

Vedanta

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Surrender to God
Swami Prabhavananda

Seeds
Swami Yatiswarananda





Master of Everything, Slave of Sex!

A job seeker got tired of visiting the manager in an office. He could not get the job. The manager said to him, "There is no vacancy now; but come and see me now and then." This went on for a long time, and the candidate lost all hope. One day he told his tale of woe to a friend. The friend said: "How stupid you are! Why are you wearing away the soles of your feet going to that fellow? You had better go to Golap. You will get the job tomorrow." "Is that so?" said the candidate. "I am going right away." Golap was the manager's mistress. The candidate called on her and said: "Mother, I am in great distress. You must help me out of it. I am the son of a poor brahmana. Where else shall I go for help? Mother I have been out of work many days. My children are about to

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Mantra Japa or Repetition of the Holy Name – 2

The quickening of the spiritual impulse in man cannot be achieved merely through books. From books only our intellect derives development, but not our spiritual susceptibilities. There is, however, some value even in such intellectual stimulation. For it may in course of time result in the awakening of a real thirst for true religion or spirituality. It is not true, however, that a high order of intellectual development signifies a proportionate development of an individual on the spiritual side. Many intellectuals are deluded into such an erroneous belief. The quickening of the spiritual impulse can come only from another soul that is itself deeply spiritual or enlightened.

The ordinary *Siddha* Gurus transmit spiritual wisdom to disciples through mantras, certain sound symbols to be repeated and meditated upon. These mantras are all helpful in the practice of divine meditation and the acquisition of true knowledge. An understanding of the philosophy of the mantras or sound symbols becomes therefore important.

As we discussed in our previous editorial, 'Om' is the basic sound representing the *Sphota* or the creative Word or Idea, into which the Supreme Being manifests in His creative role, first as *Hiranyagarbha* (also called *Mahat*) and then into the various forms of the world of creation. Om, the creative word (*Sphota*), is called *Sabda*-Brahman (Sound Brahman). The most important point to remember here is that every manifested form experienced by us in this world has got a corresponding Idea (called also as *nama*, name or word) and this idea precedes the *rupa* (form) in the cosmic mind. Now, the universal Idea, which is also the *Sphota* (creative word), including all ideas, is best represented by 'Om' because it is the most non-particularised and all-inclusive of sounds. Swami Vivekananda says, "This *Sphota* has one word as its only possible symbol, and

this is the (Om). And as by no possible means of analysis can we separate the word from the idea this Om and the eternal *Sphota* are inseparable; and therefore, it is out of this holiest of all holy words, the mother of all names and forms, the eternal Om, that the whole universe may be supposed to have been created. But it may be said that, although thought and word are inseparable, yet as there may be various word-symbols for the same thought, it is not necessary that this particular word Om should be the word representative of the thought, out of which the universe has become manifested. To this objection we reply that this Om is the only possible symbol which covers the whole ground, and there is none other like it. The *Sphota* is the material of all words, yet it is not any definite word in its fully formed state. That is to say, if all the peculiarities which distinguish one word from another be removed, then what remains will be the *Sphota*; therefore, this *Sphota* is called the *Nâda-Brahma*, the Sound-Brahman."

He further continues, "Now, as every word-symbol, intended to express the inexpressible *Sphota*, will so particularise it that it will no longer be the *Sphota*, that symbol which particularises it the least and at the same time most approximately expresses its nature, will be the truest symbol thereof; and this is the Om, and the Om only; because these three letters (A.U.M.), pronounced in combination as Om, may well be the generalised symbol of all possible sounds. The letter A is the least differentiated of all sounds, therefore Krishna says in the Gita "I am 'A' among the letters. Again, all articulate sounds are produced in the space within the mouth beginning with the root of the tongue and ending in the lips — the throat sound is A, and M is the last lip sound, and the U exactly represents the rolling forward of the impulse which begins at the root of the tongue till it ends in the lips. If properly pronounced, this Om will represent the whole phenomenon of sound-production, and no other word can do this; and this, therefore, is the fittest symbol of the *Sphota*, which is the real meaning of the Om." (C.W.3: 57-58)

Surrender to God

Swami Prabhavananda

The idea of renunciation and surrender to God is the ultimate goal of spiritual life. It is expressed by Sri Krishna to his disciple in the last chapter of the Gita (verse 66): "Abandon all duties, take refuge in Me, and Me alone." That total surrender is the last stage of spiritual life.

