

Creativity and Meditation

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When we hear the word “creativity”, most of us invariably think of some form of art work, like painting, music or literary work. In this modern technological age, we may perhaps add scientific innovation to this list. But my central thesis is that this view of creativity is firstly limited in its definition, and secondly stunts the spiritual growth of the individual. A similar statement can be made about the word “meditation”. The general understanding of it is one of a yogi seated in the lotus posture absorbed in deep contemplation. This too is a limited view of the meaning of the word. Many scriptures, and the Bhagavad Gita in particular, teach a more diverse and universal meaning of the word. In this essay, I will aim to show that “creativity” and “meditation” are interconnected and that our spiritual evolution is dependent on this understanding as well as understanding the meaning of these two words.

Every human being born in this world must confront the most basic of all questions: what is life? What is this all about? Each one of us is born into a global drama, already in progress and must figure out what is the meaning of it all. If we do not, life becomes meaningless and we will drift aimlessly in the ocean of existence. This is becoming increasingly dire in this

modern digital age where the individual feels that his or her own life is not in their control. This growing feeling of lack of control and the meaninglessness of life is the spiritual crisis confronting every individual. Regardless of who the person may be, or what segment of society they are born into, this question emerges in the mind of everyone. From the pauper to the president, it is the same question. If the individual cultivates the art of reflection in this direction, that would mark the beginning of a meaningful spiritual life. Then, every effort, every step, every attempt, in this direction helps the individual to grow, to connect meaningfully with the world around themselves so that they become a blessing to themselves and a blessing to others. If they don't take up this task, the consequences are actually dangerous. This is what we can call the drama of human life, the tragic and violent eruptions of which are reported in living color on the daily news.

Many of us think that meditation is an optional practice and is for someone who is seeking peace of mind. However, the real meaning of meditation refers to the "measurement of the mind". In his commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, Swami Sarvagatananda writes, "The true meaning of the word 'meditation' is to measure; 'medi' means to measure. You measure everything, when once you measure a thing you know what it is. When once you know, you have power over it. You measure all the elements, all thoughts, all impressions, all opinions, all the influences. It is the influence, the action/reaction that tips you off, that makes you miserable. When once you know, you are free from that. Knowledge is power; when once you examine the true nature of things, in the very process of examining, questioning, you destroy them."¹

In Sanskrit, the word for meditation is *dhyāna* which in Patanjali's Raja Yoga is seventh of eight steps leading to enlightenment. This could be defined as a total understanding of the process of life and its meaning. The ancient dictum of "know thyself" refers to this goal. The Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads refer to this as *atma vidya* or "self-knowledge".

Radhakrishnan writes, "Meditation is the way to self-discovery. By it we turn our mind homeward and establish contact with the creative centre. To know the truth we have to deepen ourselves and not merely widen the surface. Silence and quiet are necessary for the profound alteration of our being and they are not easy in our age. Discipline and restraint will help us to put our consciousness into relation with the Supreme. What is called *tapas* is a persistent endeavour to dwell in the divine and develop a transfigured life. It is the gathering up of all dispersed energies, the intellectual powers, the heart's emotions, the vital desires, nay the very physical being itself, and consecrating them all on the supreme goal. The rapidity of the process depends on the intensity of the aspiration, the zeal of the mind."² From this perspective then, one must understand what the six steps are that lead to meditation. Instead of going into the technical nature of these steps, we can summarise their import through one word: introspection.

What is introspection? Introspection is the art of looking at oneself and discovering one's shortcomings, and taking steps to correct them. Self-improvement is a precursor for self-knowledge. Sri Sarada Devi taught us that rather than wasting time finding faults with other

people, we should look at ourselves and detect our own defects and take steps to correct them. In the Dhammapada, the Buddha imparts an identical teaching: “The fault of others is easily seen; our own is difficult to see. A man winnows others’ faults like chaff, but his own faults he hides even as a cheat hides an unlucky throw.”³ So once we understand that introspection is the precursor to meditation and that introspection involves a ruthless examination of ourselves and our shortcomings, we will have taken the first step towards self-knowledge (*atma vidya*). The next step is to change ourselves once we have identified our own defects. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “We must be the change that we want to see.”

