

# The Spiritual Disciplines as Practices of Transformation

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## ABSTRACT

Spiritual disciplines are practices of transformation intentionally pursued through the day-to-day actions of deeper living. The spiritual disciplines are conceptualized here in their relationship to profound learning. The authors contend that profound learners exhibit certain dispositions, such as curiosity, that facilitate continual growth. These dispositions, when developed, become practices, habits, or routines which result in continual exploration, skill development, growth in understanding and, over time, transformation of the individual. Spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, fasting, and worship, which move the individual toward the divine, are experienced in all the traditional religious traditions. This is an intentional process of personal transformation, evolving over time, and not contingent on serendipitous circumstance. Transformational learning within this framework is a process of individual conversion from shallowness toward becoming an ever deeper, more authentic person.

## KEYWORDS

Habits, Intentional, Practices, Profound Learning, Spiritual Disciplines, Transformative Learning

## INTRODUCTION

*The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. ~Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline, (1998, p. 62)*

In this essay, we explore the spiritual disciplines as practices of transformation. The regular practice of these ancient disciplines forms an intentional approach to personal development and conversion toward greater depth and more profound living and learning. First, we situate this approach in the broader context of the transformative learning literature. Next we clarify the significance of the spiritual disciplines for moving the practitioner from shallow living to deeper living. Kroth's (2016a, 2016b) conception of the profound learner provides an important touch point with specific dispositions that facilitate deeper living and learning through the disciplines. Lastly, we highlight several ways to practice the spiritual disciplines.

In the canons of transformative learning, critical reflection is the coin of the realm. The strength of evidence, both anecdotal as well as research-based, in support of this emphasis has been established through decades of increasing interest and investigation. Mezirow presented three types of reflection: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection (1995). Cranton emphasized that reflection facilitates critical questioning and, hence, the transformation of meaning schemes (1994). Brookfield (2011), in a deeply personal essay, argued that challenging paradigmatic assumptions is an essential kind of transformation in an individual's life. These studies, and many more, have cemented the centrality of critical reflection to the growth and development of meaning schemes and perspectives. A quick review of several influential articles about transformative learning indicates that

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critical reflection, while not a sacred cow, is the tail that wags the dog of studies of transformation. Deemphasizing the role of critical reflection is a mistake, but perhaps there is another way to frame transformation, a way that can capture some elements of the human experience that are often neglected. Instead of reflection, which is heavily cognitive, the concept of depth presents an alternative approach to transformation. Depth represents both a process and a product in the scheme of transformation, adding meaning to human existence. Digging deep is a way of doing things and having depth is a way of being. While there are many paths to the doing and being of depth, a time-tested and effective framework is spiritual discipline, a varied set of practices that offer a plan and a process for building depth into one's life. Spiritual disciplines create opportunities for individuals to be transformed from the inside out. In a famously transformative experience, Thoreau practiced solitude and self-restraint, both spiritual disciplines, in the pursuit of depth and meaning-making. His characterizations of the Walden Pond experience are not simply elegant and inspirational, they display the impact that an intentional and process-oriented disciplinary practice can have on one person's life:

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms... (1971, pp. 90-91)*

The spiritual disciplines are compelling in part because one does not need to be a Thoreau, a Gandhi, an Einstein, or even a Rockefeller to make life more substantive and meaningful. There is no magic in the disciplines, no secret formula, no decoder ring, and no holy grail offering special and restricted access to truths heretofore reserved for intellectual and spiritual giants. A beginner can initiate transformative work without a disorienting dilemma. The spiritual disciplines are available totally and equally to every person and are therefore deeply democratic. As practices of transformation, the disciplines offer an open door to depth-oriented habits, but they are, as Bonhoeffer described grace, "free but not cheap."

*Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. (1995, pp. 43-44)*

Easy answers and shortcuts provide no foundation for authentic, purposeful transformation. Depth-oriented habits are the product of consistent intentional effort, not serendipitous and occasional responses and reactions. Even Nietzsche, no willing disciple or friend of habit in the traditional sense, recognized this approach to deeper living in this phrase from *Beyond Good and Evil*, "What is essential 'in heaven and earth' seems to be. . . that there should be obedience over a long period of time and in a single direction: given that, something always develops, and has developed, for whose sake it is worthwhile to live on earth..." (1886/1992, p. 291).

There are many ways to frame the spiritual disciplines. They take different shapes and sizes, depending on context and tradition. Gandhi presented a four-part structure: intellectual foundations of god, soul, and world; moral disciplines of truth, love, self-restraint, and selfless service; spiritual practices of faith, prayer, meditation and mantram, and self-surrender; and, lastly, openness to spiritual experience (1999). The Benedictines, one of the oldest Religious Orders in the Christian tradition, follow the Rule of St. Benedict (Vest, 2004). Foster (1998) developed a three-part structure including the Inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, study), the Outward disciplines (simplicity,

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