To attain it, we must practice two disciplines of a psychological nature: 1) the total and complete obliteration of the ego; and 2) a constant remembrance in ourselves of the presence of God.

This is not accomplished in a single stroke but progressively, after long training; we can then have a constant vision of Reality. Vivekananda said: "Don't seek God, see Him." To see God is the supreme experience of our life. Shankara presents the same idea in philosophical language in his commentaries: our perception of the universe, even in ignorance, is a continual perception of Brahman. Brahman cannot be absent, even for an instant. The ignorant person is not 'outside' of Him. If Brahman is everywhere, it is from Him that we receive all experience; only our ignorance prevents us from feeling it. Our goal is: "See Brahman with open eyes."

This brings to my mind one of the greatest disciples of Ramakrishna, Swami Shivananda; near the end of his life he saw the presence of Brahman everywhere. The way he expressed this made a great impression on his disciples.

When these disciples, old or young, drew near to him, it was he who saluted them first. One day, one of them asked him: "Why, Mahapurush Maharaj, do you salute us in this way?"

"My children," replied Swami Shivananda, "I cannot do otherwise. I see the presence of Brahman everywhere and only afterwards do your particular forms appear to me. I am unable to see you separate from Brahman." It is that that is the Reality. That spiritual experience is the highest there is: it is ecstasy, the greatest joy, bliss—Ananda—which is the very nature of Brahman, which is one of the dimensions of being.

What is the highest ideal, the goal of our life?

According to our great philosopher, Kapila, it is the cessation of misery, of suffering. This answer seems to indicate a negative state, but in reality behind that cessation of misery appears a positive state, Joy, which can be experienced. It is the essence of being. Why is it then that we don't all feel it spontaneously? Shankara answers: "Only the ignorant do not feel it." What then is this ignorance? According to Patanjali, it is the sense of ego that gives birth to suffering; by constantly making false identifications, we identify the Self with the non-Self, thereby indirectly producing feelings of attachment and aversion, and suffering ensues. This way of clinging to the physical life alters the quality of consciousness. Here is lodged the root of the ego.

If we analyze now to find the base, the foundation of the ego, we arrive at the solution taught to us by Sri Ramakrishna on this subject: he compares the ego to an onion that is peeled endlessly without finding any supports to the layers successively removed. The ego therefore has no foundation, it is only a shadow. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to give it up. How can we discipline it? Ramakrishna teaches us that if we cannot succeed in destroying this illusion of the ego, we can keep it, but by transforming it in such a way as to see ourselves as servants of God.

The highest example of self-renunciation is given by Girish Ghosh, the great lay disciple of Ramakrishna, of whom you have all heard. I will briefly speak of his past. He lived excommunicated from society because of his life of unbridled debauchery, but one day he felt himself to be in the depths of spiritual isolation and he searched out Ramakrishna, who immediately accepted him as a disciple.

Girish told him: "I have not come to receive teachings for I am myself the author of a great number of works and plays of a spiritual inspiration. I know the Scriptures, I can recite them by heart."

"You must practice some disciplines," the Master replied.

"I don't believe in it!"

"Then briefly repeat each day, morning and night, the name of the Lord."

But Girish replied again in all frankness: "I'm too busy and I am under the influence of alcohol all day; I feel that I could not keep a promise to repeat regularly the name of the Lord."

"Since that is the case," said Ramakrishna, "it is not necessary for you to practice any discipline. Give me your 'power of attorney' and I will do it for you."

Girish consented immediately without measuring the consequences of that act: to give to his Guru the 'power of attorney!' But Girish was sincerity itself; it was the most striking trait of his character, and it was because of this that he achieved a spiritual life.

What is sincerity? It is the perfect harmony of the teachings of the sacred Books with the heart, it is the direct expression of what is felt. One day I asked Swami Turiyananda, to whom I felt very close, "Give me a definition of spiritual life." He answered me:

"Your heart and the words that leave your lips should be in perfect accord."

