

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Perfectionism in Spiritual Practice: An Interview with Yogacharya Ellen Grace O'Brian

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today Mark speaks with Yogacharya Ellen Grace O'Brian, known as Uma to her students. She is the spiritual director for the Center of Spiritual Enlightenment at San Jose, California. Uma was ordained to teach in 1982 by Roy Eugene Davis, a direct disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda who brought the teachings of Kriya Yoga from India to the West. She is the author of numerous books including, "Living the Eternal Way: Spiritual Meaning and Practice in Everyday Life."

MM: Hello everybody, I'm so happy to welcome my friend and colleague Yogacharya Ellen Grace O'Brian to The Seekers Forum today. I'd like to ask you Uma, how do you deal with perfectionism in your community when it comes to spiritual practice?

UMA: Perfectionism is such a great topic, Mark. First, I want to say thank you for inviting me to participate with you in The Seekers Forum and also for this somewhat challenging and important topic. In terms of dealing with perfectionism in my community, I first have to deal with it in myself. I have to explore it, understand it a little more because there is so much to say about it.

First, we have an idea that spirituality means that we're going to be perfect, and our lives are going to be perfect. This is true and it's a lie. We have to discover what's true about that and what is the lie.

UMA: Shall I go on?

MM: Yes, absolutely, please do.

UMA: What's true about it, of course, is that we're already perfect, we're already whole. That's the definition of perfection in terms of spirituality coming from the path of Kriya Yoga, we are perfect because we are whole, as expressions of the one reality. We're not separate from that, we're already whole, we're already complete; in that sense we're already perfect. The mistake that happens is that we then take that call to be perfect and to be aware of perfection – which is innate – we take it and try to apply it to the changing material world, like conditions should be perfect. Our actions should be perfect, our speech should be perfect and so on. We're holding ourselves to a standard that is not viable. Then the spiritual path becomes a trap instead of a path of love and joy.

MM: Can you say more about what you mean about a trap in spiritual life?

UMA: Yes, it depends on where we're coming from and what's in charge. If we're aware of that higher perspective that is about our innate perfection as spiritual beings, which is, of course, the perfection of everyone and everything as it is, appearing in spirit, spirit unfolding versus the egoic perspective coming from the ego – that is the trap. Ego is always going to be about not enough, always going to be about looking for perfection, never about experiencing it because that would undo ego. Ego would be out of a job once our innate perfection is realized, then ego has nothing to do. That main job, the main orientation of the ego, is to seek perfection because of a sense of innate emptiness.

MM: So, if we're already perfect and we acknowledge that, then the ego has nothing to defend against, nothing to hold us together, against.

UMA: Well, it has nothing to do. There is nothing more needed to be added on to us, from the spiritual perspective, and ego is all about "there's not enough." This is the desiring of more and more from the ego. If there is no more needed, if we appreciate our innate wholeness, we recognize this on the spiritual path. Just the experience of deep meditation where you touch your essential being, you recognize, in that moment, everything is perfect. When we experience this, desire comes to a standstill, when there is nothing else needed, ego would be out of a job.

MM: Yes. What I wonder about is the role of desire and longing. How do we move ourselves to practice, where does the aspiration come from if we are dwelling in what you're calling perfection?

UMA: In our own home, why would we practice, is that the question?

MM: That's the question.

UMA: I think that's an interesting question. I would say that we practice not to become perfect, not to become whole. We practice because that is the way that an enlightened person lives. When we're at the stage of practice when we're honing our mind, disciplining our bodies and, so, it's bringing our light into a higher order in which the way we're living is in harmony with our essence, so, in that respect, self-discipline is doing that which pleases the soul. Think of it early on where discipline is learning to align our own innate joy. And once you do that, it's innate, it's spontaneous. Your practice is the way that you live.

MM: Yes, and yet, so many people use discipline as an adversary, as an internal dictator to beat ourselves up. With this idea that if we don't push ourselves harshly, we wouldn't do anything at all. So, I'm curious. How does one develop the kind of self-loving discipline that you're talking about? What are the fundamentals of that attitude?

UMA: I think the first one is the innate pull that we have toward joy and perhaps that shows up as a desire to be free of suffering, that's often what brings us to the path to begin with: the desire for freedom, desire for fulfilment, desire to find our own home. So, I think the motivation to be free of suffering is there initially, and, underneath of that is our yearning for our own joy. Those are both motivators. Did I answer your question?

MM: You did. I'm curious, where does surrender come into discipline. Are they complementary?

UMA: They are. For me, I think a lot about surrender, I was just thinking about it today. I think surrender can be thought of as the willingness to let go of the idea that our life is a burden. Because life inherently has challenges and difficulties. Waking up spiritual doesn't make that go away because it's just the way life is. What can go away in the practice of surrender is the idea that our life, or any part of it, is a burden. That's an add-on from the level of ego. Ego will never experience wholeness because it's contrary to the very idea that ego is based on. In the same way

we can see that ego has the idea that it's on its own, *I'm on my own, I don't have support*, this creates that sense of burden. I think surrender can be thought of as the willingness to let go of the idea that our life is a burden.

MM: It's like leaning into this wholeness, this perfection that you talk about, instead of resisting it?

UMA: Yes, instead of looking for it outwardly, I guess. Letting go into knowing that you have divine support even if it is not obvious, most often it's not at the moment of surrender. It's letting go of the idea that you're separate, that you're on your own and opening up to the reality, the reality and the possibility of being divinely supported.

MM: Exactly, beautifully said. I'd like to ask you about commitment versus control. That's such an interesting paradox. What does Kriya Yoga teach about our relationship to control, in practice?

UMA: Could you say more about that, Mark? What are you asking? Are you asking if we have control over outcomes? What is the question?

