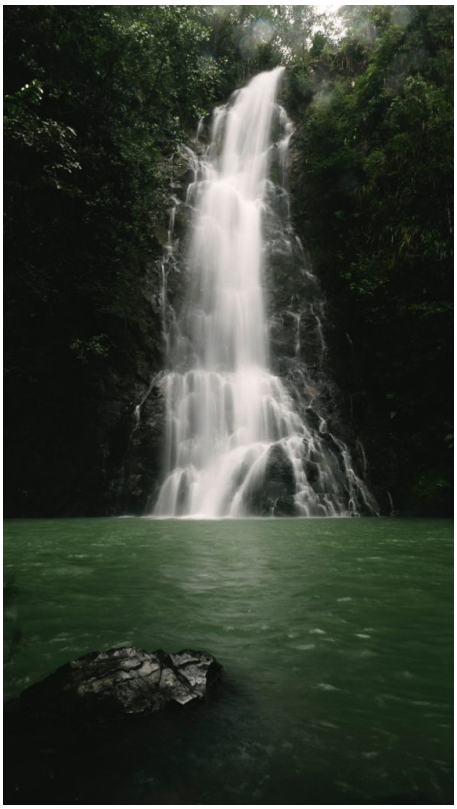
7 Steps to a More Aligned Existence – Part 1



Posted on March 3, 2019 by Sashi

Searching for Equilibrium in an Ever Changing World



Photo by Ramon Kagie on Unsplash

Never before has the past been less reliable for steering oneself into a meaningful future.

In the last three decades almost all the practices for carrying out one's everyday tasks have been replaced by completely new methods that have shifted the average person's life into a new reality.

Banking has changed as the plastic card has replaced the idea of expenditure, communication has changed thanks to the cell phone, and meaningful discourse has been replaced with 'knee-jerk' responses to trivial triggers from the world outside. Cooking and nurturing a family (particularly in the urban milieu) has been replaced with fast-food and therefore nutrition has taken a backseat to convenience.

At this point, talking about old world values that many of us grew up with cannot be applied

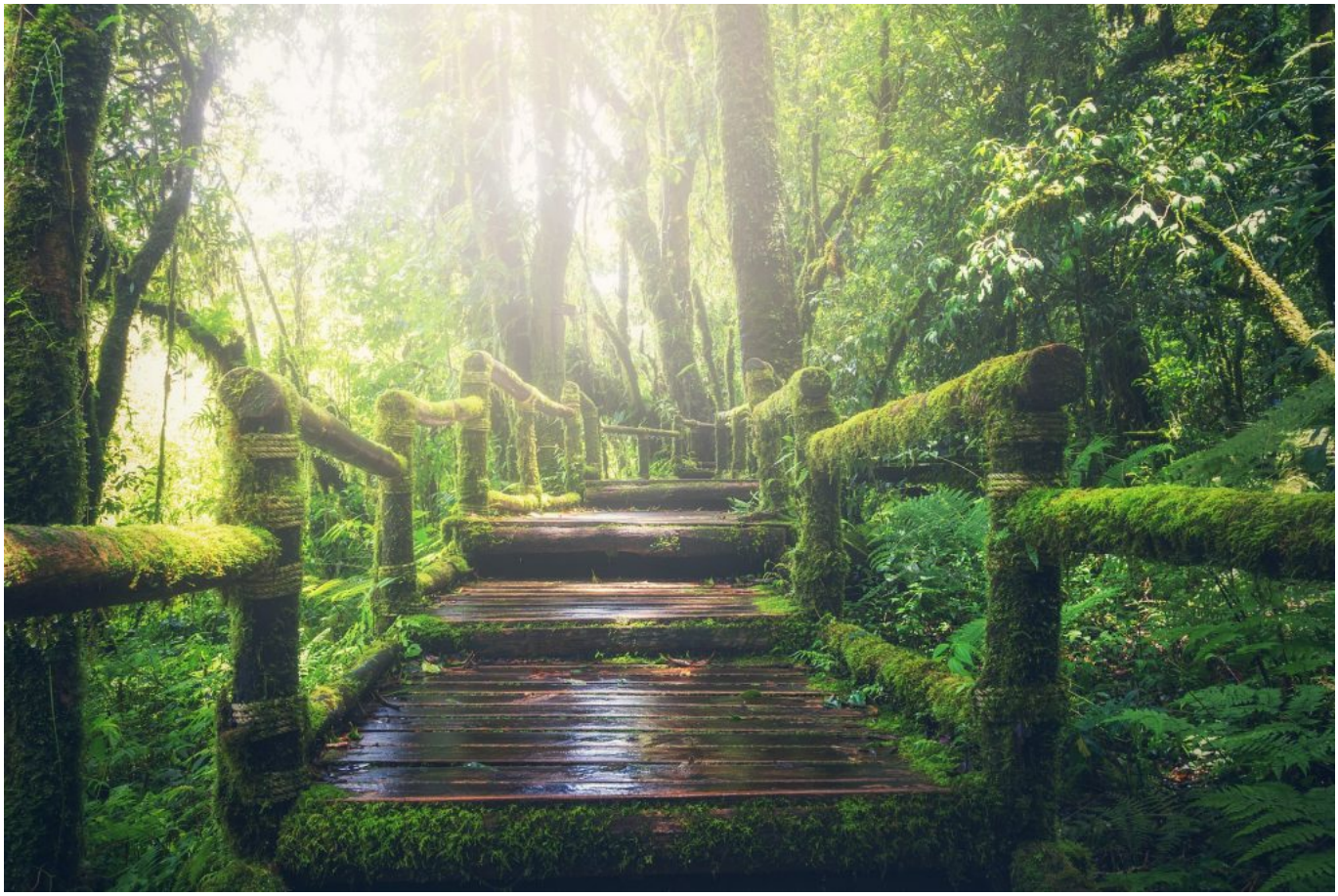
to our current scenario without making some changes to them. The younger members of our society are also separated from the wisdom of the tradition which they view with contempt or suspicion. Quick-fix models that seldom have deep or enduring meanings have replaced the presence of Elders.