Girish achieved profoundly that state. Leaving Ramakrishna, he thought: "Oh, I must quickly get to work, I must organize the rehearsals, I must write another play, etc. . ." But he immediately heard another voice inside: "How is it that I have these desires? I have no duties! It is Ramakrishna who is acting in me: what need have I to act according to my will?" And it was thus that he began to feel the presence of his Master. It is what is called the state of eternal vigilance. His whole life, his very being was transformed. It is an extraordinary case. Ramakrishna did not ask him to renounce everything, but only to give him his 'power of attorney'. Only Ramakrishna had that power to transform those who approached him.

I will tell you now how Girish gave up drinking. It was Swami Premananda, a great disciple of Ramakrishna, who told me about it one day. Ramakrishna was invited to Calcutta by a family of Brahmos. Brahmos are protestants who are very puritan and austere in their habits. Romain Rolland, in his book on Ramakrishna, speaks of the Brahmo-Samaj: it was a movement of religious reform. Ramakrishna, then, went to that family accompanied by Swami Premananda and Latu Maharaj (Swami Adbhutananda). Girish arrived just as they were leaving Dakshineswar; he was coming to see Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar and had not omitted to bring two bottles of alcohol with him. Ramakrishna invited him to accompany them, and Girish climbed into the carriage with his two bottles. But as it happened, just as Ramakrishna was leaving the carriage at Calcutta, the bottles fell to the pavement and broke: the odour of wine spread in the air. The Brahmos, who had come to welcome Ramakrishna on his arrival, were extremely shocked and

dismayed at the sight of this spectacle. No doubt they thought that Ramakrishna was in the habit of drinking. And now they hesitated to let him attend a religious meeting where praises of God were to be sung and where spiritual subjects were to be discussed. But Ramakrishna declared: "Look, it is only medicine, it is not wine." They then saw—it was a miracle—that a bitter medicine was spilled about, and that the bottles carried the label of the "Gupta Pharmacy". They were stupefied, overwhelmed, to see that even the label was changed! Even so, Girish was disappointed at not having alcohol. Without alcohol he wouldn't be able to write. He looked everywhere in the house; in the liquor cabinet he indeed saw a great number of bottles, but they all carried the label of that medicine! He was astonished; he suspected a mistake and broke a bottle to verify the contents; he recognized the same pharmaceutical odour. He then felt fully the active presence of Ramakrishna in him. Ramakrishna had never asked him to renounce alcohol, but he had led him in that way to total detachment.

Swami Vivekananda said that after Shakespeare, Girish was the greatest dramatic writer that the world had ever known. He created in Bengali poetry a meter that still carries his name. I will now tell you about my personal experience, my meeting with Girish when I was 16 or 17 years of age. Ramakrishna sometimes said to Girish: "When the world knows you it will be astonished, for there is no greater miracle than you." Indeed, when I approached him, I felt his powerful spiritual radiation. It is not enough to say that he was a saint; he was sainthood itself. When I arrived, he was writing about and giving a discourse on Shankara. He was not actually writing himself, for when he was inspired like that he lived in a state of ecstasy. He was therefore dictating to two or three stenographers. Sometimes these stenographers, not

managing to follow him, asked him to repeat his last sentences but he could not remember and answered, "I don't know." It was Ramakrishna himself who dictated everything through him.

Another time I went to see Girish with the editor of the Bengali review, the 'Udbodhan'. We asked him to write an article or a poem on Ramakrishna for our publication. He at once called for a secretary, entered into a state of ecstasy, and dictated a magnificent poem overflowing with devotion.

This memory brings another recollection to my mind: a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, Swami Ramakrishnananda, founder of the Madras Monastery, came to Calcutta, where he died shortly afterwards. During his final moments, he expressed the desire to hear a song about Ramakrishna whose first line he could only recall. An excellent singer from Calcutta, Pulin Mitra, was sent for and was asked to sing this song. However, he did not know it. Thinking that Girish was the author of it, he went to find him, and said: "Swami Ramakrishnananda is about to die. He would like to hear the song that you composed." Girish recited it at once—he had found it intact immediately in his mind.

