

Spiritual Cross-Training

by Lyn Hunstad

Any experience when fully entered into, can open a portal. - Vijnanabhairava Tantra

There was a time when the idea of a baseball player or a pole vaulter doing yoga would have seemed weird. But in physical sports it does not take long for something that works to be embraced. There is a constant search for anything that can give a competitive edge.

Cross-Training

The encyclopedia Wikipedia describes cross-training as:

“Cross-training refers to an athlete training in sports other than the one that the athlete competes in, with a goal of improving overall performance. It takes advantage of the particular effectiveness of each training method, while at the same time attempting to negate the shortcomings of that method by combining it with other methods ...”

In a sense spiritual cross training is similar. The spiritual aspirant trains in other areas with the intention of utilizing the unique effectiveness of those methods. The idea is that the combined effectiveness of all the different methods will ease the opening to experiencing the ultimate state of Oneness, samadhi, ego-death, God, etc. The other areas that the spiritual aspirant works with help to detach and dis-identify awareness from the ego or identity.

I got interested in the concept of cross-training when a friend asked me to describe my own experiences and process of spiritual growth. When I looked back at my life and I looked at the major or significant spiritual experiences in my life, mostly they were not in a formal sitting meditation practice. They just seemed to arise spontaneously. Usually as a result of an intense experience that focused attention.

Awakening

These deep spiritual experiences created a fundamental change in me, they created an awareness of another way or state of being. They were undeniable and made me aware of what I was experiencing most of the time was only a small part of the whole picture. There was something much more vast and powerful at work. These experiences were key portals for me. They seemed to provide a way of expanding awareness that were not accessed in a sitting meditation practice.

Most of us are familiar with meditation as a practice that can lead to awakening, but what other areas can productively support the expansion of awareness? To answer this question it is useful to examine the process of awakening.

In the awakening process our awareness goes from being stuck in duality and separation to an experience of infinite oneness and light. It is our ego and our identification with it that keeps us limited and separate. The aim of our sadhana or spiritual practice is to support our letting go of that attachment to ego. Our identity has been described as a knot of delusions. The delusions are what we think are important and if death occurs before the realization that they are not important, we are born again. It is the dissolution or untying of that knot of delusion that happens in a full release into non-duality.

Often the awakening experience has been described as this sudden bursting forth into the light. Practices that create a single-pointed, highly concentrated focus of attention like Zen, mantra, and Vipassana meditation have historically been seen as the primary vehicle to support the emergence of an awakening experience. These practices tend to create a powerful concentration of our awareness that then penetrates or breaks through the confines of limited egoic thinking. But anything that helps one to be less caught in the illusion of separation helps awareness move closer to the ultimate state of Oneness.

Focusing

In my experience, what I focused my attention on did not matter so much, it could be extremely pleasurable or extremely painful. It did not seem to make a difference if it was something I liked or something I did not like. But if there was an intense single pointed focus of awareness, then awareness responded by breaking through the barrier of ego to a more subtle expanded awareness.

Inquiry

There is a large collection of practices that help release the ego's tight grip on awareness. The teachings of Ramana Maharishi and the practice of self inquiry support the freeing of awareness from all the illusionary stories and thoughts we have about ourselves and who we think we are, in other words, our identity. For some, psychotherapy is an effective means for identifying and releasing such erroneous beliefs.

For me, my main practice was self inquiry in the first several years of my spiritual practices. That practice was very beneficial for lighting or reducing the false delusions I had about myself and the attachment to the particular ways of being or thinking, and created a lot more spaciousness and curiosity about what was possible.

Heart Opening

Another area that helps reduce the illusion of separateness deals with opening the heart and feeling our connectedness with everything. Some classic spiritual practices in this area include the Buddhist loving kindness meditations, bhakti yoga, selfless service, and chanting. Non-traditional practices for opening the heart and letting everything in, include neo-tantric sexual practices and journey work with certain substances. More will be said about these below.

