



THE HOLY LIGHT ACADEMY



STEPPING STONES ALONG THE PATH



The Spiritual Disciplines

We are going to discuss the main disciplines to be used in these courses of study, although there are others we have discussed in further articles of the **Stepping Stones along the Path**, such as worship, study, service, and concentration.

These disciplines are tools of the soul that will assist you in your spiritual unfoldment. The primary disciplines we emphasize are prayer, meditation, contemplation, and the spiritual exercise.

We will start by explaining Prayer, Meditation, Contemplation, and the Spiritual Exercises.

Prayer is the first thing the aspirant usually practices, and you have probably been doing this for years already.

We will explain the scientific operation of prayer. People often pray in their own manner, but for prayer to function correctly there are a few steps you need to know. First is supplication, where you need to know what it is you are praying for. Then you contact the Creator, the place where God resides within your heart. It is similar to calling a friend on the phone and making sure you have reached him, which means you just don't start talking when you haven't even reached him yet. You have to make actual contact. Then you ask God what you want.

The steps are simple: contact God, then offer praise, worship, giving thanks to God, and then offer your supplication, and lastly end the prayer.

Christians prefer to pray in the name of Jesus Christ, and end by stating, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen." This is an option if you so choose.

We also ask that you pray in "right action," which means no harm will befall yourself or another in your prayer. Selfish prayers are unwise. If you have a genuine need, by all means take it to prayer. Praying for others who need help, offering blessing, healing, or counseling, is always wise. Likewise, visualizing what you seek is helpful. We recommend that you start a prayer list of people who may need your prayers.

Meditation is the art of going within. To properly meditate you must first learn relaxation and breath control, and also concentration, and from these meditation becomes retroactive. Certain

exercises will help with these beginning steps; for instance, the concentration exercise on the orange.

For the practice of meditation, as in prayer, always contact the Creator, that is, more specifically, the God-Self within. Then you allow your mind to be cleared of all thoughts. There are many reasons to meditate, like seeking peace of mind, stress reduction, controlling and dispelling negative emotions, problem-solving, seeking answers to questions, etc.

Meditation starts with the act of clearing the outer mind so that you can be open to the presence of the God-Self within, wherein you learn to listen to the inner voice. Practicing meditation will help you discern the mental clutter from genuine guidance from within, and this often takes time.

In fact, meditative writing, or what some may call automatic writing, is when you meditate with an open notebook and pen, and when you ask the God-Self a question or questions, you must be prepared to write down answers. Although sometimes the outer mind enjoys giving answers, write them down too, and afterward, you sort through what you have written and learn to discern which is the voice of God and which is not. Since you have a comparison of both in your notebook, eventually this discernment may become easier. It may be like comparing the chattering of an unruly child to the voice of a wise adult. Input from the ego is usually based on selfishness, greed, desires, fears, worries, self-serving, etc. Input from the Divine is always selfless, wholesome, inspiring, uplifting, mind-expanding, serving others, etc.

Thoughts do arise when you're trying to meditate, but as you learn to clear them out and allow peace to enter in, meditation will become easier after weeks, months, and even years of practice.

Contemplation is a form of deep concentration on a specific theme or topic. It is a way of receiving wisdom from within. It can involve reflecting upon spiritual ideas, perhaps from specific Scriptures you have read, reciting an affirmation, reviewing things in retrospection, or being receptive to the voice within. Essentially, you are posing a question for which you are seeking further understanding and insights.

Contemplative prayer involves mentally repeating a particular sacred word or phrase, an affirmation, or short prayer. This is a very devotional process and in this way you can connect to God within. This is explained more fully in the course on **Developing a Relationship with Jesus Christ**, Lesson Three.

Spiritual Exercises require meditation as a basis, which involves relaxation, breath control, concentration, and sometimes visualization, and sometimes this process will be contemplative. The essence of the spiritual exercises is focusing within, upon your higher nature, where the God-Self resides. Other phrases for this can apply, such as Christ Consciousness, Divine Consciousness, Buddha Consciousness, Cosmic Consciousness, etc. Many traditions may split hairs and define each one a little differently, but ultimately they are all the same as they are all expressions of the Creator.

Don't view these disciplines as stringent and arduous tasks, or like something you are required to do. See them as a means to progress on the spiritual path, as a way to unfold spiritually, especially as a way to grow closer to God, to where you enter and realize the reality of this Divine Consciousness within you. Let your heart and your yearning guide your way. Practicing these disciplines becomes a spiritual lifestyle, even an adventure of discovery.

There are various other forms of spiritual discipline, and different religions and traditions may view these somewhat differently. You can read the other articles on these disciplines in these **Stepping Stones**, which are worship, study, service, and concentration.

There are so many others that could be used as disciplines, such as confession, forgiveness (giving it or receiving it), fasting, solitude, making amends, and so forth. For an extensive view of several disciplines, we suggest that you read Richard J. Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*.

We must emphasize one last item. In Eastern philosophies, one-pointedness is an important principle, and we can call this concentration or keeping your focus on one thing at a time. When you go to chop wood, only chop wood. When you go to eat your meal, only do that. When you read a book, only do that. Unfortunately, your thoughts often run rampant when you are doing a particular task, and these must be controlled, and applying spiritual disciplines will help with this. There are people who believe in the practice of "multitasking." However, this is detrimental to anyone practicing meditation or any spiritual practices. When you practice multitasking, attempting to do several things at once, or even a few things, you are training your mind to be scattered, because you are trying to function in several directions at once. The most your mind can do is rapidly jump from one item to the next and to the next, similar to a juggler who is juggling many balls. This is not concentration; this is letting your mind run amok. A serious meditator would rather practice one-pointedness throughout the day. You could say each task you do is a meditation of focus. Then when it comes time to meditate, at night perhaps, you have already practiced concentration and then meditation becomes easier. A person who has practiced multitasking most of his life will fail at being able to truly meditate. This is why practicing one-pointedness on a regular basis is so important. Keep this in mind when you apply these spiritual practices.

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