When Swami Ramakrishnananda heard it, he cried out: "That expresses perfectly the feeling I have at this instant." He sang it like a litany and felt an extraordinary peace fill him.

If Girish was able to achieve such a spiritual life, it was because he had, above all, sincerity and faith. Ramakrishna often said that Girish possessed faith of a level of 175 per cent. It is so difficult to understand such a faith. One day, I asked M., the author of 'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna', a work written according to notes taken during conversations between Ramakrishna and the faithful: "What did you gain by your intimate contact with Ramakrishna?" He replied: "I gained faith." That astonished me. I didn't know then the meaning of faith. But after several years I understood the

meaning. Faith is generally taken to mean religion or religious experience and what insight can reveal to us; samadhi, or the state of turiya, the fourth state. But all that is on a lower level than spiritual life; the experience of Brahman, samadhi is not enough. Much more is necessary. Doubtless these experiences transform our lives. But what is necessary is faith, that is to say to live, as St. Paul said, by dwelling continually in God. Faith is alive at each moment of our existence; to feel Brahman always behind you, to remain bathed in Him without losing track of His presence even for a second, to live, to move, and to have the root of one's being in Him—that is true religion, that is the spiritual life.

And this state leads to the realization of the highest virtues. The realm of metaphysics is touched here. Faith gives a harmony and balance in our interior and exterior lives. All of the contradictions and oppositions which generally disrupt our peace are reconciled and we remain calm, resting on the very inner being of our nature, which is Brahman. We cannot find this through the intellect, only through intuition. To live continually in that intuition of Brahman, that is faith.

I will now recount several memories that illustrate the meaning of the words 'faith', 'same-sightedness', and 'peace'.

I knew Swamis Saradananda and Turiyananda, two great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Turiyananda was very seriously ill. He had to undergo five operations for skin abscesses without anaesthesia. He asked only for several minutes to compose himself before the operation. While the surgeon operated on him, he spoke calmly of one thing or another. He was in the habit of often repeating a saying of the Master: "Oh my body, occupy yourself with your affairs, with your sufferings; but you, my mind, do not remain in its company, stay away from all association with suffering."

Swami Brahmananda said one day: "My brother Turiyananda has attained supreme equanimity of vision; he is so great that I wish to prostrate myself at his feet." He really had to be a man of intense spirituality, for Swami Brahmananda, the venerated leader of all, to express the desire to bow down before him. Swami Turiyananda heard these words but maintained his calm serenity.

But one day Swami Saradananda put into practice the words of Swami Brahmananda. He entered the room of Swami Turiyananda, who was very ill, by passing through a door behind the Swami's bed. Upon seeing Swami Saradananda, who was secretary of the Order, the attendant wished to awaken Turiyananda. Swami Saradananda stopped him; he approached the bed, prostrated himself, and took Swami Turiyananda's feet in his hands. The Swami awoke and asked: "What are you doing?" Swami Saradananda said: "I heard the words of Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) and I have come to extend to you our veneration, for you have attained the supreme state." Swami Turiyananda replied: "I myself consider that you have achieved this supreme experience. Do you remember that incident, after Ramakrishna's death, when we were together in the Himalayas?" Here is the story: one day in the Himalayas, Swami Saradananda and Swami Turiyananda became lost. The region was infested with tigers and they could hear their growling all around them. They decided not to remain together so that at least one of them might save himself for the cause of the Ramakrishna Order. They therefore separated. Swami Turiyananda soon perceived a faint light. After many difficulties, he came to a small hut in which a hermit lived.

He asked the hermit: "Can you help me find my brother?"

"Not now," came the reply.

Swami Turiyananda persisted: "We were together. I can't stay without him."

"No, no, my child, this area is infested with tigers, and if one goes out there one won't come back," cautioned the hermit.