This is where we can be creative. How can we change ourselves for the better? In every challenge of daily life, we must view it as an opportunity to improve ourselves, improve our mind so that we can become stronger. Again in the Dhammapada, the Buddha taught “Engineers who build canals and aqueducts lead the water wherever they like, fletchers make the arrow straight, carpenters carve wood and good people discipline themselves.”⁴

In other words, your character is the artwork. Fashioning your own character is where creativity comes in. Sri Ramakrishna would often sing “O mind, you do not know how to farm. If only you knew how to farm, how rich a harvest you can reap.” Indeed, it is true that all of our life is really dependent upon our mind. This song of Ramprasad appears in many places of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna and I feel that it encapsulates the essential connection between creativity and meditation. Therefore, I give this song in full:⁵

*O mind, you do not know how to farm! Fallow lies the field of your life.
If you had only worked it well, how rich a harvest you might reap!
Hedge it about with Kali’s name if you would keep your harvest safe;
This is the stoutest hedge of all, for Death himself cannot come near it.
Sooner or later will dawn the day when you must forfeit your precious field.
Gather, O mind what fruit you may. Sow for your seed the holy name
Of God that your guru has given to you, faithfully watering it with love.
And if you should find the task too hard, call upon Ramprasad for help.*

In Shankaracharya’s Vivekachudamani, we find a perceptive verse in this context. “If the mind ever so slightly strays from the ideal and becomes outgoing, then it goes down and down, just as a play ball inadvertently dropped on the staircase bounces down from one step to another.” (Verse 325)⁶ This means that the yogi in search of enlightenment must not deviate even by a minuscule amount until the goal is reached since any such deviation leads to a fall, just as a ball being bounced up a staircase falls if we are inattentive. Apart from its profound meaning, the image it conjures up reinforces the seriousness of the spiritual practice that is required. We cannot afford to have the slightest deviation in our attention.

I recall one student asking me after a class on the teachings of the Buddha, why we should strive for enlightenment. In other words, why should we strive for self-improvement? Rather than answering the question, I asked him a counter question. Suppose you were driving across the country on the Trans-Canada highway and you didn’t have basic knowledge of

how your car worked. What would happen if it broke down along the way in the middle of nowhere? He then saw immediately the answer. We are all journeying on the highway of life, and all of our difficulties arise from our lack of knowledge of ourselves, of our own minds.

We haven't learned the creative art of farming, of reaping the harvest from our own mind. We must learn how to farm our mind — this is the essential meaning of creativity and meditation. So how exactly are we to farm our mind? How do we fashion our character? We can begin by asking ourselves how we are utilising our time energy. Yes, contrary to the popular idiom, "time is money", time is actually energy. It is the daily gift of God to each and every individual. Each human being is presented with twenty-four hours upon awaking, no more no less. The president does not get more. The pauper does not get less. Each of us gets the same amount of time. We cannot hoard time for the morrow. The day that is here now is gone tomorrow and so how we use today determines to a large extent what we are and what we wish ourselves to become. The wheel of time stops for no one.

Therefore, the first exercise in introspection is to account for the time of the day. The Holy Mother teaches that "you must at least sit down once in the morning and again in the evening. When one sits in meditation in the evening, one gets a chance to think of what one has done – good or bad – during the whole day. Next one should compare the states of one's mind in the preceding day and the present."⁷

One can even argue that the control of time is equal to the control of the mind. For many of us, days go by without any progress because we do not know how we are utilising time. We do not have the courage to confront ourselves, our stupidities, our foibles, our vagaries. We do not want to change and we make no effort. This is our problem.

There are some who know their defects, their shortcomings. They know full well how time is wasted each day, but they claim they are too old to change. The latest findings of neurology do not bear this out. It seems that the brain is constantly changing itself, rewiring itself according to our thoughts. True to the ancient dictum, "as we think, so we become", neurology has proved that neural rearrangements are taking place all the time in our brain. "Cells that fire together, wire together" has now become the fundamental mantra of neuroscience.

In his book, "Rewire Your Brain", John Arden writes "There is a revolution occurring in brain science. Not long ago it was thought that the brain you were born with was the brain you would die with and the brain cells you had at birth were the maximum number you would ever possess. The brain was thought to be hardwired to function in predetermined ways. It turns out that this is not true. The brain is not hardwired; it is 'soft-wired' by experience."⁸

We all want to be better than what we are. Yet many of us have either convinced ourselves that we cannot change or that we are genetically hard-wired. We do not make the effort to change and we continue in the same mechanical rut. This is our folly. Yet, if we can muster

up some courage and really look at ourselves, we will find not only negative tendencies but also positive ones. Like Nachiketas in the Katha Upanishad, we can say, “Of all people, I am not the best, nor am I the worst. I am somewhere in the middle. I can also do something.”⁹ We must bring in this kind of constructive humility, together with a wholesome self-confidence, into our spiritual journey.

