

## *Embodied Spiritual Practice*

### **A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By The Rev. CJ McGregor**

**Delivered on June 27, 2021**

“There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground. There are a thousand ways to go home again.” I adore these phrases written by thirteenth century Sufi poet and the originator of the dance the whirling dervish, Rumi. I’ll admit I adore every word that Rumi has given us, and I rely on his wisdom, his heart, and his compassion in living, truly living, my best life. I’ll also admit I’ve never danced the whirling dervish. Rumi is talking about spiritual practice and the idea that there are many of our daily as well as our intentional practices that support our spiritual lives.

Spiritual practices have always been at the heart and soul of the world's religions, and they are also key elements of today's less organized spirituality movements. They help us discover our deepest values, address our longing to connect with what we consider greater than ourselves, and propel us on the journey to wholeness — all aspects of spirituality. Spiritual practices are specific activities we do to deepen our relationships with the sacred and the world around us. Practices help us to connect to whatever name we use to describe that "something more" beyond ourselves. They enable us to become actively engaged with our inner or "true" selves — the depth of our being. And they expand the range of our experiences, encouraging us to relate in a particular way to other people and the whole creation.

"We are what we practice," Jewish writer Avram Davis observed. He writes, "If we become angry a lot, then essentially we are practicing anger. And we get quite good at it. Conversely, if we practice being joyful, then a joyful person is what we become." So, we practice all kinds of things all the time, but the decision to do spiritual practices is intentional. These activities have meaning and purpose, and they influence how we live our lives. Practices are usually very concrete and practical. They specify just how we can walk our talk. Sometimes before we can act, however, we may need to clarify our values and beliefs. Asking and living with questions is a kind of practice. The practice of asking questions is particularly strong for Unitarian Universalists. Some practices require setting aside a special place and time, but most of them can be done in the midst of our daily lives.

A spiritual practice does not have to be hard. It rewards presence, not effort. Some practices do yield an outcome, but many are done simply for their own sake. And practice does not make perfect. We can't expect to overcome all of our weaknesses and fix all our problems. Take my practice of meditation, for example. I have been practicing on and off for many years. The problem is that when I meditate, I find myself an hour later having been slumped over and sleeping. No matter what I do, how I position myself, the type of meditation I practice, it puts me to sleep. That's why I'm still practicing. I've realized perhaps the sleep is my spiritual practice. That is, when I remove myself from life's noise and quiet myself, and sleep I am practicing self-care. Now if I could just master not snoring in group meditation,

Practice is a process, and it changes over time. We may make a commitment to do a specific practice for years or we may get what we need from it in a day. Practices do not have to be complicated. I think we stay away from spiritual practice because we feel we are too busy, won't be good enough, can't practice in the way of someone else. Consider how many of the ritual exercises of the world's religions are simple: lighting a candle, eating a piece of bread, bowing. And don't disregard the use of your mind. Naming, remembering, watching, identifying, imagining, questioning — these are honored elements of the spiritual life. The best practices for us will arise naturally out of our ordinary activities as we reframe and redirect them toward new depth and breadth.

In spirituality, words have only 2% importance while 98% importance lies in the experience. This is why we claim within our sources of Unitarian Universalism direct experience. Our Unitarian Universalist theology depends on our direct experience with others and the world. 'Spiritual practice' is a stumbling block for even the most intelligent person who reads or listens to any matter on spirituality. The reason being most intellectuals tend to get caught up in the words and debate the sacred writings. However, ultimately one needs to experience spirituality and the words written in these sacred writings. This can be understood by the famous story of the scholar and the boatman.

Once a scholar was being ferried across a river by a poor boatman. During the boat-ride, they spent a while in conversation. The scholar named a number of holy texts and asked the boatman if he had studied them. When the boatman replied in the negative, the scholar remarked, "You have wasted half your life." As this discussion was going on, the boat sprang a leak and water rapidly entered it through the crevices. Seeing this, the boatman asked the scholar, "Sir, can you swim?" The scholar replied, "I have read several books on swimming and have gathered much information on it, but I cannot swim." The boatman then commented, "Then your entire life has gone to waste. This boat is about to sink!" The scholar's theoretical knowledge was of no use to him. Similarly, to be able to cross this vast ocean of worldly life and experience happiness through it, one should practice spirituality and not just acquire knowledge. Direct experience.