Swami Turiyananda then found in the hut a sort of conch which he sounded, hoping that Swami Saradananda might hear it. Then, at dawn, he wished to go out in search of his brother. The hermit stopped him, saying that because of the fog it was extremely dangerous to go out before eleven o'clock. But Swami Turiyananda did not listen to him and left. After a long search, what did he see? On a rock, an immobile man deep in meditation. He calls. No answer. He approaches. It was Swami Saradananda. Swami Turiyananda shook him to awaken him and they embraced warmly. Swami Saradananda then explained that, feeling himself surrounded by tigers and sure of being devoured, he did not wish to let himself die in fear but rather in meditation. And as soon as he was plunged in meditation, he entered into samadhi. The long hours of the night and of the morning passed like this. He had, in the midst of danger, conserved that peace and that tranquillity that are the result of faith.

There are then here in this world, such as all the direct disciples of Ramakrishna, some who have continually achieved that state of peace and who have taught us the way to attain it and to achieve ourselves that ideal of abnegation of self, abnegation inspired by Faith.

To arrive there we must constantly remember the thought of God, to be unfailingly vigilant. We are not able to achieve this state immediately, but little by little it will establish itself. Maharaj said to me one day: "My son, only five minutes of the thought of Brahman, of the thought of God, brings a state of blessedness. Try to cultivate that state by continually thinking of love. Love can only grow if we think of Him to whom we offer adoration. To

constantly keep that thought in us is the way to live always in love, to keep in touch with the eternal source."

We must then keep the spirit gathered at the feet of the Lord. We must learn how, through faith, through the love of God. Before leaving India to go to America, I went to see Swami Turiyananda. The simple advice he gave me was to cultivate sincerity. He also told me: "If you give light to others, you will yourself receive more." That was for me a subject of deep reflection. How to obtain more light and love? One day, I told Maharaj that I wanted to go and see a great saint about whom someone had spoken to me. Maharaj replied: "You have already seen many; now practice spiritual disciplines, try to do more meditation and japa. It is only when you have more love in your heart that you will have the need and the ability to be united with the misery of the people, in time with the suffering of the world. To remain in contact with suffering, to help the world overcome it, that is the expression of love. Try to show sympathy to others, then you will feel that truth."

Jesus taught love of one's neighbour. That ideal is difficult to live without meditation, without having made contact with God inside oneself. That is the goal of these spiritual exercises: it is not the supreme vision or samadhi, but it is to feel love, to pour it out to the world, to those in our entourage who need it, and to diminish suffering around us.

Here is a recollection that illustrates this love: around 1914 or 1916, I was struck with a very dangerous illness in India: tropical smallpox. Very few people survive that illness. Swami Turiyananda and I were in Benares at that time. As soon as a person is struck with smallpox, he is isolated. I was therefore alone in a small room, where the Swami came to see me every day. He was very learned. He had been to America, and he knew the dangers of contagion. Nevertheless, he remained near me. I looked

repulsive because of the sores that covered my body. Every day, with his hand, he touched my entire body to calm the burning. One day, seeing me very upset and perhaps fearing for my life, he said to me: "Ask me anything, I will bless you with it." As a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, the words that he pronounced had the power to come true immediately, and if one asks for the realization of Brahman, for example, it is obtained. I said to him: "Don't come anymore to my room, for your person is so precious that it would be a misfortune if you caught this illness. Don't come any more." He was very struck by this answer. From that time on he did not enter my room, but even so he came to ask about me from the door. Beginning to convalesce, I took a bath; that is the most dangerous period for contagion because of the peeling of the skin. Swami Turiyananda was in a room with many people around him. Everyone was terrified upon seeing me. "He will contaminate us," they cried. But I stayed at the threshold, at a great distance. "Come near me," said Swami Turiyananda. "Those who are afraid of germs can go." And I crossed the whole assembly to go and seat myself at the feet of the Swami.

With the Divine Mother, by Her power, fire will lose the ability to burn, and wind will lose the ability to carry us away! Always rest in that consciousness of the Divine Mother.

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Seeds

Swami Yatiswarananda

Our spiritual life, whatever the worldly-minded may say, should be begun as soon as possible. The cleverness of all worldly people is like that of the crow; the crow thinks itself terribly clever, but it eats filth and dirt all the same. Worldly people always tell you that there is plenty of time to embark upon the religious life; first enjoy your youth and in old age, they say, there will be time enough to do your spiritual practices. But when the years have rolled on you find that the old impressions have become so deep in the mind that there is no possibility of effacing them; you find that you have become the slave of impulses and instincts and can no longer act in the way you would like to; you are unable to take up a higher and purer life, either mentally or physically.