MM: To me, there is a difference between commitment and control. Control being the control over outcomes, also control regarding perfectionism. It seems to me that perfectionism is connected to this need for control, the ego's need for control. That's contrary to commitment, I think. I just wondered if Kriya Yoga talks about that interface between control and commitment.

UMA: On the yoga path you find some teachings, for example in the Bhagavad Gita, that we cannot control every aspect of an action. In other words, we can have a clear intention, we can arrange conditions, we have control over certain factors, how we arrange conditions, what our intention is, how we prepare ourselves, what we bring together. The teachings say it's useful to know there is always an unknown factor. The example is given of a farmer who uses an almanac. He plants by the moon, tills the soil, uses the right seed, has the right experience, plants at the right time, then there's that unknown factor; it might be a drought or it might be an early rain that brings a bumper crop. There's always the unknown factor that comes into play in any action that we have. In truth, we don't have control over outcomes. The whole practice is about giving up ownership to outcomes, giving up attachment to an outcome.

Then people think and wonder, why should I have a goal if I'm not attached to the outcome? It's a fascinating question. On the spiritual path, we do see a goal for a particular outcome that we hope to see, but at the same time, we remain open to divine possibility and what is going to happen with what we're participating with, what is being put in motion. That's one part of it, letting go of a particular outcome. We want to allow room for divine grace. It will be something that is so much better than you imagined, that's always possible.

The other part is that our work is not really a product, it's not like we work and have an end product. Our work is really about who we are becoming. That's where the commitment comes in, Mark, the commitment we have to being more awake, being more loving, compassionate, enlightened human beings. Right?

MM: Right. What does Kriya Yoga teach about different temperaments, using different practices? Do you have a breakdown of different personality types for whom certain practices are more conducive than others?

UMA: Yes, in Kriya Yoga, the yogi sutra is our basic text, but we also use the Bhagavad Gita, and as you know, it clearly outlines different avenues of yoga for different temperament types. There's a yanni yoga for those who are inclined to use their intellect, to explore the nature of reality through discernment; there are those who are more scientific in their approach, step by step which we call the rasha yogi who practice a method; there are those that have a devotional temperament, they tend to lead with emotions, they are the ones who engage and enjoy ritual worship and chanting of the divine names and prayer, they are more inclined along those lines.

The fourth one includes those who are more active in life and are oriented toward service and that path. I think it's interesting in couple relationships, very often different types will end up together. We end up learning from each other. So, one who is oriented toward intellect and discernment, they frequently get paired up with somebody who leads with their emotions. Do you find that too?

MM: Oh, absolutely. I thought that maybe Kriya Yoga had a particular teaching around allowing for different temperaments, but it sounds like they follow the general yoga principles.

UMA: Definitely. I would say, because Kriya Yoga is an integrated path, it takes from those main yogas and integrates them with its practices in a sense, the methodology we get with Kriya yoga is a call to become a balanced human being. So yes, you have your particular lead card, but you need to develop these other avenues of perception and discernment and engagement with life to create more balance, which is an ultimate goal of yoga. You want to balance your intellect and your emotions and your actions and your methodology. So the call of Kriya is to take all those yogas and bring them into balance in your life.

MM: Beautiful! Speaking of discernment, I was just going to ask you about the difference between judgement – in the sense of being judgmental – and being discerning. What's the difference between those two approaches?

UMA: These are such good questions.

I find for myself, I've had the same thing come to me from the students, sometimes when we're just discerning the way that something is, or in particular, the way that another person is acting, it can feel like we're judging that person. And that doesn't feel very good and if you're on a spiritual path you don't want to do that. But what happens is that sometimes I find devotees are a little prone to throwing their discernment out the window because they associate it with being judgmental. I would say that the distinction is that when we're being judgmental we attach some kind of negative implication to that person versus just discerning the way that things are, discerning the way that a person acts, discerning certain qualities of behavior which we then don't attach to somehow denigrating the being of that person.

MM: That makes sense. So, discernment is judgement without story.

UMA: That's a good way to say it. Yes. Discernment without story, also without denigrating the self, denigrating the divinity of the person, so we always have to recognize that the Self of everyone is the same Self. Everyone is a spiritual being, no more, no less than anyone else. That's always a truth about anyone. But their behavior certainly may not reflect that and that's where we have to use our discernment.

MM: Right. So, is it okay to judge a personality?

UMA: Well, yes, I think you have to discern what certain personality characteristics and qualities are. For example, there are some people that become very vulnerable when they come into spiritual community. They have the idea being in the spiritual community that everyone is spiritual, they think: *I can fall in love with this person, I can lend money to this person*. All of a sudden, they forget about common sense in looking at the behavior of the person. Is the person trustworthy?

MM: Yes, right. So, we can judge bad behavior without judging the soul of the individual who's performing the bad behavior.

UMA: Absolutely. We have to. There is a beautiful quote by Sri Yukteswar, who said, "Saintliness is not dumbness."

MM: Right. Trungpa used to talk about "idiot compassion."

UMA: Yes, I think that's what I was just talking about.

MM: Exactly.

My last question for you, Uma, is what are you working on? I hear there is a new book in the works?

UMA: There is a book in the works, this is a book on the goal of artha, or wealth, how to prosper according to spiritual principles. It's just in the beginning stages, it won't be out 'til next year but it's an exciting project that I'm working on.

MM: Wonderful, I can't wait to read it. Your teaching is powerful as always, and I'm just grateful for you taking the time to talk to me today.

UMA: I really don't know anyone like you who asks such piercing questions, these are such important questions, questions I think we really benefit by asking ourselves and reflecting upon. So, thank you so much for the wonderful questions and for inviting me to be in this conversation with you.

MM: Thank you so much, my dear, have a wonderful day.

