Spirituality in Daily Life

We need to live in the world. We need to look after our families. We need to do our work and while doing all this we need to have health, material wealth, success, achievements, harmony, respect and peace. Above all we desire contentment, a sense of fulfillment. We try to achieve all this by spending our time and energy chasing what we consider to be the good things of life in the material world with no thought for anything else. It is all an outward quest. In our endeavors the idea of an inward journey is completely alien to us. At best we go through hurried motions of prayer or follow some rituals mechanically and uncomprehendingly. As Sri Aurobindo says, The ordinary life consists in work for personal aim and satisfaction of desire under some mental or moral control, touched by a mental ideal.1

The work is carried on

From the ordinary motives of the vital beings, need, desire of wealth or success or position or power or fame or the push to activity and the pleasure of manifesting their capacities, and they succeed or fail according to their capability, power of work and the good or bad fortune which is the result of their nature and their Karma2

Certainly very few see the connection between the outer and the inner life. That’s why a popular notion has grown that religion or spirituality is for the old when they have nothing left to do in the outer material world. As if the young are required to remain in an unending state of material greed and spiritual stupor. In spite of this single-minded pursuit of worldly success and material gain, more fail than succeed in meeting their aspirations. Also, in the late noon of their lives, or even earlier, they face an inner void, hunger, a lack that no amount of material prosperity seems to fill. This is not to decry or in any way denigrate worldly success but to point out that physical and material satisfaction alone is not enough. Why?

Because we don’t want life as it is any longer, because we don’t want falsehood and ignorance any longer, because we don’t want suffering and unconsciousness any longer, because we do not want disorder and bad will any longer…3

This is the cry of the spirit, which has its own requirements that crave satisfaction. We try to fill this vacuum within us by seeking fulfillment through even more comforts, even more material pleasures, or we get so attached to worldly success that we turn ourselves into workaholics to escape this inner void that we do not know how to fill and therefore are not even willing to confront or acknowledge.

Then, we are worried about what people will say. We have been a person steeped in the world rejoicing in material gains and grieving at their loss. We fear that if we change our attitude or way of life, we may lose our friends on whom we have become dependent for companionship, or for bolstering our confidence and self-esteem, or for validating our successes, or in whom we see a network of contacts for more gain. As the Mother says, One who does not pass his time in striving for wealth or in trying to increase his comforts and well being, to secure a good position and become an important person, a man who is not like that is mistrusted. People wonder whether he is in his right mind.4

A strong dichotomy has arisen in our minds between the material and the spiritual but surely both are important and both must be achieved. Without material resources even spiritual endeavors may fail. The aim is to bring about a transformation both in the individual and the
collective so that material progress can go hand in hand with spiritual evolution. As Sri Aurobindo explained to a sadhak:

…I do not regard business as something evil or tainted, any more than it is so regarded in ancient spiritual India. If I did, I would not be able to receive money from X or from those of our disciples who in Bombay trade with East Africa; nor could we then encourage them to go on with their work but would have to tell them to throw it up and attend to their spiritual progress alone. How are we to reconcile X’s seeking after spiritual light and his mill? Ought I not to tell him to leave his mill to itself and to the devil and go into some Ashram to meditate? Even if I myself had had the command to do business as I had the command to do politics I would have done it without the least spiritual or moral compunction. All depends on the spirit in which a thing is done, the principles on which it is built and use to which it is turned. I have done politics and the most violent kind of revolutionary politics, ghoram karma, and I have supported war and sent men to it, even though politics is not always or often a very clean occupation nor can war be called a spiritual line of action. But Krishna calls upon Arjuna to carry on war of the most terrible kind and by his example encourage men to do every kind of human work, sarvakarmani. Do you contend that Krishna was an unspiritual man and that his advice to Arjuna was mistaken or wrong in principle? Krishna goes further and declares that a man by doing in the right way ad in the right spirit the work dictated to him by his fundamental nature, temperament and capacity and according to his and its dharma can more towards the Divine.5

Hence, this whirl gig of chasing endless material possessions accompanied by a gnawing inner dissatisfaction which will not go away must give way to a different mode of thinking, feeling and acting so that we accomplish the best possible in our chosen field of activity and also achieve inner calm, peace and contentment. This can only be done when we act in the material world through a spiritual consciousness. Spirituality is not to run away from the material but to infuse spirit into matter so that the matter too evolves to its perfection through its own swadharma or laws of its own being.