Those who are not spiritually minded while they live in the world can never be spiritually minded when they "retire" from the world. Unless we have sown the seed in our soul from an early age, there is no possibility of creating spiritual insight in later life. Our ideal, then, is to make a beginning as soon as possible and to make the best use of the time that is given.

Purity

Purity is the condition for Divine grace to reach the soul. Without it and real dispassion there can never be any inner life, or even any deep spiritual striving. The grace of the Divine comes to a person in the form of self-effort, in the form of the will to strive for something higher and more permanent than what we perceive through the senses. Some speak of destiny, others speak of

self-effort, while again others say: "It is true that everything depends on the will of the Lord, but the Lord desires that I should strive my utmost. Self-effort comes as a manifestation of 'destiny'; it is the will of the Lord that creates in me the desire for striving."

We find that unless we strive our utmost, the Lord's grace will not descend. We must know how to divide the mind. Whatever our occupation is, we must know how to harness its wonderful powers by making one part of it cling to the Lord and the Lord alone. This in itself is a great sadhana. What is most essential in all forms of spiritual life, even when we are occupied with some worldly duty, is to keep the greater part of the mind thinking of God: thinking of the Ideal and never allowing it to wallow in thoughts of the world or in mundane affections and relationships. Through constant and unflagging practice, we develop an attitude of mind that enables us to think and to feel that whatever we do, whether it be physical, intellectual or spiritual work, is a service to the Lord and that we have no right to the fruits of any of our actions.

"O Lord, whatever works I do, I look upon them as a form of worship to Thee."

It is quite true that everything is a manifestation of the Divine, but it is better to salute some of these manifestations from a safe distance. There are some forms of the Divine that we should avoid and there are others we should not approach too closely during the time of our sadhana.

Always be on your guard and wide-awake. Always watch the reactions in your mind brought about by certain people and things, and act accordingly. Avoid everything that is apt to arouse old impressions and thoughts. If you do not, you will not attain mental purification.

The Ideal

So long as we allow ourselves to be vague and dreamy, hazy in all our feelings and doings, no progress will be felt, and there will be a continual conflict which will prevent us from advancing even a single step towards the goal. There is too much of shallow, superficial thinking and not enough of any definite, clear-cut spiritual purpose or awareness. When we study our minds dispassionately, we find that the ideal and the path are not at all fixed; different ideals and ideas arise in the mind alternately. There is no steadiness whatsoever. The Ideal must be clear and it must be fixed before beginning spiritual disciplines. That is what is needed. We must have a very definite idea of the path and of the goal to be attained.

We must know for certain that neither worldly nor heavenly pleasures are our goal; that the only Goal is self-realization. Heavenly enjoyment is no better than earthly enjoyment—it is, after all, a very cheap thing. We cannot lead the worldly life and the higher life at the same time. We cannot allow ourselves to run after worldly desires and simultaneously have higher Divine Love. God and worldly desires; God and worldly passion and pleasure—these cannot live together.

"Where kama (lust) is, there Rama cannot be; where Rama is, there kama cannot be."

Thus, before we actually begin our spiritual life in earnest, we must decide if we are fully prepared to pay the price. If we look into ourselves, we shall discover that there are two tendencies: there is the worldly tendency and the spiritual tendency, and both are equally strong. The spiritual must be strengthened otherwise there will be no progress and the tug-of-war that is going on inside will continue for an exhaustive, indefinite period. It is absolutely necessary for us to fix once and for all our ideal, our conduct of

life, everything ... and then stick to it whatever happens. If we really wish to follow this difficult path, beset with so many pitfalls and dangers, we must also be prepared to overcome all the difficulties. And if we wish to transcend all the unrealities, there must always be a certain amount of the dare-devil in us; a certain amount of fearlessness and true heroism.

The aspirant's path is dangerous. The pitfalls are everywhere and if once trapped, then, for many, there is a long wait before another chance is offered. To realize the higher ideal, we must sacrifice all our worldly desires, our sense of I-ness. We should pray unceasingly: "Lord! Grant me discrimination; grant me renunciation; grant me devotion and knowledge."