To summarize, the three main areas that impact the awakening process are:

1. The focusing force generated by the practice. Traditionally, these are the more classic spiritual practices that focus awareness. But, any practice that generates a high level of concentrated attention is associated with this factor (e.g., intense pain or pleasure).
2. The thickness of the ego/identity barrier. This influences our ability to let go of our erroneous beliefs about ourselves, and our ability to surrender our identity
3. The permeability of the ego/identity barrier. The openness of our hearts and our ability to rest in open stillness, remaining neutral or welcoming towards whatever arises. Connecting with the Oneness of all of life.

These three factors are represented in Figure 1. A Model for Awakening.

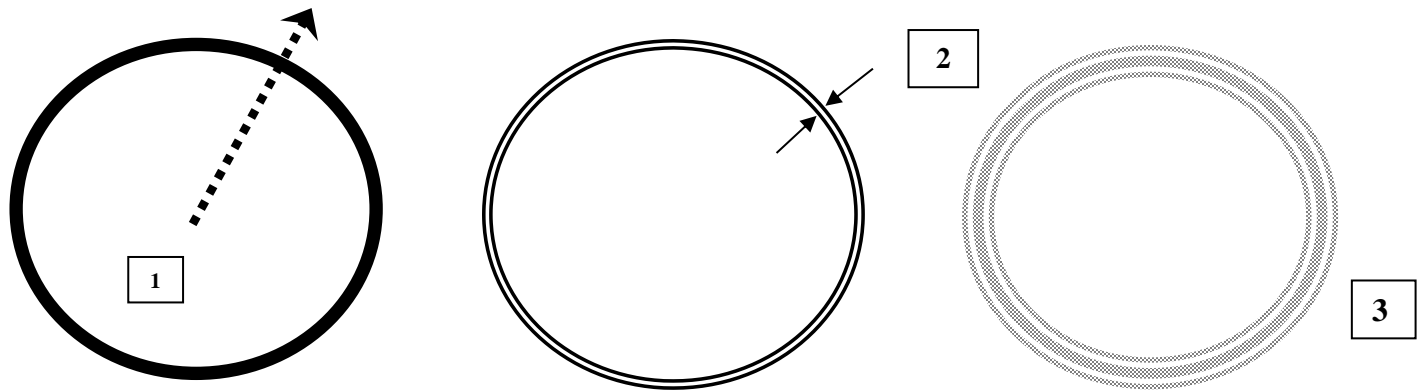


Figure 1. A Model for Awakening

This model is a way to group the various practices that support liberation. When approached consciously, every experience can be a support for moving into greater freedom from delusions, past conditioning, and traumas. Different practices emphasize different aspects of becoming free, and by skillfully combining them we optimize our time and energy.

Table 1. Examples of Practices Related to the Three Factors of Awakening

Modality	1. Generating a strong breaking through force	2. Reducing the egoic barrier	3. Softening the barrier
	Chit	Sat	Ananda
Astrology:	Cardinal	Fixed	Mutable
Meditation:	Focused attention-oriented practices: <i>vipassana, zen, mantra</i>	Inquiry oriented practices: <i>self-inquiry, Jnana yoga</i>	Heart centered practices: <i>bhakti, loving kindness</i>
Psychological:	Practices to still the mind	Self-help work, psychotherapy	Happiness and well-being practices
Tantra:	Awakening practices	Healing oriented work	Ecstatic/Flow practices
Psychedelic Medicines:	Toad/5-MeO-DMT, psilocybin/mushroom	MDMA used for trauma work, Ibogaine, Ketamine	most plant-based substances

note: Most practices impact more than one factor, but tend to have the strongest effect with one.

Meditation

We have discussed how classic meditation practices can generate a concentrated focus, and they are associated with the first factor. Practices that tend to focus on untying the knot of delusion or in reducing the number of delusions we identify with, are associated with the second factor in the model. These practices are about seeing through the delusion and letting go of the false, that which is not our true Self. As we bring the light of awareness to these false beliefs we have about ourselves they naturally fall away. Ultimately, we can unhook from enough of our false ideas about our self, that the barrier between self and Self becomes so thin we can move into our higher Self and the infinite.

Practices that tend to soften or dissolve the walls of ego are associated with the third factor in the model. These practices open the heart and generate a sense of connectedness with all of life. As we open our hearts, the shell that confines our awareness becomes more permeable. Eventually enough of the shell dissolves that awareness is able to move through it to the infinite.