The control of mind is really intertwined with the control of time. If we can discipline how we use our time energy, we can make substantial progress in self-improvement and gain control over mental vagaries. Part of our time should be devoted to maintaining our physical well-being like daily exercise. In his famous lectures “From Colombo to Almora”, Swami Vivekananda emphasized the need for both physical strength and mental strength. In his lecture “Vedanta in its application to Indian life”, with his usual inimitable humour, Vivekananda said, “Be strong, my young friends, that is my advice to you. You will be nearer to heaven through football than through the study of the Gita. These are bold words, but I have to say them, for I love you. I know where the shoe pinches. I have gained a little experience. You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger. You will understand the mighty genius and mighty strength of Krishna better with a little of strong blood in you. You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the Atman when your body stands firm upon your feet and you feel yourselves as men.”¹⁰

Many of us neglect this basic teaching. We do not get our daily physical exercise. For this purpose, we need not join an athletic club or engage in an expensive sport. We can be creative and work a daily one hour walk into our routine. Mahatma Gandhi used to walk a minimum of ten miles a day and this gave him a robust constitution. In his famous autobiography, “The Story of My Experiments with Truth”, Gandhi wrote about the day he took charge of his expenses and made the fundamental change in his daily exercise that transformed him for the rest of his life. “The new arrangement combined walks and economy, as it meant a saving of fares and gave me walks of eight or ten miles a day. It was mainly this habit of long walks that kept me practically free from illness throughout my stay in England and gave me a fairly strong body.”¹¹

In this example, we see that Gandhi managed, in a creative way, to include walking in his daily regimen, so much so that it became part of his nature.

This aspect of creativity can also be applied to another component of our physical well-being: what we eat. Most of us do not pay attention to what we eat and so we may find many of our maladies are due to poor nutrition. The Chandogya Upanishad teaches, “*āhāra suddhau sattva suddhih, sattva suddhau dhruvā smrtih, smrti lambhe sarvagranthīnām vipra moksah*”. “When the food is pure, the mind becomes pure. When the mind is pure, the memory becomes constant. When the memory is constant, all the knots of the heart are rent asunder and we become free from bondage.”¹² Not only should we pay attention to what we eat, but we should also pay attention to how we prepare it. Here again, one can be creative and take some pride and joy in one’s cooking. Through these examples then, it becomes

apparent that there is a great scope for creativity. Some attention to basic nutrition and regulation of diet can go a long way in speeding up the spiritual journey. This is creativity with regards to one's physical health.

When we come to mental health, once again there is infinite scope for creativity. Our occupation certainly depends on the quality of our mind — of this there is no doubt. However, there is something to cultivate beyond this basic capacity. Most of us just coast through life, making the minimal amount of mental exertion to complete the required job. We do not put any extra effort at learning new things or acquiring new talents. “What we don't use, we lose.” And so, if we do not harness the energies of the mind, we lose those energies. We are only confined by the sense of limitation we have about ourselves. We can actually do more and extract a greater sense of well-being from life, if we are willing to put that extra energy to cultivate different dimensions of our mental personality. For instance, we may not all be musicians, but all of us have an appreciation of music. All of us have collected tons of music on our compact discs and ipods, but how many of us actually spend time listening to this music? On the spiritual path, we can cultivate our higher emotions, our devotion by listening to music that awakens such feeling.

As mentioned earlier, The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is suffused with devotional music, and one can hear the melody travel through the ages. It is said that Dakshineswar, in those days, was a mart of joy. Countless saints and sages sang their way to enlightenment. From Mirabai, Ramprasad, Kamalakanta, Kabir, Tulsidas, Thyagaraja to Ramakrishna, we see that music was an essential feature of their sadhana. Music forms an essential component of all religious traditions. The “serpent” mind is easily tamed through music.

Though we can tame it through music, the realm of the mind is not easily conquered. Since our minds are projected outwards, we seldom pay attention to inner mental development. We rarely look within or introspect. But when we do have the fortune to reflect, we find that there are many positive aspects of our character that need strengthening. Though mind is linked to our material body, mind is not matter. Yet, in our modern scientific age, the materialistic view dominates. We seek to explain our behaviour through our genetic propensity, and thereby absolve ourselves of any responsibility for our actions.

It is true that superstition must be discarded. The instinctual, emotional and sub-rational levels of our mind should be transcended through reflection. Reflective consciousness is higher than ordinary consciousness. Even in our daily life, this is the challenge that influences our consciousness.