Images

As you seek to spiritualize your worldly relationships, so you come to have a wider love and sympathy. If one person in particular attracts you, direct the mind into higher channels and create loftier sentiments. You may even, for the time being, create in yourself a dislike for the person in question so that person loses all charm for you. Later, this dislike can be effaced so that you can look at that person with indifference. Why attach yourself to an ephemeral form? If you want to love, love the Ideal or the Divine. When you find something higher, the lower automatically loses its attraction and is put aside. So long as you allow love for the world to dwell in your hearts, Divine Love can never be born.

In the beginning of your spiritual life, you have to create your own images, but these are always images of the real, not of the imaginary. Some stress the sense of the Presence more than the form, though they also may seek the aid of a form of the Divine. You need to keep in mind that the same Being permeates both the form and your own eternal being. Just think that your whole heart

and head are permeated with Divine Effulgence and that this Light is part of the Infinite Light that pervades everything. Melt away your personality, your body, your mind, your senses, your emotions—into That. Imagine vividly that this Infinite Ocean of Light becomes solidified into the form of your Ishtam, your Chosen Ideal. Never lose sight of the infinite background of which your Ishtam and you yourself, as well as all others, are parts; it permeates all these. The Ocean, the One Eternal Principle lying behind yourself and the universe, must never be lost sight of because it is That which will be realized by you one day. In this form of meditation, the One becomes two, as it were. The Infinite Light becomes solidified into the object of worship and the worshipper.

The Fire

We should practise a certain amount of control and discrimination regarding the food we take. As long as we are in the body, the body must be taken care of and nourished to keep it a fit instrument for the realization of the Divine. There is much more body-consciousness in the person who is ill and weak than in those who are perfectly healthy. And we have to see that our body-consciousness is reduced to a minimum if we want to make progress in spiritual life.

Unless our mind is to some extent pure and unattached, we can never even think of God-realization. Try to purify your body, heart and mind as much as possible, then the blazing fire of spiritual realization will burn away all desires.

Banish all worldly thoughts with an effort of the will. Consciously and purposefully fix your mind on the Divine. One who does not lead a pure life and is not disciplined ought never to receive this instruction, because meditation becomes dangerous

in the case of a person who is not properly prepared and who has not gone through the preliminary training. Only one who has passed through tremendous training and ethical discipline can have true self-surrender.

You must never associate too freely with people: always use your discrimination. Once Sri Ramakrishna told Swami Vivekananda not to associate too much with Girish Chandra Ghosh, the great Bengali dramatist and actor. The Master said that a cup that had contained garlic for a long time would still retain some of the smell even after it had been washed and cleaned. On hearing about this from another devotee, Girish naturally felt piqued and went to the Master and brokenly asked him about it. "Sir," he pleaded, "what can I do to get rid of this garlic smell? Please bless me so that it goes away." Sri Ramakrishna replied, "You have lighted such a fire of devotion that it will burn away all the smell. No taint of your past life can cling to you."

Only one who has passed through strenuous self-effort, who has gone through his or her spiritual practices with great perseverance and doggedness, can surrender himself wholly and unconditionally at the feet of the Divine. Self-surrender comes when our wings are dead-tired like those of the bird sitting on the ship's mast. (A reference to a story told by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Brahmananda about a little bird who fell asleep on a ship's mast and was carried far out to sea. On discovering its plight, the bird flew endlessly in all directions seeking land—but to no avail. Finally, the bird decided to stop searching and to hold on to the mast with all its strength. Eventually, the ship reached harbour and the little bird found a new land.)

All forms of striving make the mind pure and fit for the Divine touch. But too much activity is dangerous, because it usually becomes the aimless activity of the monkey; a kind of restlessness

and nothing more. But there is also a form of so-called self-surrender that is nothing more than inertness, indolence and lethargy. This is just as bad as aimless activity. Most people are active because they are afraid to be left to themselves. They work and work, go to cinemas, parties, theatres, and read volumes of books. What for? Just to keep themselves busy; just to divert their minds from themselves. The true aspirant should always try to combine both activity of the right kind, and self-surrender. Self-realization is the ultimate goal and the ideal.