This dichotomy between the material and the spiritual world has taken place because we have been dominated by Western culture, specifically the Euro-American mindset for the past several hundred years (which) has depicted life as being composed of polar opposites in competition with each other: Us/Them, Masculine/Feminine, God/Devil, Sacred/Secular. Many other cultures do not make these distinctions, especially between the sacred and the secular. These other cultures do not divide life into two separate spheres. Life is whole, of one piece. Life is both—and life includes the opposite in a creative, vital and the life-giving tension. From this perspective then here is not one set of rules and values brought to work and another set operational in the other parts of life. If the connection or bridge can be made, this life would be one of piece. One way and the way we work could truly be said at best to be spiritual, and at minimum to contain a spiritual dimension. Spirituality could permeate every aspect of this integrated life.6

So, what is spirituality? Just hearing the word makes people uncomfortable because it is a perspective so different from their own. Also it has come to acquire a broad connotation from going to ashrams, performing rituals, to a moral code of conduct. It has also acquired a whiff of something vague, mysterious and even phony often bordering on the charlatan. Is a religious
person necessarily a spiritual one? Or, a man who lives by his strict principles and code of conduct necessarily spiritual? Actually, we need to distinguish between religion and spirituality and morality. Sri Aurobindo clearly explains:

The spiritual life (adhyatma-jivana), the religious life (dharma-jivana) and the ordinary human life of which morality is a part are three quite different things and one must know which one desires and not confuse the three together. The ordinary life is that of the average human consciousness separated from its own true self and from the Divine and led by the common habits of the mind, life and body which are the laws of the Ignorance. The religious life is a movement of the same ignorant human consciousness, turning or trying to turn away from the earth towards the Divine, but as yet without knowledge and led by the dogmatic tenets and rules of some sect or creed which claims to have found the way out of the bonds of the earth consciousness into some beatific Beyond. The religious life may be the first to approach to the spiritual, but very often it is only a turning about in a round of rites, ceremonies and practices or set ideas and forms without any issue. The spiritual life, on the contrary, proceeds directly by a change of consciousness, a change from ordinary consciousness, ignorant and separated from is true self and from God, to a greater consciousness in which one finds one’s true being and comes first into direct and living contact and then into union with the Divine. For the spiritual seeker this change of consciousness is the one thing he seeks and nothing else matters.

Morality is a part of the ordinary life; it is an attempt to govern the outward conduct by certain mental rules or to form the character by these rules in the image of a certain mental deal. The spiritual life goes beyond the mind; it enters into the deeper consciousness of the Spirit and acts out of the truth of the Spirit.

We can only act from the truth of the spirit by transforming our own consciousness and consequently our mode of functioning. Whether in the family or in the work place, there are certain obstacles that are a common experience to all of us in our day-to-day life. We often think that we are not able to succeed because of our particular circumstances and hence give in to them leading limited and unhappy lives. We may then become bitter or unyieldingly rigid making it impossible for others to interact joyfully with us. Or we may become perpetual reminders of the sacrifices we have made for the members of our family filling them up with feelings of guilt and thereby demanding (often unspoken) perpetual obeisance and service from them. When they are unable to give in to our unreasonable demands we blame them for being uncaring and ungrateful.