All three of the factors have traditional spiritual practices associated with them: zazen, mantra, self-inquiry, bhakti, loving compassion, etc. However, the ability to reduce our ego's control and to open our hearts to all of life is *not confined to these traditional practices*. For some people, some of the time other techniques are actually more efficient.

Other Practices

For example, direct work with sexuality through neo-tantric practices can often be much more effective at accessing and releasing deep trauma, as well as opening the heart (factors 2 and 3). Tantric practices are basically of three types: healing, ecstatic, and awakening. Healing practices focus on removing blockages to the natural normal flow of our energy. They have the effect of reducing the thickness of the egoic/identity barrier; dissolving energetic blockages and fixed behavior and emotional patterns (factor 2). Ecstatic practices focus on increasing the capacity for bliss and ecstasy. Opening our channels to the flow of bliss tends to make the egoic/identity barrier more permeable and easier to move through it (factor 3). Awakening practices focus on cultivating a deep observer and moving into the space of no mind. These are about dropping into a deep witness consciousness and resting in stillness without or with minimal thought or internal commentary (factor 1).

Seeing the diversity of different types of practices and how each one has a unique benefit can help one be spiritually efficient. Each practice helps one move into more wholeness getting release from the limited ideas we have that create a separation between us and the rest of life. Once this false separation dissolves, a door opens to an ecstatic experience of Oneness.

Awakenings

The first time this breakthrough happened for me was over 40 years ago after an intense love making session (an ecstatic tantric practice, factor 3) where I completely let go and moved into the experience in a way that was deeper than I ever had in my life. The second time I had that experience of expanded, infinite awareness was about 12 -13 years later when I accidentally had an extremely painful situation develop with a tooth. It was the most intense sharp pain that I've experience in my life and it totally focused my attention. And, that focus expanded the attention into this vast void that was pregnant with everything (factor 1, focused awareness).

It was about another 12-13 years later when I again had another experience of completely letting go into the experience of making love in a way that deeper than I had ever done before. This also produced a singularity of attention which opened awareness into an infinite indescribable ecstasy.

Non-grasping

I found these experiences very interesting because several times during this time period while sitting in meditation, the awareness would start to concentrate and focus and would start to go into an expanded state. However, what would always happened was that I would notice that this expansion of awareness was finally starting to happen and I would get eager or want to move towards that space of expanded awareness, and that desire would always throw off or derail the process.

Assisting Awareness

There is something about the focus that is generated by intense pain or pleasure that creates such a strong movement of the awareness that it would over ride the witnessing part of the mind that in meditation would want to grasp at the unfolding experience. When sitting in meditation the movement of awareness did not have the same force behind it. The experience unfolded more slowly than when the awareness was being moved in response to an intense external stimulus.

Once I learned not to cling to these expanded states, there were a number of other tantric sexual experiences where I was able to completely and totally move into a total focus on the experience, and that focus opened up awareness to access that vast infinite indescribable space. As I opened more, softened my heart more, and let go of more habits and thoughts about my self, the full release experiences became more frequent. I had five more full releases and five more near full releases¹ before other portals started to open for me. One of these other portals was chanting. So far, this portal has opened to the full release level twice, once during an intense all night kirtan. And, a couple of other times to the near full release level. This was again the result of an intense focus on the chanting combined with the heart opening practice of bhakti. Around the time these portals were opening more regularly, I got introduced to the TOAD² sacrament.

TOAD

It was a total surprise that the toad sacrament could open up the same place that the intense pain and the intense pleasure and the deep meditation had also opened or moved towards opening. This was surprising because I had previously worked with good results with most of the other psychedelic substances, but every substance facilitated an experience where I did not have the clarity, did not have that sense of the vastness of the infinite void, the indescribable ecstasy, that was there with the non-substance facilitated full releases, there was always something that was not as clear. Although they did not support a full release, these experiences with other psychedelics were mind-expanding and helped me to detach from a rigid sense of self and all the conditioning that had formed when I was growing up. So, none of the other substances opened up a full release portal. That only occurred with toad (5-MeO-DMT).

¹ A near full release is a very expanded awareness where the sense of a separate self is starting to dissolve, yet a witnessing still remains, as does duality.