As mentors to different groups of people from the late 70’s onwards, Raghu and I began to notice that people were more distracted with information overload, and less sensitive to their own inner flowering as well as to relationships with the world outside. Traditional ideas and philosophical underpinnings were being diluted by the pursuit of pleasure.

I remember the responses of my class of architecture students to the subject of traditional architecture. The very same group of students who unquestioningly accepted principles and theories from Europe, Japan or the US, became offensive and cynical as soon as traditional Indian mores were introduced. In a matter of one or two generations, any respect for traditional knowledge had been lost and replaced with a strong feeling that only western knowledge was of value in the contemporary life.

Perhaps no matter what the age or external environment, an eternal question that human beings ask is how can one re-envision oneself in response to a radically changing world?

The Seven Steps to Inner Harmony


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In connection with this, Raghu and I came up with a very interesting module called Saptaswara. Saptaswara denotes both the concept of seven steps as well as harmonisation of the self using the symbol of the seven notes of music. It is a sacred quest for personal alignment as well as a balance with one's own context.

Each step of the Saptaswara comprises of the following four essential parts:

1. A 'here and now' encounter with oneself.
2. A contemplative context for self reflection.
3. An experiential learning about the insights of Yoga and Vaastu.
4. A framework for developing an enduring personal practice.

The seven steps of Saptaswara work with personal reflections and relationships with the world. Change cannot take place without the inner self and the outer universe coming together in a dynamic manner. In normal circumstances, most of us end up fragmenting

ourselves into many parts. Some of these parts comprise of our inner self with emotions, ideas, prejudice and conditioned behavior. The outer manifests as relationships, coping mechanism and capability to sustain order in our daily life.

The Seven Steps of the Saptaswara are

1. Maitri
2. Karma
3. Dharma
4. Jnana
5. Ramya
6. Yoga
7. Abhyasa

Our hope, through Saptaswara, is to help the individual look at these many fragments, bring about alignment between them, and release their full inner potential. Over the next few posts, we will define and discuss each of these seven steps, to give you a glimpse of the process and a taste of the possibilities. This week, let’s take a look at Maitri, the first step of the Saptaswara.

Step 1: Maitri

When we speak of Maitri, we look at two aspects of the word. One is the ability to hold a friendly and open attitude towards everything that the world throws at us. The second is the result of an encounter, and the way one holds one’s emotions after having experienced the ups and downs, the turbulence and the anxieties of living in this world.

An Open and Gracious Heart



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The first aspect may seem self evident, but upon closer inspection how many of us hold this attitude in our daily lives?

Let’s engage in a small exercise. Right at this moment, take a look around you and note where you are sitting, what your posture is like, how your body feels. Allow yourself to settle into your present being. Now, take a few moments to recollect all the activities of your day, all the interactions you have had till now. How many of them could be characterised by this open, friendly attitude of Maitri?

Let’s take it a step further. Can you recollect the moment you woke up? Let’s go back there, to the warmth of your bed and the first stirrings of the day. What was the first thought that went through your mind? Did you meet the day with a sense of openness and excitement, or a feeling of dread and therefore resistance?

By preparing ourselves for the day ahead with an attitude of hope and expectation, we also

create a context for well being. This is the beginning of Maitri towards the self and the world.

Having an open and gracious heart is much more than simply ‘being nice to everyone’ or ‘being positive’. It is a fundamental shift in our attitude towards life. Whether we realise it or not, these attitudes of gratitude or resentment resonate through our bodies, altering our biochemistry, and moving out into the world to colour all of our experiences. Choosing an attitude of Maitri is an act of courage, because in choosing to open our hearts to ourselves and the world around us, we also make ourselves vulnerable.

Here is where the second aspect of Maitri comes into play.

A Steady Port in an Emotional Storm



Photo by Johannes Plenio on Unsplash

The second aspect of Maitri is one that we desperately need in the world today. It’s all very well to talk about having a friendly attitude and being vulnerable, but what do I do when someone bangs into me during my commute, or someone reprimands me at school or work? When a tragedy strikes, what good is such an attitude?

Our reactions are almost immediate when we meet the complex, the painful and the ugly in the world outside. The point isn't to be impervious to negative emotions, but to be able to return to a place of equanimity once the event is over.

The need for this equanimity cannot be understated. In today's world where battle lines are being drawn every day, where the nightly news brings us tales of aggression and intolerance, and where our everyday interactions are laced with tension and strife, we need to find a way to come to a place of stillness and calm, if only to protect our sanity! Medically, this constant triggering of our sympathetic nervous system (which activates the flight or fight response) results in chronic stress, which can further lead to cardiovascular diseases, immune disorders, and a complex of mental health problems.

A Sadhana or daily practice of quietening the being and harmonising the various fragments of the self goes a long way in establishing another way to meet the world. We are what we do, day in and day out. Just as a doctor's training allows her to perform at utmost efficiency during an emergency, so too does our daily practice hold us in good stead during stressful and trying times. It could be a practice of breathing deeply to counteract negative emotions, a practice of exercise, or even a simple habit of writing down the small things for which we feel gratitude every day.

Maitri becomes both the friendliness of one's own nature, as well as the equanimity that one can experience after having gone through emotional disturbances. During our workshop, this process of examination of one's self and with the environment is guided and supported in the workshop through various simulated exercises. How do you stay centered in your everyday life, and how could you cultivate more openness in your interactions?