Then, our interpersonal relationships make us unhappy. We react sharply to criticism. At other times, unexpected hurdles seem to block our way. We fall short of resources. Moreover, there are our own insecurities, fears, anxieties and apprehensions, complexes that we have to deal with. Usually we do not acknowledge that we have these and that we may ourselves may be responsible for our own failures. It is always someone else or something else we feel that has come in the way and let us down. We blame Life itself for being unjust and unkind and curse the Divine for making our lives miserable. All this and much more leaves us dissatisfied, frustrated and unhappy. The question is how do we cope, as we cannot run away from the business of life. Running away is, in any case, no answer. As the Mother says: “To run away from difficulties in order to conquer them is not a solution. It is very attractive.” It is especially attractive to “those who seek the spiritual life, there is something which says, ‘Oh! To sit down under a tree, all alone, to
remain in meditation, not to have the temptation to speak or act how fine it must be!’ it is because there is a very strong formation in this direction, but it is very illusory.” 9

Sri Aurobindo acknowledges the value of the life of the ascetic but does not regard it as essential to a spiritual life or even as superior to the life in the world: There is, of course, also the ascetic idea which is necessary for many and has its place in the spiritual order. I would myself say that no man can be spiritually complete if he cannot live ascetically or follow a life as base as the barest anchorite’s. Obviously, greed for wealth and money-making has to be absent from his nature as much as greed for food or any other greed and all attachment to these things must be renounced from his consciousness. But I do not regard the ascetic way of living as indispensable to spiritual perfection or as identical with it. There is the way of spiritual self-mastery and the way of spiritual self-giving and surrender to the Diving, abandoning ego and desire even in the midst of action or of any kind of work or all kinds of work demanded from us by the Divine. If it were not so, there would not have been great spiritual men like Janaka or Vidura in India and even there would have been no Krishna or else Krishna would have been not the Lord of Brindavan and Mathura and Dwarka or a prince and warrior or the charioteer of Kurukshetra, but only one more great anchorite. The Indian scriptures and Indian tradition, in the Mahabharata and elsewhere, make room both for the spirituality of the renunciation of life and for the spiritual life of action. One cannot say that one only is the Indian tradition and that the acceptance of life and works of all kinds, sarvakarmami, is un-Indian, European or western and unspiritual.10

To adopt spirituality as a mode of life in our karmabhoomi, the first and foremost requirement is to be aware of our own being, our own motivations, aspirations and desires. This is essential because the same thing can be done with different motivations and the outcomes are likely to be different depending on our motivation. This is because the inner dynamics changes the outer and this can be experienced in daily life and its actions. We cannot prohibit a person from doing something if we ourselves do the same thing. For example, we cannot ask our juniors to be honest if we ourselves are dishonest. Again, if we do something for the good of an organization without any ego or desire for self-aggrandizement or if we do the same thing for our own benefit, the outcomes will be different although the action is the same. This has to be practiced and experienced before we can believe and understand it.

The first thing, then, is to understand our own selves, as it is we who are acting. An individual has an outer being that constitutes the personality or the persona or the mask which an individual presents to the world; and the inner being, the true Being or the Person who uses the outer mask of the personality. The outer being is only the instrument as a means of expression. It is not our real self. The problem is that most of us identify ourselves with our outer being and regard it as our self. Using Sri Aurobindo’s division of the being into physical, vital and mental, A.S.Dalal has summed up the responses of the outer and the inner being in four spheres of our existence. Table 1 shows the responses of the inner being when it acts independently and not as an instrument of the inner being.

**Table 1**

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TOWARDS PHYSICAL VITAL MENTAL

Life Aimlessness; life governed by habit and routine Pursuit of wealth, sex and power, life governed by desire. Pursuit of knowledge; life governed by moral and mental principles.

Oneself and other* Identification with the body. Identification with impulses and mind. Identification with the emotions.

Work Chore; drudgery. Means of earning, exercising power and exhibiting one’s skills and abilities and self-improvement. Performance of duty; rendering a service; means of self-expression

Difficulties Indifference; passive Resignation; avoidance or escapism Struggle, anxiety and tension; irritability and aggression. Dispassionate problem-solving.

