

Making Steady Progress in the Practice of Yoga

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In our personal life we often make several attempts to implement some practice. For instance, as a student we might have resolved to get up early in the morning and study. Alternatively, we might have resolved to practice music or dance at least three days a week. As a member of the society we also make certain attempts to implement something that we have been thinking about. For example, we want to help the underprivileged at least one Sunday a month. In the office place, we may resolve not to keep pending issues overdue beyond three days. All these are wish lists at the outset.

When we get to seriously implementing these resolutions, we often find that the success rate is not necessarily great. Quite often we experience a “steep drop in our enthusiasm” which eventually results in our discontinuing the practice. Once we find ourselves in a position of not being able to implement what we resolved for ourselves, we might find a way to justify why it was not possible. After some time, we might even be able to articulate our thoughts as to why it is even alright to have dropped this resolution. We will convince ourselves that not much was indeed lost in the process. There will be a period of lull for a few months or so and then we will start with the next resolution. It is possible that this might also face the same fate.

Steep Drop in enthusiasm

The main villain in our inability to make any progress in some chosen path is the drop in enthusiasm, which is steep at the beginning and gradual thereafter, leading to discontinuing our efforts altogether after sometime. Therefore we need to understand the reasons for this. If we reflect on a few of these occurrences, we will find a pattern to this.

In many cases we would make a great start which will create such a steep discontinuity to our existing habits that we may find it simply unsustainable. What I mean by great start is a “big bang” approach. For example, if we want to implement a practice of complete fasting once in 15 days, it will be a near failure for many of us to implement it in one go. On the other hand, if we had implemented it over a 6 – 12 month practice by ramping up slowly, the chances of succeeding are high. For instance we can cut dinner to begin with, then perhaps the breakfast and eventually the lunch.

The other reason for this to happen is that once we get into the new habit, the mind will agitate more. The mindset inertia will trigger the mind to somehow restore the status quo. Therefore, the mind will start analyzing the new trajectory on which we are trying to progress and bring to our attention why this is not really required. Perhaps the mind will suggest that there may be other ways of achieving what we wanted to achieve with this new habit. For instance, in the “once in 15 days fasting experiment” that we recently embarked upon, the mind will suggest that weight reduction could be done in other easier ways. Why to strain our body and subject our taste buds to such a cruelty. In fact the mind will even

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entice us to start a daily jogging instead of fasting like this. It is yet another matter that the mind will discourage our jogging efforts with another set of similar arguments later.

Alternatively it will try to point to several instances where even after they have practiced diligently they ended with limited success. In our fasting example, it will point to our cousin or the friendly neighbor who indeed practiced a similar routine and met with limited success. Even if we resolve to implement an even simpler practice such as giving up drinking coffee altogether we may go through a similar pattern and return back to our habit of enjoying the “strong filter” coffee.

If for such simple ideas such as fasting and giving up drinking coffee we need to go through so much difficulty what to speak of getting into a habit of *dhyāna yoga*. How are we to make sure that we will make progress in the practice of yoga? Shri Krishna has some advice to us on this count. We shall see two *ślokas* from chapter 6 of *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Progressing in the practice of Yoga

Shri Krishna has provided helpful suggestions to us on how we could indeed make a steady progress in the practice of yoga. He says, the *sādhaka* must take gradual and slow steps in the process (*śanaiḥ śanaiḥ-uparamet*). As explained before, taking drastic steps at the very beginning is a recipe for failure. Secondly, Lord Krishna says the mind (*manaḥ*) and the intellectual faculty must be firmly established (*buddhyā dhṛti-grhīṭayā*) in the self (*ātmasamsthā kṛtvā*). Further He advises that the mind should not be allowed to stray into other thoughts (*na kincidapi cintayet*). Mind if let to go astray will orchestrate the thoughts and keep pestering us to get out of the path of yoga by pointing to seemingly convincing reasons. This is again a recipe for disaster in our journey in the path of yoga.

शनैः शनैरुपरमेद् बुद्ध्या धृतिगृहीतया ।

आत्मसंस्थं मनः कृत्वा न किञ्चिदपि चिन्तयेत् ॥ 6.25

*śanaiḥ śanaiḥ-uparamet buddhyā dhṛti-grhīṭayā
ātmasamsthā manaḥ kṛtvā na kincidapi cintayet*

When these precautions are taken the *sādhaka* will experience moments when the mind will try to stray away (*yato niścarati*). It will agitate more (*manaścāncalam-asthiram*) and try to snatch away the thoughts. Whenever we face such moments, we need to take control of the mind (*tatastato niyamyaitat*) and make conscious efforts to bring the attention back to the self (*ātmanyeva vaśam nayet*). Since the object for meditation is one’s own self, this must be practiced.

यतो यतो निश्चरति मनश्चंचलमस्थिरम् ।

ततस्ततो नियम्यैतत् आत्मन्येव वशं नयेत् ॥ 6.26

*yato yato niścarati manaścāncalam-asthiram
tatastato niyamyaitat ātmanyeva vaśproam nayet*

Key drivers of progress

The above two *ślokas* and the preceding detailed discussion on why we fail in our efforts to make steady progress in anything we resolve to do in life point to two key aspects:

- Do not travel at breakneck speed and end up creating steep discontinuity at the very beginning. There is enormous value in gradual one step at a time approach.
- Constantly invest in keeping the mind under control, lest it will go astray and lead us back to status quo.

These recommendations are generic and universal in appeal to not only a spiritual seeker but also to a person who is in the thick of his/her professional pursuits. Once we are able to follow these guidelines diligently, we will be assured of success in whatever new pursuits that we take in our life. Mindset inertia will become a thing of past.