For instance, we all face the challenges of “multi-tasking” every day. As soon as we awake, a stream of thoughts about what we must do that day floods our consciousness. However, we know that we become ineffective when all of these tasks invade and clamour for our attention at the same time. Therefore, we learn to prioritize our tasks and take them one at a time, in a creative way. Here again we see the aspect of the control of time.

This is a challenge for every individual. Some have too little to do. Some have too much to do. Training the mind for efficient action is the essence of karma yoga. The sense of being overwhelmed by our duties, the sense of anxiety, can be mitigated by prioritizing our tasks. Even mundane tasks that we must do daily can be transformed into exciting work by realizing the challenge they present to the mind. Often it is the case that we take up an exciting project in earnest but do not finish it. Another task enters our room and we leave this to attend to that. The projects accumulate. They collect dust in our mind. If these tasks were silent and submerged, that would be fine. But that is not the case. Experience shows that they become a constant nag and our performance becomes ineffective. To effectively deal with this psychological phenomenon and to rise above our duties so that we are in control, is the essence of karma yoga. Effective action operates from the realm of reason. Logic is our counsel.

In the Bhagavad Gita, we find two definitions of the word “yoga”. The first is “*samatvam yoga ucyate*” which means “yoga is equanimity”. The second is “*yoga karmasu kausalam*” and this means “yoga is efficiency in action”.¹³ Let us note that equanimity comes before efficiency. We must perform our duties with a calm mind, not an agitated one. Karma yoga, as defined by these two phrases, allows an individual to rise above murky, turbid and confused emotions to the realm of logic and reason.

Much of humanity is still stuck in the quagmire of emotion. Great advances in civilization have been achieved only because we were able to rise above ignorance and superstition through scientific thought. In the course of evolution, humanity stands at a transitional point. No doubt, the advances of science are great. Reason has lifted us out of the dark cave of fear and superstition. However, we must go forward.

That which touches the very core of our being lies beyond the domain of reason. In this modern technological age, we have consciously or unconsciously offered ourselves, mind and all, to the high priests of science. By this, we delude ourselves into thinking that we are scientific. It is true that science is better than superstition. But science, being evidence-based, is limited in scope. We cannot wait for the latest pronouncements of science for us to go forward on our spiritual journey. In our materialistic age, many do not look for inner transformation of their mental vagaries, but reach for a drug or prescription to treat them.

Commenting on this tendency, Swami Vivekananda wrote, “There is another class of men among us who are intent upon giving some slippery scientific explanations ... and who are always talking of electricity, magnetism, air vibration and all that sort of thing. Who knows but they will perhaps someday define God Himself as nothing but a mass of electric vibrations!”¹⁴ Highlighting the limitations of reason, Swami Vivekananda writes in his book on Raja Yoga, “The field of reason, or the conscious workings of the mind, is narrow and limited. There is a little circle within which human reason must move. It cannot go beyond. Every attempt to go beyond is impossible, yet it is beyond this circle of reason that there lies all that humanity holds most dear. All these questions, whether there is an immortal soul, whether there is a God, whether there is any supreme intelligence guiding this universe or

not, are beyond the field of reason. Reason can never answer these questions. What does reason say? It says, 'I am agnostic; I do not know either yea or nay.' Yet these questions are so important to us. Without a proper answer to them, human life will be purposeless. All our ethical theories, all our moral attitudes, all that is good and great in human nature, have been moulded upon answers that have come beyond the circle. It is very important, therefore, that we should have answers to these questions. If life is only a short play, if the universe is only a 'fortuitous combinations of atoms,' then why should I do good to another? "¹⁵

Our ability to think, to analyse, to reason, is only a narrow range of consciousness. There is a higher level beyond reason. This range can be accessed only by creative self-exertion and meditation. Great sages and saints who taught us the virtue of unselfishness, obtained their knowledge from this higher stages of consciousness. Vivekananda writes, "We find, in studying history, one fact held in common by all the great teachers of religion the world ever had. They all claim to have got their truths from beyond, only many of them did not know where they got them from. ... All claim that this knowledge has come to them from beyond, not through their reasoning power. What does the science of Yoga teach? It teaches that they were right in claiming that all this knowledge came to them from beyond reasoning, but that it came from within themselves. The Yogi teaches that the mind itself has a higher state of existence beyond reason, a superconscious state, and when the mind gets to that higher state, then this knowledge, beyond reasoning, comes to man."¹⁶

To summarise, creativity and meditation are interconnected. Though creativity is often interpreted as referring to artistic or scientific creativity, there is a larger dimension of its meaning. Our own character transformation is an act of creativity! Viewed this way, the journey of life, learning from its lessons, makes us creative. This is the essence of meditation.

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