If we analyze this table we find that there is a lot of aggression and negative feelings that will inevitably leave us with a lack of serenity, a feeling of oppression and dissatisfaction when we act only through our outer being. When the outer being, however, is made to function as the instrument of the inner, the responses change as Dalal has shown in Table 2.

Table 2]

INNER ATTITUDES

Towards life Search for the purpose and meaning of life; pursuit of inner growth; life governed by what is felt to be the truth of one’s inner being.

Towards Oneself Looking upon oneself and others as more than a physical-and others Vital-mental being – as a Person.

Towards Work A means of inner growth, self-offering and self-consecration.
Towards Difficulties

Viewing difficulties with equanimity, as opportunities for inner growth.

Thus, when action originates from the inner being in those very spheres where earlier the outer being was acting alone, the picture becomes different. Life becomes more meaningful and serene, a process of inner growth and evolution leading to joy and fulfillment.

The crux of the issue, then, is how do we transform ourselves so that it becomes possible for an individual to remain calm, sthitpragya and to perform his allotted task on earth with sincerity and with equanimity. Of prime importance is our aim in Life and our attitude towards it. No matter what we may have done or not done in the past it is always possible to start here and now. As the Mother says:

Lest you get discouraged by your own faults, the Dhammapada gives you this solacing image: the purest lily can spring out of a heap of rubbish by the wayside. That is to say there is nothing so rotten that it cannot give birth to the purest realization.

Whatever may be the past, whatever may be the faults committed, whatever the ignorance in which one might have lived, one carries deep within oneself the supreme purity which can translate itself into a wonderful realization.

The whole point is to think of that, to concentrate on that ad not to be concerned with all the difficulties and obstacles and hindrances.

Concentrate exclusively on what you want to be, forget as entirely as possible what you do not want to be. If we realize what we want to do or what we want to be, we are not easily deterred by adverse circumstances. The whole attitude with which we view them is transformed. As the Mother points out,

There is a state in which one realizes that the effect of things, circumstances, all the movements and actions of life on the consciousness depends almost exclusively upon one’s attitude to these things. There is a moment when one becomes sufficiently conscious to realize that things in themselves are truly neither good nor bad; they are this only in relation to us; their effect on us depends absolutely upon the attitude we have towards them. The same thing, identically the same, if we take it as a gift of God, as a divine grace, as the result of the full Harmony, helps us to become more conscious, stronger, more true, while if we take it—exactly the very same circumstance—as a blow from fate, as a bad force wanting to affect us, this constricts us, weighs us down and takes away from us all consciousness and strength and harmony. And the circumstance in itself is exactly the same—

This is not to say that circumstances do not help or hinder but to realize that they are only circumstances. What we make of them depends on ourselves. As Sri Aurobindo explains that whenever we do any serious effort, there is bound to be an abundance of adverse interventions and unfavorable circumstances but these have to be overcome. To give them too much importance is to increase their importance. Hence their power over us multiplies. They get into a habit of coming. If we face them with equanimity, with a “confident and resolute
will,” their importance diminishes and we find that both their persistence and recurrence becomes less. The important thing is to realize that the determining power is within us, even, as Sri Aurobindo says, in the weakest of us. It just has to be unveiled.15

Then, since our work or sphere of activity must necessarily involve others, we need to have a positive attitude not only towards the difficulties encountered on our path, but also towards the people with whom we have to live and work. The key, probably, lies in being non-judgmental and always bringing to the fore the strengths of others while dealing compassionately with their weaknesses. As Sri Aurobindo says, To take advantage of what is good in others, keeping one’s eye always on that, and to deal tactfully with their mistakes, faults and defects is the best way; it does no exclude firmness and maintenance of discipline, even severity when severity is due; but the latter should be rare ad others should not feel it as if it were a permanent attitude.16

