Spiritual Discipline – The "6 Treasures"

by J. Erik LaPort

When we hear the word "discipline", we often picture rigidity, forced effort, and an ongoing battle against our own impulses. But true spiritual discipline serves the exact opposite function: its primary purpose is to eliminate friction and conflict – both inner and outer.

The six practices outlined below are not designed to add burdensome rules to your life. Instead, they exist to systematically strip away the inner conflicts that agitate the nervous system. Evolution has wired the human mind to perpetually scan for threats and chase sensory distractions – a default setting that creates a chronic state of low-grade stress. Discipline is simply the mechanism we use to override this exhausting biological programming – purification and preparation – greatly benefitting spiritual inquiry.

Crucially, resolving this inner friction is the prerequisite for removing outer conflict. When you are no longer at war with your own instincts and psychological reflexes – out of control impulses and compulsions – you stop projecting that chaos into your environment, your decisions, and your relationships.

Any spiritual discipline is ultimately a temporary tool. The "practice" requires deliberate, willful effort in the beginning, but it is meant to be performed only until it fundamentally reshapes your baseline. The objective is never a lifelong struggle for control. Instead, you practice the discipline until it becomes entirely natural, culminating in a state of effortless, frictionless equilibrium.

1. *Mental Mastery*

The mind functions as an "inner instrument" – a biological problem-solving tool designed fundamentally for survival. It operates constantly on sentry duty, scanning the environment for immediate physical dangers and secondary, potential long-term problems. Because its default mode is threat-detection, if no actual dangers or problems exist, the mind will often seek out or invent them.

In the modern world, where genuine threats to life are exceedingly rare, this survival mechanism remains in overdrive. Mild everyday annoyances – such as heavy traffic, workplace pressure, or running late – are processed by the brain as if they were prehistoric predators on the savanna. This traps the nervous system in a chronic, mild sympathetic stress response (the "fight or flight" state).

When the nervous system is caught in this stress loop, true focus, deep meditation, and inner calmness are biologically impossible. The mind becomes a continuous, frantic flow of thoughts, habituated to directing attention outward into worldly concerns. Controlling this mad outward rush is the essence of mental mastery. Mastering the mind effectively triggers the vagus nerve reset required to exit the stress response, which is a physiological prerequisite for genuine spiritual practice.

To firmly harness this restless, survival-driven mind, a seeker relies on three distinct shifts in understanding:

- **Discernment:** The ability to differentiate between what is ever-present and what is temporary.
- **Dispassion:** A natural disinclination toward fleeting, worldly fascinations and passions.

- **Mental Control:** The deliberate redirection of attention whenever past habits, attachments, or evolutionary survival instincts attempt to draw focus back toward external distractions.

Restraining the mind's extroverted impulses, compulsions, and evolutionary threat-scanning allows attention to turn inward and rest effortlessly in the higher realms of spiritual inquiry. Ultimately, the mind is only completely redirected when this control is applied through a combination of firm will and a clear understanding of its instrumental functional nature.

2. *Sensory Mastery*

The willful control of the physical sense organs serves as the necessary counterpart to mental mastery.

While the mind's evolutionary programming drives it to scan for threats, it is equally conditioned to seek out and attach itself to sensory pleasure. It constantly ruminates on past gratifications and plots future indulgences, dissipating vital energy in the process. Because deeply ingrained psychological conditioning and habitual tendencies drive this behavior, directly controlling the mind's momentum is often exceptionally difficult.

However, the physical senses act as the primary gateways to the mind. External sensory inputs trigger the vast majority of internal mental activity. Therefore, even when the mind remains unruly and preoccupied with desires, regulating sentience and behavior – simply refusing to physically engage in the indulgence – provides a highly effective intervention. It is fundamentally easier to govern outward physical actions (the gross layer of experience) than it is to instantly tame the internal flow of thoughts (the subtle layer). Proceeding from the physical to the mental is a practical, accessible approach to regulating the entire nervous system.

