesses only one path. The labyrinth path is intended as a metaphor for our life path—our journey through life. Some suggest that if we can bring ourselves to surrender to the labyrinth's path, we will enable our soul to heal and be whole. By following the labyrinth's path we can connect with the Divine, the Sacred. The labyrinth, as a practice, is reported to be of particular benefit to those in transition or going through change.

Channeling continues to be a controversial practice. It involves another person—such as an oracle, shaman, medicine man or woman—connecting with the spirit world and using this connection to communicate between the spirit realm and the human condition realm. Channeling is thought of as a method to communicate with more evolved entities that have the ability to enlighten us as we move on our conscious evolutionary path that eventually returns us to the Divine, the Sacred, the Source.

Crystals, gems and stones are thought to be sources of power and energy. Many modern-day crystal practitioners use crystals and gemstones as a healing modality. June Mewhort, in her book The Spiritual Labyrinth: A Guild through the Myths, Symbols, Practices and Pitfalls of New Age Philosophy, notes that “it is believed that in concert with the human healer, they work with the subtle energies of the etheric and spiritual bodies, realigning, attuning and enhancing those energies to promote harmonics that will translate into physical healing. They work with life force, prana, or chi, balancing, harmonizing and persuading the body to heal naturally”. [p. 143]

Observing and being with animals can be a wonderful window on spiritual practice. As Diana L. Guerrero expresses in her book What Animals Can Teach Us about Spirituality:

Inspiring Lessons from Wild and Tame Creatures, animals are spiritual beings that have much to offer us by way of spiritual practice, if we only take the time to observe them in action. From the loyal dog, playful otter, powerful polar bear, heart-based lion, communicative wolf, visually-astute eagle and wise owl, Diana Guerrero writes about how all animals demonstrate spirituality in their day-to-day lives. My little Shiz-Tzu dog named Muggins—I affectionately refer to him as *Little One*—is a remarkable expression of spirituality: always, always full of love—unconditional love at that; always ready and willing to serve; always in a state of *now*; always in a state of pure and utter peace, *Little One* demonstrates that all animals have something to teach us about how to live a spiritual life.

Robert McDowell writes passionately about poetry as a spiritual practice in his book Poetry as Spiritual Practice: Reading, Writing, and Using Poetry in Your Daily Rituals, Aspirations, and Intentions. The author eloquently portrays how reading or writing poetry requires the person to be in the present moment with focused vision that is meditative in nature. Think about the last time you were enthralled with a poem you were reading. It brought you to a place of peace, did it not? “Poetry as spiritual practice leads to stillness, the calm centre where you are most open and alive. Poetry itself makes you more mindful, and as you become so, you gracefully reconnect with the natural world”. [p. 9]

While fasting was inherent in some of the ascetic practices previously mentioned, it deserves its own focus here. In his book Finding our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices, Brian McLaren talks of fasting as a way of facing one's weaknesses in the face of adversity (or impulses and cravings as McLaren puts it). In doing so McLaren suggests fasting allows one to practice impulse control and recognize the significance of “something other than impulse gratification”. [p. 86] In his unique, witty fashion, McLaren goes on to share that in fasting he experienced “a little practice in impulse control, a little practice at facing my weakness, a little practice at laughing at my pretensions to maturity and spirituality, and a new possibility was actualized”. [p.87]

Nature is abundant in its spiritual teachings and offers a plethora of opportunities and practices that will bring us closer to the Divine. From the land—its forests, lakes, rivers, open spaces and majestic landscapes—to the ocean and all its mysteries, to the skies and all its wondrous splendor, nature casts a spell on us that lets us know we are not alone in this time and space. Spend some time alone in nature and you will sense the mystical energy of the natural world. I am reminded of my own spiritual experience one day at the top of Whistler Mountain in beautiful British Columbia, Canada. I was on a ski vacation at the resort and took a day to sit quietly at the top of the mountain to just be *still* and *quiet*. After I settled into my meditation, I became aware that in *quietness* there is sound, in *solitude* there is presence, and in *spirit* there is unparalleled joy and happiness.

Establish and/or create a sacred space as part of your spiritual practice. These sacred spaces are places you can go to be quiet, to be at peace, and to be one with the Divine. Maybe your sacred space is in a church, or in nature, or maybe right in your home. Many have written about building alters in your home, like Sage Bennet, PhD, in her book Wisdom Walk: Nine Practices for Creating Peace and Balance from the World's Spiritual Traditions. These alters do not need to be sophisticated structures. They can consist of a few simple items: a candle; an ornament or statue; some prayer beads; or something else that denotes sacred to you. Where ever or what ever your sacred space

is, this space will be a place you can and will use to connect with the Divine and be your place of worship.

For some, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and counseling will be a controversial addition to this list of potential spiritual practices. There remains much stigma—most of it negative—regarding psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and counseling in general. These practices have been wrongly stereotyped by many as being for the weak, mentally challenged or those who have lost their way. I recently read a book that was authored by a well-known and well-published psychoanalyst who believed that in order to be an effective psychoanalyst, one had to first undergo extensive psychotherapy. I thought it was a courageous point of view. If one believes, as I do, that spirituality is about your personal journey toward enlightenment; if one believes that a significant aspect of reaching enlightenment involves becoming one with, or connecting with, one's true self or Divine Being; if one believes that psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and counseling can help you get to know yourself; it stands to reason that psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and counseling may be able to help with the spiritual process of enlightenment.

Some Simple, Everyday Spiritual Practices

If all of this talk about spiritual practices has overwhelmed you, do not despair. There are many simple activities that you can engage in that will help you connect with your higher self. Do not underestimate the effectiveness of the practices below:

- Reading spiritual literature (like this article, for example)
- Conscious movement, sight, hearing and touch
- Learning to live more in the eternal present—the now
- Evoking and trusting your own deep insights
- Living simply, honestly and generously
- Learning emotional balance
- Staying in silence and solitude amidst worldly noise
- Practicing happiness and love; the core attributes of spiritual living
- Volunteering as a form of spiritual practice
- Seeing divinity, the sacred story, and the opportunity for spiritual growth in every life event, even if tragic
- Being in the company of spiritual people and doing spiritual practice together
- Doing what you love (as Joseph Campbell taught: following your bliss opens doors never before possible or even conceived)
- Writing about spirituality
- Taking classes on spiritual subjects
- Talking to religious professionals about your concerns and questions
- Seeking spiritual guidance from a trained guide, director or teacher
- Listening to peaceful, relaxing music

Spiritual practice does not need to be complicated. In its purest form, spiritual practice becomes what you do and who you are. As your spiritual practice matures, you will attract new experiences that will enrich your life. Embrace these opportunities to connect with the Divine that *is* you—you and everyone around you will be better for it.

What Do You Think?

What spiritual practices have you enjoyed and/or experienced? You are invited to share your thoughts and experiences with Robert. He can be reached at rmeagher@istar.ca.

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