



THE HOLY LIGHT ACADEMY



STEPPING STONES ALONG THE PATH



Study as a Discipline

Study is not just an academic discipline but it can be used spiritually as well, whether you are studying scriptures from various religious traditions, such as the Bible, the Quran, the Vedas, the Mahayana Sutras, the Torah, the Tao Te Ching, to name a few. Such sacred texts are considered sacred or divinely inspired, but there are other forms of spiritual literature that may be informative and educational.

The function of study is primarily a mental operation, but it does incorporate other areas as well, which makes it a more fulfilling discipline. If a work of spiritual literature is mentally stimulating and inspiring, then this directly affects the emotional and spiritual levels likewise. Also, it will affect the physical level when you take action on what you read, to apply certain practices and principles in your daily life, for instance.

In Christian Mysticism, when you read the teachings and commandments that Jesus Christ gave in the Gospels, and when you are stimulated by the profound impact of his words, you are stimulated on all levels: mentally, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. With enthusiasm you go forth and apply what he taught and live his teachings in your day-to-day life. Also, this is no different if you study sacred scriptures from other traditions, or spiritual literature that reflects true inner Wisdom.

You can begin this process of living true teachings in your life by practicing Study as a worthy discipline. Study is an act of focusing all of your attention on a specific subject, whether this is literature, music, art, dance, science, spirituality, nature, etc. The list is limitless. However, in these courses of study, your focus is on the spiritual nature of Life, and although the reading of certain literature or lessons is one of the main focuses, it is not the only one. For instance, when you read the course on **Soul Unfoldment on the Virtuous Path**, you can study the Ten Virtues through observance and contemplation. Also, you can study and observe Nature which is all around you. Henry David Thoreau is a perfect example of this, if you have ever read *Walden*.

Let us consider the study of spiritual literature, whether it is the lessons in these courses, or recommended reading from the book list, or other resources, etc. What you read and what you accept as true will affect you, for you are stimulated when what you read rings true to you as it resonates on all levels: mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. If you are using your intuition properly, you will be able to tell whether the passage actually rings true. In fact, often the mental level is affected first. You read about a particular principle of truth, for instance, when Jesus said, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you." (Matthew 7:7) Then it begins at the mental level which is the first receptor of input, then the

emotional level is affected, as you feel the stimulation sink deeper, and then it is absorbed by the soul, the spiritual level. Lastly, the physical level is affected, when you go forth and apply such principles. Unfortunately, such spiritual ideas do not always reach this level as much as it should. This level is the real testing ground then, which shows how dedicated and sincere you are, determining if you will only admire these words of wisdom that you read, or step out and practice them in your life. The same holds true in the old saying, "Practice what you preach." If you believe such principles and teachings, and you teach them, you should be practicing them as well. You are always put to the test in action. In the words of Richard J Foster:

"What we study determines the kind of habits that are formed, which is why Paul urges us to focus on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious."¹

You read such literature so it will stimulate and inspire you in a positive and virtuous way; hence, you are encouraged to think and to live the way such lessons or literature instruct.

In Richard J. Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, he suggests that when you study, you should apply the elements of repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection, for these will initiate certain habits of thought to form. Let us touch on these four elements.

"Repetition regularly channels the mind in a specific direction, thus ingraining habits of thought. We may smile condescendingly at the old teaching method of recitation, but we must realize that sheer repetition without even understanding what is being repeated does affect the inner mind. Ingrained habits of thought can be formed by repetition alone, thus changing behavior. This is one reason why so many forms of spirituality emphasize the regular deeds of God."²

This also qualifies the process of applying the repetition of affirmations in order to instill certain new patterns of thinking. Even if one does not fully understand certain principles, the repetition of them will have an effect eventually. Also, if you accept the principle, but have a hard time believing it fully, the repetition of it will plant the seeds in time. For example, an affirmation such as, "I forgive and love myself completely," is hard for many to swallow, but if you acknowledge its truth, having faith that this is true, the repeated affirmation will sink in sooner or later.