² Prior to Jan. 2011 TOAD or 5-MeO-DMT was NOT listed as an illegal substance. All experiences with this sacrament occurred prior to Jan. 2011.

Ecstatic Dancing

Another portal into the non-dual that I have experienced is ecstatic dancing. So far it has only happened once, and it was a near full release, but there was the taste of what was possible from an ecstatic dancing practice. Again it was a matter of fully entering into the experience. I was directly experiencing the quote at the beginning of this article from the *Vijnanabhairava Tantra sutra*: “Any experience when fully entered into, can open a portal.”

Even though most of my awakening experiences have happened off the meditation cushion, it feels like the decades of meditation practices I have done supported opening and orienting consciousness towards a release from the egoic identity. And, even though the full release experiences did not happen during the sitting meditation practice, I consider the meditation practice to be a strong catalyst and a powerful way to cultivate receptivity to these expanded states.

Meditation Useful

When I started looking at what changes inside of me helped to produce the readiness or openness to move into these expanded states of awareness, I realized it was not just the meditation practice that I was doing. The meditation practice was very helpful for resting in my center, in the stillness, and for getting a sense for who I was not - not all the habitual behavior patterns and emotions, thoughts, and desires. The meditation practice actually did a lot to lighten the load of the ego and reduce the thickness of the identity/egoic barrier (factor 2), even though it was a focused attention style of practice (factor 1).

Sexuality

Another factor that seemed to be significant in the opening to the expanded state was the opening to the heart that happened as my sexuality was deeply embraced. As I opened to an intimate, vulnerable connection with another person, I accepted myself in a deeper way than ever before.

In a way similar to working with sexuality and tantra, careful conscious work with consciousness-altering substances can sometimes provide just the right push at the right time to facilitate release from the grips of the ego, or habitual unhealthy behavior patterns. The internal mindset with which one approaches these types of experiences, as well as the setting one is in are critical for successful work with these entheogenic³ substances.

Using the Model

One of the benefits of the Model of Awakening is that we can see the role different practices play in our movement into the infinite Light. Often there is a synergetic effect by combining different practices. When we have hit a block or a plateau with one practice or style of practice we can invest our time and energy into a completely different type of practice with a very productive outcome.

³ An entheogen ("generating the divine within") is a substance used in a religious, shamanic, or spiritual context. Entheogens have been used in a ritualized context for thousands of years; their religious significance is well established in anthropological and modern evidences. Entheogens can supplement many diverse practices for transcendence, including meditation, yoga, and prayer, visionary art, chanting, and music.

An important concept that comes out of the Spiritual Cross Training approach is that of finding the optimal set of practices for a specific individual. Just as there is a great variety of different types of people, there is a great variety of different types of practices that can be bundled together to optimally support each person's awakening. One size does not fit all! In addition to the practices discussed above, some other practices that one might use include: deep emersion in nature, martial arts, seva/karma yoga, pranayama, walking meditation, etc.

The broader we build the base for our sadhana or spiritual practice, the easier it is to reach the infinite heights. And, this works a little like cross-training does for physical athletics. Just as a mountain climber may find training with weights improves their ability to climb, conscious work with tantra or a consciousness expanding substance may be a great aid to the spiritual warrior. By including multiple aligned practices in our spiritual work, we may find that we are more effective.

Don't Sacrifice Depth

A final point to consider is about breath versus depth. The concept of spiritual cross-training emphasizes the benefits of appropriate breath. The value of drawing on the uniquely different benefits from different types of practices to create a more balanced and effective way of engaging in spiritual practices. The danger in this approach is in spreading ones energies so thin that the deeper work is never engaged. It is good to never lose sight of ones main practice. And, to periodically question if the alternative practices we are working with are continuing to be beneficial. Just like the physical athlete has her main sport she competes in and her cross-training helps her to perform at a higher level.

Lyn is a therapist and guide who has a love and passion for supporting the growth process. He brings a spiritual presence and perspective to his work based on his lifelong daily meditation and yoga practice. He's a Certified Tantra Educator, a SkyDancing Tantra Facilitator, and a Certified Breema Practioner. For more information see: TempleOfAuthenticDivinity.com.