There are two types of spiritual practice I think we should be aware of. There is spiritual practice with expectation and spiritual practice without expectation. Spiritual practice with expectation is spiritual practice done with the expectation of worldly gain. For example, saying prayers, making offerings, fasting or doing some rituals to gain wealth, get a job, find lost objects, overcome an illness, or ensure the safety of a loved one. Spiritual practice without expectation is spiritual practice done with the sole aim of spiritual growth. Thus, in this mode of spiritual practice, seekers of spiritual growth will continue with their spiritual practice while using every event in their lives for spiritual growth. If at all they are faced with a difficult situation they will use the situation to grow spiritually by reducing their ego or surrendering the outcome of the situation. I wonder which type of practice you lean toward.

Let us return to that Rumi quote. Remember Rumi wrote, "There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground. There are a thousand ways to go home again." There are indeed a thousand ways. Have you ever been told, "What you need to do is..." and then the person tries to force their spiritual practice on you? There is not, despite what some religions might tell you, a set of practices that we must subscribe to, Just like the diversity of beliefs in this congregation, there is a diversity

of practice that soothes us, adds meaning to our lives, and comforts us. It is, however, in our interest to go from many to one. That is, focus on one practice and avoid many practices that leave you unfocused and exhausted. That misses the point. Think about it, is it better to dig one well to access water which is hundreds of feet deep or digging hundreds of wells of 10 feet deep? Is it better to accrue frequent flyer miles from various airlines or sticking to just one airline? The impact of our efforts is much more powerful when we concentrate our efforts on the one, instead of the many. When undertaking spiritual practice it is important to bear in mind that each individual is different and so what works for one person may not work for another. When climbing a mountain each climber thinks his way is the only way. But when he reaches the top of the mountain, he realizes that there were an infinite number of ways that could have taken him to the top. Likewise, there are as many paths of practice as there are people. If five patients were to go to a doctor and each was suffering from a different ailment, then giving all five the same medicine would not result in each of them being cured. So also, each of us are different and hence the same spiritual practice cannot be recommended for all. In a spiritual context each of us is unique.

Please don't be put off by the word spiritual this morning. Spiritual doesn't have to entail -- though it often does -- meditation cushions, prayer beads, chant books, yoga mats or any other such paraphernalia. A spiritual practice might be baking, gardening, running, knitting, playing piano, painting, hiking, meditating, golfing, doing yoga, tai chi or calligraphy. It is not so much about the form but about the profound and connective quality of the time spent within it. The practice part means just that: you do it daily, over and over, not in a gross way, but rather in a this-is-what-makes-me-who-I-am way. Without the aim of ever stopping with it, you practice as contribution to your ever-unfolding life on this earth. It can feel beautiful and compelling, harrowing and agonizing, annoying, vexing, boring as hell or as ordinary and routine as brushing your teeth. Above all it is your rock, the ultimate calming pillar, steady and reliable as they come.

Our spiritual practices provide clarity in the midst of our overflowing and demanding days. Practice wipes the fog from the lens of your mind and makes you blessedly sharper. They cultivate the attention required to complete your tasks. Precision and awareness become elevated in whatever it is you apply yourself to. They lift your mood. Joy and uplift come much more readily. Who doesn't want that? They create a sense of steadiness and grounding in change. No matter what unforeseen stuff is thrown at you, your sense of calm center is not so easily thrown off. THEY keep you afloat and even-keeled in even the most riotous emotional storms. When irrational feelings threaten to take you down, practice keeps you from capsizing. They help you see your life on a macro level. You come to rely on practice as a tool for stepping back and getting perspective on the broader picture. THEY draw you into the simplicity of the moment. Nothing like regular practice to bring you into the now, and to keep you from getting lost in the past or mired in fears of the future.

They connect you to and reveal true spirit. Practice is where you download profound intuitive messages by opening to your own divine spark. Ultimately, you must summon the courage to make room for spiritual practice, and the experiment that it is. You must be willing to face whatever arises within this uncanny vehicle and to touch the sacred in yourself every precious day.

May it be so.