We are not talking about brainwashing techniques, although these ideas may be used for such; therefore, you need to be careful of such people or groups who use these negative and deceptive practices. Learn to discern when these principles are being used for positive, constructive purposes, or for negative ones.

"Concentration is the second step in study. If, in addition to bringing the mind repeatedly to the subject matter, the person will concentrate on what is being studied, learning is vastly increased. Concentration centers the mind. It focuses the attention on what is being studied. The human mind has an incredible ability to concentrate. It constantly receives thousands of stimuli, each one of which is stored in its memory banks while it focuses on only a few."³

This is an automatic function at the subconscious level, but it takes practice at the conscious level, something most people rarely attempt. The author goes on to say:

“We live in a culture that does not value concentration. Distraction is the order of the day. Many will, for example, go through all the activities of the day and evening with the radio on. Some will read a book and watch TV at the same time. Most people find it virtually impossible to go through an entire day focusing on a single thing. We are the lesser for this dissipation of our energies.”⁴

This refers to “multitasking,” not the positive trait people think it is. You are actually spreading yourself thin when you attempt too many things at once, especially the common act of daydreaming while you work at some task. You are disengaging your mind from your body and this can become a hindrance to unfoldment if such a habit persists.

Next, the aspect of your understanding of these principles comes into play. Foster shows how concentration leads to this:

“When we not only repeatedly focus the mind in a particular direction, centering our attention on the subject, but understand what we are studying, we reach a new level. Comprehension then is the third step in the Discipline of study. Jesus, as you remember, reminds us that it is not just the truth but the *knowledge* of the truth that sets us free (John 8:32). Comprehension focuses on the knowledge of the truth. All of us have had the experience of reading something over and over and then, all of a sudden, we understand what it means. This *eureka* experience of understanding catapults us onto a new level of growth and freedom. It leads to insight and discernment. It provides the basis for a true perception of reality.”⁵

Those who do not understand many of these principles of wisdom can practice study as a discipline and then the necessary comprehension they seek will follow. Intuition is the factor that is stimulated here, which can be initiated in either study or meditation.

“One further step is needed: reflection. Although comprehension defines what we are studying, reflection defines the *significance* of what we are studying. To reflect, to ruminate, on the events of our time leads us to the inner reality of those events. Reflection brings us to see things from God’s perspective. In reflection we come to understand not only our subject matter, but ourselves. Jesus speaks often of ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see. When we ponder the meaning of what we study, we come to hear and see in a new way.”⁶

Between the elements of comprehension and reflection is where the intuition is activated. This is where that deep insight of understanding occurs. This is when you come to know the truth that will set you free, one morsel of truth at a time. With your limited mental faculty, you often can only comprehend small amounts at a time, although in meditation you can experience a deeper more expansive form of divine wisdom. Many of the classical spiritual disciplines (as explained in Foster’s book) may play a part in leading to this development or inner unfoldment, but above all your surrender to God and God’s grace in action brings about true spiritual growth. You must apply certain tools to get the ball rolling, to put yourself in the right place, and this occurs when you apply the appropriate disciplines. We will stress here that practicing these disciplines with a devotional heart will richly enhance the process. The joining together of heart and mind is fundamental to this work, but it is sorely overlooked too often.

“The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the discipline of study. The apostle Paul tells us that we are transformed through the renewal of our minds. (Rom. 12:2) The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it.”⁷

That which is true, principles that reflect truth, are those things that will transform the mind, as well as the whole being. Normally, the human mind is the first place that is affected and stimulated, as we stated above, then the other levels are affected. Actually, once repetition and the other elements are established, the automatic response of all levels simultaneously being affected and activated will manifest. Then, as you come to know the truth, this Truth will surely set you free. Keep in mind that it is God who sets you free.

* * *

References

- 1 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, (New York: Harper San Francisco), 64
- 2 Ibid., 64-65
- 3 Ibid., 65
- 4 Ibid., 65
- 5 Ibid., 66
- 6 Ibid., 66
- 7 Ibid., 62

Stepping Stones Along the Path

Copyright © 2000-2024 by the Holy Light Academy