



7 Ways to Make Your Life a Spiritual Practice

Tim Geil

For most of us, the time we spend attending dharma talks, taking classes, and going on retreats is a small fraction of our lives. Yet we yearn to transform our lives into something spiritual. Sometimes the busyness and demands of our daily schedule feel like a barrier to our spiritual growth. It can become something we endure until we can return to our practice. Or our spiritual practice can feel like another “to do” item, competing with all our other demands. How can we fit a practice into our lives? A better question is how can we fit our lives into the dharma? How can we reframe the very busyness and struggle of daily life as a spiritual practice, one custom-designed with our own patterns of suffering?

Let us explore seven ways to make one’s life a spiritual practice.

Body as Anchor

Most of us “live a short distance from our bodies,” as did Mr. Duffy from James Joyce’s *Dubliners*. This both disconnects us from the information and grounding the body offers and ensures we become lost in thought and emotion. Learning to inhabit our physical bodies and attune to the richness of the sensations is a critical step for a meditative student. We learn the difference between actual sense experience vs. our concepts and thoughts. This often takes a sincere and focused effort to first learn, and can easily be forgotten in the midst of daily life. Learning to keep in contact with our bodies while going about our day to day existence is tremendously helpful and opens the gate for making our life a spiritual practice.

When we do this, we have an anchor into the present moment, even as our thoughts pull us into the future or past. That orientation often makes being present possible in the intensity of life. This embodiment also reveals how this choice, this emotion, this interaction echoes in the body. The subtle sensations such as tension and softening provide feedback and a litmus test of what is really happening. The body doesn’t lie. Your face and words may be saying yes, but the contraction in the belly says no. We learn to trust the body’s wisdom more and more.

Fortunately, we don’t have to maintain the deep attention we cultivate through formal practice or retreats. Keeping just 10 to 20% of our awareness in the body is enough for daily life practice, if we do it at all times. Then, when the body speaks through

sensation, we can turn more fully toward that information. In this way, body sensations serve as a guide for investigation.

Mindfulness of Mind and Emotions

An essential aspect of making our lives a spiritual practice is mindfulness of the content of the mind, including emotions. Sometimes we stay only on the breath and body, retreating to the grounded and stable nature of that object of attention when our minds are agitated and our emotions raging. This is useful and helpful, much more than becoming lost in those thoughts and emotions. Yet, for deeper transformation to arise, we need to include the content of our minds and emotions as objects of attention. Much of the issue with thought and emotion is that we take it personally. We believe this emotion and current thought defines who and what we are. We form our identity around that thought or emotion. This is “I, me or mine.” This is the process of identification, forming a story of self in relationship to thought and emotion.

When we start being mindful of the content of the mind, we can start being mindful of the process of identification. It helps to see thought and emotion in the same way we observe sensations in the body. In fact, sensing the body sensations that arise with an emotion or thought is very helpful.

When we learn to do this, we multiply a hundred-fold the potential of daily life to be a spiritual practice. Suddenly, all the thoughts, reactivity, longings, fears, and joys become entry points into practice. They become entry points into insight of the arising and cessation of suffering -- all created in the individual patterns and framework of our own suffering and identification.

Lead with Interest

What captures your interest in practice? It might be a single word, like dukkha or non-self, joy or ease. Perhaps a set of teachings such as the Four Noble Truths or Dependant Origination holds a deep fascination. It might be a modern “koan” like “Where is there love in the midst of conflict?”

The important aspect is that it arises from your own passion and interest. This becomes a focal point for practicing in daily life. Your passion around this dharma point provides energy and concentration. The burning interest naturally inclines the attention toward connectedness and steadiness. The curiosity replaces the long practice periods often needed for concentration to arise.

Use this area of interest to direct your informal and formal practice periods. Devise ways to experiment in your daily life around this point. In this way, we become curious and engaged when struggles arise in our lives, instead of resistant and disparaging. Our interest in dharma transforms those times into one of learning and growth.

Take Ownership of Your Experience

Life can seem full of difficult people and situations that trigger us, sometimes profoundly. A key way to transform those areas of conflict into a spiritual practice is to take ownership of our own experience. It means fully acknowledging your own emotions, thoughts, and sensations in a fully honest way. If we stay focused on the external cause of our reactivity, we lose the chance to learn the particular pattern of identification and suffering that is conditioned into us. This doesn't mean ignoring or enduring dysfunctional and harmful external circumstances and relationships. This does not negate the need for boundaries and making good decisions.

Instead, it speaks to the moment by moment experience triggered by relationship and environment. Right now, what are the sensations coursing through the body? What are the emotions and thoughts? What is the underlying story that is being believed? Meet the underlying pain with compassion. If we can bring mindfulness and investigation into the heart of this reaction, it becomes a spiritual practice. Particularly if we are deconstructing the mechanism of self-making instead of just creating a different sense of self.

Sometimes when we take ownership of our experience, we shift from attributing the cause of reactivity externally to internally. Instead of the fault of my emotion being the other person, it becomes who I am. This strong tendency to solidify a conclusion ("I am lonely because I am a flawed person") moves in the opposite direction of the dharma. Instead of investigating and deconstructing any unconscious belief in self, we are investing in a more entrenched self. Remember compassion as this is seen.

Examine What Is Left Out

We all have areas of life which we leave out of our spiritual practice. Often our sexuality, our entertainment, and our addictions are seen as outside our spiritual life. The Buddha was very comprehensive in his teaching for a reason. Our wisdom and understanding must be integrated fully into our lives. This is a significant advantage for lay practitioners. We have relationships, need to make money, have families, and all the inherent conflicts and difficulties as well as joys that go along with those aspects of lay life. These areas become opportunities for practicing our insights. All that is needed is the honesty to see what is being left out. Then, become curious. It is not about stopping those behaviors, but becoming fully conscious of them. Learn how they contribute toward freedom or suffering.

Daily Practice

A devoted period of time each day to practice insight meditation provides a vital foundation for our practice. This cultivation helps counteract the pull of our lives,

creating a touchstone of the spiritual. What we give our time to reveals what we value. We wouldn't usually leave the house without combing our hair and brushing our teeth. Care for your mind and heart with the same priority.

Practice each day, regardless of whether it feels good or not, regardless of if you want to or not. Learn to meet your mind and body in all conditions. This cultivates a confidence to meet life as it unfolds, with all its sorrow and joy. A daily practice is also easier to maintain. If we sit five days a week, that may shift to four days, then to three days. Each day, practice.

Community

This practice can be so internally focused. We can lose sight of the common shared experience of suffering and freedom. We can become isolated in our struggles and growth. Finding like-minded people to share the journey is essential. As the Buddha said, sangha is the whole of the spiritual life. Sangha is the community of fellow practitioners walking the same path. We encourage each other and hold each other accountable. Even those in isolated areas can find that community online. Those lucky enough to live near a center, use that opportunity to connect and share this wonderful journey of the dharma.