The disciplines of preparation function as a cascading sequence:

- When discernment (the ability to differentiate the permanent from the temporary) is sharp, dispassion toward fleeting pleasures arises naturally.
- With dispassion established, mental control follows automatically, making sense control entirely effortless.

Conversely, when discernment is weak, dispassion becomes difficult, making direct control of the mind virtually impossible. In these highly reactive states, applying firm willpower to physically restrain the senses acts as a critical fail-safe. It prevents impulsive and compulsive engagement with behaviors that serve immediate gratification but ultimately undermine long-term stability and spiritual inquiry.

While physical restraint acts as a vital emergency brake against impulsive and compulsive engagement, it is not a permanent solution. Over time, discernment and dispassion must be systematically strengthened so that regulating impulses and compulsions occurs naturally and without effort.

Relying indefinitely on sheer willpower to deny the senses creates friction within the nervous system. Continually fighting deeply conditioned evolutionary drives, instincts, and reflexes without an underlying shift in understanding leads to psychological suppression – merely forcing unresolved desires underground – rather than achieving a genuine, effortless transformation of the mind.

3. Withdrawal

Natural withdrawal is the spontaneous settling of both the mind and the physical senses away from external stimuli. It marks the complete cessation of the nervous system's conditioned craving for sensory gratification.

What distinguishes this state from the preliminary practices of mental and sensory control is its absolute effortlessness. There is no longer a need for deliberate willpower, psychological suppression, or an emergency brake. The mind remains inherently peaceful, un-tempted, and entirely free from its evolutionary habit of rushing outward. When mental and sensory control are built upon a solid foundation of discernment and dispassion, this effortless, self-settled state is the natural psychological and physiological culmination.

Because permanent physical retreat from society is rarely practical in the modern world, undertaking periodic, temporary withdrawal is a structural necessity for this training. The 19th-century teacher Sri Ramakrishna provided highly practical instructions on this, emphasizing that physical withdrawal is required to break the mind's momentum. He advised seekers to physically remove themselves from their daily environments and obligations:

> *"Whenever you have leisure, go into solitude for a day or two. At that time don't have any relations with the outside world and don't hold any conversation with worldly people on worldly affairs."*

Recognizing that capacity varies, he quantified the duration of this practice based on individual circumstances:

> *"It is necessary for him to spend some time in solitude – be it a year, six months, three months, or even one month."*

For those deeply embedded in daily obligations, he reduced the requirement to the absolute minimum needed to create a break in the mind's conditioning:

> *"It will be of great help to a man if he goes away from his family, lives alone, and weeps for God even for three days. Even if he thinks of God for one day in solitude, when he has the leisure, that too will do him good."*

This emphasizes the precise mechanics of mental withdrawal. Remaining effortlessly untroubled in the midst of a chaotic world is the ultimate objective, but it is neurologically and psychologically impossible to establish while the nervous system is constantly subjected to the same environmental triggers. Literal, physical isolation – even if only periodically or for short durations – is a prerequisite practice required to disrupt the mind's habitual extroversion so that the internal instrument can finally settle.

4. Forbearance

Human experience is defined by continuous exposure to alternating extremes: heat and cold, pleasure and pain, praise and criticism. These pairs of opposites arrive in inevitable, unstoppable waves. Forbearance is the psychological resilience to endure these fluctuating extremes without allowing the

mind to become fixated on or destabilized by them. It is the capacity to process the unavoidable friction of life without losing internal equilibrium. Forbearance is a "spiritual toughness" on the path.

True mental balance is inherently symmetrical. An internal instrument that allows itself to be overpowered by pleasure, excitement, and praise will inevitably be destabilized by their opposites – pain, sorrow, and insult. Equanimity requires neutralizing the mind's reactivity to *both* ends of the spectrum. If the nervous system is trained to remain steady amidst joy, it will naturally maintain that same steadiness amidst adversity.

