

Obstacles in Spiritual Practice

At some point in our lives, it is not uncommon to become dissatisfied with prayer, meditation practice, and spiritual development. We may despair of attending church or synagogue, be repelled by groups that we used to enjoy, or find ourselves bored with spiritual advice. We may invent excuses for why we are uninterested, lazy, or just disgusted with our lack of progress. We may avoid seeing our therapist or spiritual director or stop confiding in a friend. Prayer can be a chore, and while previously we brought our troubles to a trusted guide or to silent contemplation, now we spend more of our time avoiding these activities...

Awareness of our resistance to spiritual practice, then, can serve to reveal unacknowledged or unconscious dimensions of the psyche and spirit...The fear of confronting the self, to become aware of doubt and confusion, can create an all-consuming spiritual and psychological crisis. Various types of resistance—among them inertia, discouragement, confusion, avoidance, addiction, and willfulness—are indicators that our spiritual practices have gotten off-track and are being used to avoid the unpleasant or fractured places within. Whatever arises becomes an important tool of spiritual maturation, and the remedy I suggest is to meditate on and address the cause. If we feel lost, if we feel hopeless, if we feel discouragement, if we do not feel grounded in our divine center, as before, then that is where our prayer goes. Suspend old practices and pray directly for realization.

One of the obstacles to spiritual practice is spiritual **inertia**, the let-down that happens when meditation and prayer become difficult or do not result in obvious benefit. Inertia can generate feelings that you are not doing the practice correctly, you are inherently wrong, or your life is not progressing. In the past, efforts led to results, but now your spiritual practice is spinning in circles. Spiritual inertia may be the result of contemplating yourself instead of God. In other words, your practice has become so internalized and convoluted that you are actually meditating on yourself instead of contemplating the divine. Self-referential practice is static; it shields the ego from insecurity and dreads surrender to that which is greater than the self. Related to inertia, **discouragement** is a distinct emotional state where you find yourself derailed, stymied. You are disheartened and cannot connect to the source of your being. You no longer experience passion or longing for the divine...

In **confusion**, we may feel unmoored, as the disjuncture between our old and new reality is not yet resolved. We may become lost in a confused helplessness and, imprisoned by an old self-identity, are unable to escape. The impasse can be overpowering. We cannot go back to what we once were, but we cannot go forward either. Here we need to discern whether disorientation is the result of being bound by or stuck in the false ego, or whether it is part of a more profound transformation (such as the dark night) when the divine is drawing us deeper into faith, along a path we cannot see or know.

Avoidance is when practice touches on unpleasant feelings or painful memories and we may devise strategies to avoid uncovering hidden motives and injury. Trapped by the powerful emotion of fear, our perspective is altered so that we cannot see that it is easier to pass through the pain, than to resist...If your

prayer or meditation has become repetitive or rote because there is resistance to delve more deeply, then this is the time to suspend your practice. Let the practice go and instead pray about why it is that you are in avoidance. Ask [God] directly, instead of feeling that you are letting God or yourself down. In this way, with the help of Spirit, obstacles can be transformed.

When a practice is adhered to excessively, is used to bypass inner troubles, or overrides other aspects of life, these are symptoms of **addictive** impulses. Frequently, compulsive practices are those that require undue attention, bolster the false personality, or provide something to the self...An addictive personality can use anything, including spiritual practice, as a substitution-albeit a healthier one. But compulsive behaviors still obscure the gentle, humble, motiveless, and non-dual consciousness that underlie deeper states of contemplation. Being attached to the outcome of our labor may have its roots in a fear that we are not inherently good; or, in a desire to dominate others, that we must prove ourselves.

When we use spiritual practice as an **imposition of the will**, it does not lead to fullness of the self, but rather to diminishment...Eventually, layers of suppressed personality rise to the surface, disturbing the facade that our determination is keeping in place. In other words, our will is using spiritual practice to conceal those hidden fears and false identities that we do not want to unmask. Usually a situation arises to upend willful behavior. Life events occur that will simply require you to go deeper. The imposition of the will is never for freedom but is an act of aggression that we have posed on ourselves to suffocate conflicted emotions, thereby veiling deeper truths. When a person reaches a spiritual block, he or she will feel unclear motivations and uneasiness of heart-a jarring of the inner life-as a reminder that he or she is not on the right path. Contemplation is truth, and therefore it is a contradiction to seek self-knowledge using the will to suppress painful issues one doesn't want to confront.

In this look within, confession can be an antidote for the obstacles and painful actions that derail us, for we admit we have done something not in line with our better selves. The shame that occurs when we are aware of, but cannot disclose, the grip of our various stumbling blocks translates into pride, arrogance, and illusion. Repentance, however, overcomes resistance. Authentic sorrow changes our heart and the hearts of those we have injured. It is a force for lifting up our moral fiber and leading us to liberation...For good or ill, what we do and bury inside ourselves adds to the collective storehouse of consciousness. By having the willingness to face what is hidden, we open a portal to the possibility of change, and offer a welcoming heart for the birth of the holy among us. The philosophy that I hold and live is this: every one of our painful or self-destructive emotions and behaviors is built on top of a fundamental wound that distorts the intimacy of divine love. If you are willing to look within, the divine will guide you through darkness and into your true goodness. The gift of truth continues to surface throughout our lives, despite denials, calling us toward wholeness and healing, the universal force of love never abandons us. ~~Teaching on Text from the Tradition:~~ by Christine Luna Munger

Questions for Reflection: in general, what do you notice in your head, heart and senses from the text?

- What have you noticed about obstacles in your prayer and practice? How have you responded to them?