



## Sadhana - Cultivating a Spiritual Practice

What brings me back home? What is that tool? Who is that friend whose hand I hold to come back home to my Self?

That friend of ours is called sadhana in Sanskrit. Sadhana means a spiritual practice. Any effort we make to come back home to our wholeness, to our grounded-ness, to our Divine Self, is called sadhana.

Sadhana comes from the Sanskrit word sadhya, which means that which can be practiced. So, the true definition of sadhana is a spiritual practice that can be practiced. We can go to a workshop, a seminar or a spiritual retreat. We may learn something there, but if we cannot practice it, what good is it for us?

We may have a very well-known friend, but if that friend is not able to be there at our side when we need to hold someone's hand, we may have to look at it. A good friend is someone who is available to hold our hand at any given moment in our life. This is sadhana.

Our sadhana doesn't have to be complicated or mysterious, as long as we do something daily and are able to say, "This is my anchor. This is my spiritual practice. This is what I do to connect with God. This is what I do to come back home."

Taking a mindful breath could be our practice. It sounds very simple, but it works. Whenever we feel anxious and are getting washed away by the day's events, the very moment we stop, take a step back, and take a nice deep breath, we feel as if we have come back home. We may get involved in the situation again, but there is a break. There is a moment of connection with our wholeness.

In India, when people receive initiation into a spiritual practice, they are given a mantra. Do you know what mantra really means? Mantra is a mitra, meaning a friend. It is a friend given to us by our Guru, a friend whose hand we can always hold, to come back home to ourselves.

Our Guru teaches us how to be around this new friend. Just imagine what it feels like to fall in love with someone. Being around this friend is not a chore or obligation. We are always thinking about this friend and we can't wait to be with this friend. We carve out time to spend with this friend. The day we develop this kind of attitude toward our spiritual practice, it becomes an anchor for us.

If we want to drink the water, we have to dig one well deep. If we want to get something out of our practice, we need to think in the same way. But instead of digging one well deep, we end up digging many potholes. We do a practice for a while, and then we start to feel it's not working for us. Then we try something else, and begin feeling the same. It continues like this and we never get to the water. We end up with lots of shallow holes, and we may even trip in one of them, fall and twist our ankle.

Creating an anchor in our life requires patience, persistence and forbearance. Suppose we are digging a hole and come to a big rock. If we keep spinning the shaft there, and continue applying pressure, someday that rock is going to shatter and the shaft will fall deep. But we tend to lose our patience. We move on to something else, and then something else, and we never get to the water.

Hardship will come. Challenges will come. But we need not run away from them. Instead, we should search to find a spiritual practice that keeps us present to it all. It could be a mindful breath, a mantra, keeping good company or being around people who inspire us. These are all tools to help us stay connected with ourselves and stay grounded.

The very moment we begin to bring a discipline into our life, our heart rejoices, but our mind feels threatened. The heart has no option, but the mind has many. The very nature of the mind is to be free and undisciplined, and an undisciplined mind subject us to excessive cleverness. Although we know what is good for our soul, by practicing excessive cleverness instead of nurturing ourselves, we end up deceiving ourselves. To save ourselves from this predicament, we have to understand how our mind manages to stay in control.

To stay in control, a threatened mind practices four trusted methods of victory: saam, daam, dand, and bhed. In this context, saam, the first noose can be translated as denial. After we decide to bring a discipline into our life, when it comes time to bring it into action, the first suggestion will come: "It's not a big deal ... I can skip it today ... I can start it tomorrow." An undisciplined mind will try to procrastinate on the implementation by denying the importance of the undertaking.

If somehow, with the help of enthusiasm, discipline, fear or guilt, we are able to push through the first obstacle, the second noose will be thrown at us: daam – a better option. Mind does not care what we do, as long as we do not do what we set out to do in the name of our practice.

Let's take an example. You decide to make a promise to yourself that starting tomorrow you will meditate every morning. Before going to bed, you set the alarm clock. When the alarm rings, the first suggestion will come, "It is still early ... I am having such a good sleep ... a little longer sleep won't hurt ..."

But somehow you are able to work through this obstacle and get out of the bed and sit down to meditate, the second noose, daam, a better option, will be hurled at you. The suggestion will come, "It's such a nice morning – I can go for a walk ... and I'll be getting my exercise at the same time ... it will be much better than trying to sit here with my eyes closed ..." Remember, the mind's main concern is that you do not stay sitting on that meditation seat!

If you are able to ignore the second noose and continue your meditation, the third noose will be flung at you. It's called dand, which means punishment or instilling fear. Your mind will come up with thoughts like, "Did I leave the stove on? ... I must make this call right now otherwise that person may leave ... My legs are going to fall off ..." There are so many variations of fear that can come into your mind and try to distract you from your meditation.

Ignoring it all, if you are able to continue your meditation, the last and most powerful noose will be thrown at you – bhed or separation. To stop you from keeping the promise you made to yourself, the mind will say, "It is not for me ... I am separate, I am different ... I am a certain body type or personality type or zodiac sign ... I am special ... I don't deserve it ... I am too old for it ... This is not for me, it's for somebody else ..." Those who fall prey to this noose become deprived of their growth and never move past the place where they had begun their journey.

When bringing any new discipline into our life, we must be aware of those four trusted methods of victory of an undisciplined mind if we want to continue our practice. An undisciplined mind is always looking for something more. Through a regular practice once our mind has become our friend, the journey becomes very meaningful and nothing remains impossible.