This endurance is not a state of passive, reluctant resignation; it is an active resilience anchored by profound intellectual clarity. The 20th-century teacher Swami Chinmayananda explained that this capacity emerges naturally when the intellect is firmly resolved:

> *"When the intellect is fully convinced of its accepted values of life, of the sacredness of its Goal, thereafter in trying to gain it, the mind smilingly faces all difficulties and obstacles. This capacity of the mind to accommodate cheerfully all the vicissitudes of life and patiently ignore any obstacles that might come its way is forbearance."*

5. Trust

In Western intellectual frameworks, the closest equivalent to this concept is a working hypothesis. It is an intellectual trust in the teacher and the teaching, adopted with the explicit understanding that it must ultimately be subjected to direct validation.

To understand this trust, one must understand the role of the teacher. The teacher acts as an authority on the subject matter, but crucially, never as an authority *over* the student or anyone else. There is no dynamic of control, hierarchy, or coercion. As an authority of knowledge, the teacher simply imparts the instruction.

The transmission of this knowledge relies on a highly specific psychological progression. The student applies their working hypothesis to the instruction. This initial trust leads to understanding. As that understanding is applied and tested, it matures into conviction. Through continued, rigorous inquiry, this deepens into a firm intellectual conviction. Finally, when that intellectual conviction is directly validated through firsthand experience, the transmission is complete. The student no longer relies on the teacher; they become their own authority, quite literally "authoring" their own profound understanding of reality.

This progression illustrates why this principle is frequently confused with blind belief, yet operates entirely differently. Blind belief demands rigid adherence without logic or reason; it cannot be verified and inevitably fails in a crisis. Trust, conversely, is anchored firmly in observation and profound understanding. Because it is a working hypothesis that is actively tested, it grows stronger when challenged.

Swami Chinmayananda defined this foundational quality simply as "belief plus understanding". This requires a complete integration of the internal instrument: the questioning mind provides the necessary openness to trust the teacher's instruction, while the reasoning intellect supplies the rational capacity to understand it. The mechanics of this process were aptly captured by St. Augustine, who said:

> *"Faith [trust] is to believe in what you do not see, the result of which is that you see what you believe."*

6. Focus

Single-pointed focus is the ability to hold the mind steadily and unbrokenly upon a single objective.

Success in any endeavor requires focus, but the profound nature of spiritual- or Self-inquiry demands an exceptionally intense level of focus. This degree of focus is only possible when the internal instrument is no longer scattered. Because the previous disciplines have systematically neutralized the mind's habitual extroversion, sensory cravings, reactivity to life's friction, and situational triggers – and because the intellect is now firmly anchored by a working hypothesis – attention can finally be gathered into a singular, laser-like focus.

Importantly, this concentration is not a strained, forceful exertion. When built upon the foundation of the preceding disciplines, this single-pointedness emerges as a natural, effortless state of the nervous system. The mental energy that was previously dissipated across worldly anxieties and desires is entirely conserved and directed toward the realization of spiritual Truth.



Ultimately, the "6 Treasures" are not a lifelong sentence of rigid self-denial, but a precise, systematic method for rewiring the nervous system. Rather than fighting human nature, they work as a cascading sequence to dismantle our evolutionary survival programming:

- **Mental and Sensory Mastery** intervene to calm the biological drives for threat-detection and immediate gratification.
- **Withdrawal and Forbearance** create the space and resilience needed to remain untroubled by external environments and the inevitable friction of life.
- **Trust** anchors the intellect, transforming instruction into direct, lived experience.

Together, these first five disciplines gather the scattered energies of the mind, naturally giving rise to the sixth: **Focus**. What begins as a deliberate, willful effort eventually resolves into a state of effortless, frictionless equilibrium. The practitioner is left no longer at war with their own instincts, reflexes, impulses, and compulsions, but perfectly prepared for the profound work of true spiritual inquiry.