But before dealing with others, we have to deal with our own self. We must be very sure that we are not acting out of fear, egoism, malice, ill will or motive of revenge, or for our narrow personal benefit and self-interest. To ascertain this we have to be able to step back and look at ourselves squarely and truthfully in the eye. This requires detachment, which is hard to come by, but can be attained through constant practice. As Sri Aurobindo points out: That is a great error of the human vital—to want compliments for their own sake and to be depressed by their absence and imagine that it means there is no capacity. In this world one starts wit ignorance and imperfection in whatever one does—one has to find out one’s mistakes and to learn, one has to find out one’s mistakes and to learn, one has to commit errors and find out by correcting them the right way to do things. Nobody in the world has ever escaped from his law. So what one has to expect from others is not compliments all the time, but praise of what is right or well done and criticism of errors ad mistakes. The more one can bear criticism and see one’s mistakes, the more likely one is to arrive at the fullness of one’s capacity.

As for comparison with others, one ought not to do that. Each one has his own lesson to learn, his own work to do and he must concern himself with that, not with he superior or inferior progress of others in comparison with himself. If he is behind today, he can be in full capacity hereafter and it is for that future perfection of his powers that he must labor…17

Finally our attitude to work has to be one of joy and fulfillment rather than doing it as mere tasks to be done to earn a living. As Sri Aurobindo says: …one must take it (work done in the world) as a training and do it in the spirit of Karmayoga—what matters there is not the nature of the work in itself, but the spirit in which it is done. It must be in the sprit of the Gita, without desire, with detachment, without repulsion, but doing it as perfectly as possible, not for the sake of the family or promotion or to please e superiors, but simply because it is the thing that has been given in the hand to do. It is a field of inner training, nothing else. One has to learn in it these tings, equality, desirelessness, dedication. It is not the work as a thing for its own sake, but one’s doing of it and one’s way of doing it that one has to dedicate to the Divine. Done in that spirit, it does not matter what the work is.18

In fact, Any work done well and carefully as a sacrifice to he Divine, without desire or egoism, with equality of mine and calm tranquility n good or bad fortune, for the sake of the Divine and not for the sake of any personal gain, reward or result, with the consciousness that it is the Divine
Power to which all work belongs, is a means of self-dedication through Karma.

If one can step back and do all he work with detachment, as a service to the Divine, with faith that all will be as it should be, with the conviction that we are only instruments of the Divine and that we have to surrender all of ourselves—good and bad—to the Divine, our lives are bound to be full of peace and contentment and we are bound to do well in our work too. It cannot be otherwise. Thus spirituality, as the Mother points out, has a practical application.

It is only by integrating the apparent opposites of the Spirit and Matter that we can infuse these inner realizations into our work and into our personal life to create an integrated being.

It is not necessary to leave life to find one’s soul, it is not necessary to give up the world or to have limited beliefs in order to enter into relation with the Divine. The Divine is everywhere, in everything, and if He is hidden…it is because we do not take the trouble to discover Him.

We can, simply by sincere aspiration, open a sealed door in us and find…that Something which will change the whole significance of life, reply to all our questions, solve all our problems and lead us to the perfection we aspire for without knowing it, to that Reality which alone can satisfy and give us lasting joy, equilibrium, strength, life.

Or as Sri Aurobindo puts it in Savitri:
All the world’s possibilities in man
Are waiting as the tree waits in its seed:
   His past lives in him; it drives his future pace;
   His present acts fashion his coming fate
The unborn gods hide in his house of Life.

Endnotes:
2. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p.xii
14. A.S. Dalal, Compiled and Introduced, Looking From Within, pp.4-5
15. Ibid., pp.6-7
16. Ibid., p.47
18. Ibid., p.63-64
19. Ibid., p.63
20. Wayne Bloomquist, Search for the Soul in Everyday Living, p.1
21. Ibid., p.2
22. Ibid., Introduction