

Indian Spirituality II: Many Traditions, One Goal

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Spirituality is freedom itself. One may come to realize the need for spirituality in one's life and the benefits of practicing it in one of several different ways.

- A desire to get out of the rules and regulations of society and gain spontaneity. The thrust of our societal and political processes, as well as of science and technology, is to make everything and everybody predictable and thus remove spontaneity. Spontaneity and freedom must be found outside societal laws.
- A desire to free oneself of ethnicity. Ethnicity is one of the important attributes which humanity needs in order to survive—we cannot communicate efficiently unless we have a common language, we cannot do transactions unless we have common symbols. But upon analysis, we will see how our own identity becomes an obstacle to our growth at some point; our ethnicity and the conceptual framework each of us carries in our head limit us in what we are able to receive. Once we have freed ourselves of the need for a framework and symbols, we realize that we will be able to receive all messages.
- A desire to see the root or origin of our own being.
- The fear factor, the reward factor, and the uncertainty factor have all been used very heavily to induce people to take an interest in spirituality so that they pay attention to the things that are free from the processes that cause them fear or uncertainty.

But there is fear in letting go of the institutions, symbols, rituals, language, etc. that hold us together as a society. It is only a very few who feel the impulse to break out of the system. These bold and enterprising people—the *dhīrah*, as Kaṭhōpaniṣad II.1.1 describes them—are prepared to give up the security and sense of closure that comes from being a part of the social order. They prefer to constantly question and experiment, accepting or rejecting ideas in their quest for truth, freedom, and spirituality. This flip-flop approach is generally unacceptable for ordinary interactions—for a person practicing it is not dependable. In the spiritual domain, however, this approach is essential.

Different traditions, different religions, different practical methods have been developed to guide us in our quest for spirituality and give us some insight about ourselves. There are many paths, one mountain. Think of life as a multi-lane road where each one of us has our own lane on which we can drive at our own speed to suit our convenience and needs, and yet everyone is on the path. This traffic analogy is very useful for understanding how to avoid conflict with others. Everyone has a way to accomplish his or her goals; one may take a break here or a detour there, without being in conflict with others.

In Indian spirituality, there are many traditions. First, there is the Vedāntic tradition described in [Part I](#). Some others have their origin in the idea that birth and death are miserable, so we must seek something that is beyond both; the

teachers use the fear factor as the psychological inducement to make people pay attention to God and ethics. In some, there is no creator. Atheism and agnosticism too are a part of Indian spirituality; that atheists do not believe in God does not mean that they deny the existence of a spirit that is not conditioned by anything. It is the theists who should free themselves of their limited notion of God. Buddhism and Jainism, with their independent systems of enquiry, are essential parts of Indian spirituality; but we do not have the space to discuss them in detail.

In Hinduism, the emphasis on spirituality was a key teaching of Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836-1886), one of the important religious figures of India. His approach to spirituality was one of harmony-building – seeing the Supreme in every form and in every situation. Hindu religious practices have been greatly influenced by his teachings: "The particular way you worship does not matter – what matters is that you retain the spiritual aspect." Going away from the notion of God with form and possessed of good qualities (*saguṇa* form) to the notion of God without form or attributes (*nirguṇa* form) is one of the spiritual tasks advocated by him in order to develop one's spirituality. This accords with the teaching of Bhagavad Gītā 2.45.

One point we must clearly understand is that spirituality is nobody's exclusive preserve – not even of those who believe in God. Spirituality is as open as sunlight or space; it is only when we try to capture it within a certain framework and thereby impose limitations on the concept that the problem starts. The source of spirituality is the spirit itself. By its very definition, the spirit *is* freedom; it is not owned by anyone. This we have to understand. And once we understand that, harmony becomes the very nature of spirituality and quarrels are avoided.

It is fair to say that Hindu spirituality has freed itself from any type of exclusiveness and, at the same time, is so inclusive that it does not make any sense to us! Normally, we are used to drawing a line between what is acceptable and what is not. The definition of Hinduism as the world views us is also like that. Even some Hindus would like to draw a boundary and make an exclusivity of Hinduism. So they come with operational definitions such as: that person is a Hindu who behaves in a particular way. Spirituality has nothing to do with such matters. This does not mean that we should disrespect those who hold these views; we realize the use of these views for particular purposes. But we must also realize that such views do not convey the whole picture.

Thus the practice of spirituality is two-fold: (a) First, I have to examine deeply my perceptions, judgments, and interests and work to free myself of the limitations I have been brought up in; (b) I then have to look at the plurality that exists around me and realize that all of them have the same quality of naturalness (discussed in last paragraph of [Part I](#)) that I have realized in myself. This is what I understand about spirituality. Unless I begin to live that kind of freedom of the spirit in my own life, I will look upon others as the enemy. But once I have achieved that freedom, I will be able to follow the biblical advice, "Love thy enemy." The cultivation of such a transformation in one's own life is a basic requirement to see spirituality as authentic and real and not a mere speculative or bookish concept. The value of spirituality to me is in giving me a touch of openness and liberality. For onlookers, the value is that my behavior will become an example to follow.