We must strive for perfect self-control, otherwise the mind will be drawn away by the senses and become more and more outgoing and sense-bound. We can have only one centre of consciousness if we wish to progress in spiritual life. You cannot lose your body consciousness without disciplining and subduing the body and its cravings.

The Infinite

Most people cannot begin their spiritual practices with the Formless—not even the Formless with attributes—whatever they may think. But first they must find this out for themselves, then only can proper instructions be given to them, not before. Mere concentration without a strict ethical culture is not enough. We must learn to purify our feelings and so attain a sense of vastness, of the Infinite pervading everything.

But very often we find it impossible to think of the Divine as such. So it is proper to think of the great Personalities, the Prophets and Incarnations. To worship God in Spirit and in Truth is all very well, but how to do it? If we cannot, it becomes a meaningless phrase.

We possess only our limited, impure, individual consciousness, but the Great Ones possess infinite consciousness. They rise out

of the Ocean, but the Ocean never becomes limited by wave form. It is the wave that merges itself into the Ocean: that becomes one with it; that comes to have Ocean Consciousness. "Lord, when I am one with Thee, it is not Thou that becomest myself, but it is I who am lost in Thee."

The part becomes merged in the whole: never can the whole be identified with the part. Individual consciousness expands itself into Universal Consciousness, but Universal Consciousness can never become individual consciousness. This is the meaning of "Thou art That" or "I am Brahman" and is the reply to all who say, "How can God become man?" God is never limited and the Incarnation is only a manifestation, never the whole of God. We are just like small waves and ripples that are merged in the ocean, and it is very difficult for us even to have full wave consciousness. We are like bubbles, or, at the most, a very small wave: but they, the great Incarnations, are mountain-high waves, always conscious of their true nature and consciously in touch with the Ocean. What happens if you try to take a small bubble out of the water? You get wet fingers. The bubble only bursts, for no bubble can exist by itself without this ocean background. The trouble is, we are not conscious of this background. We believe ourselves to be separate entities: separate from the Ocean and separate from each other. So it is that all our other mistakes follow as a matter of course and cannot be avoided.

Although we take our limited existence to be real, we find, when we go deeply into the matter, that it is not so. The conception of the reality of our limited existence is wholly due to ignorance; to the bubble imagining itself to be independent of the ocean. So, we come to cherish many petty, undignified conceptions. When we get rid of these limiting adjuncts, we rise above all such illusory,

misleading ideas and become dignified, Self-conscious beings (using the term 'Self-conscious' in the highest sense).

The Conductor

Christhood and Buddhahood are states of Absolute Existence. Those who have attained this state always have the Saviour's consciousness—Infinite Consciousness—not the lesser, individualized one which is so limited. As substance, Consciousness is all one and the same. It is indivisible, eternal, unchanging, but it cannot be denied that during the time of our clouded, individualized state, something is there that is not of this Substance. Something other than this one Substance creates all this differentiation.

Each of us has raised a thought-world round ourselves, and it is that which individualizes us all. Where does this thought-world come from? What was our condition before this individualized form came into existence? Why does this body and these diverse and manifold thought-forms exist? Why does the Formless assume form? It is all madness. The moment this individualized state is brought about, passions and desires crop up and try to gain control over us. If passions, desires, body-consciousness and all the rest really belonged to our essential nature, we could never get rid of them. But fortunately this is not the case. They are merely our second nature.

The touch of the Great ones brings us also to Universal Consciousness. It bursts the bonds of this limited existence by bringing in new light, a deeper kind of awareness that lies hidden in all of us. By lifting ourselves consciously to the plane of their thoughts, we get rid of these wrong and deep-seated notions of being men and women. Drop the limiting adjuncts and feel a newer and purer sense of existence! Sometimes, through the

intensity of our feelings, we can give such a stimulus to the Cosmic Mind that a Divine Form arises out of it.

All the Great Souls rise out of the Cosmic Mind of which our individual minds are but parts. Because we bubbles find it impossible to come in touch with the ocean, we need to come in touch with the mighty wave. By loving the Great Ones with great intensity, with our whole heart, we come to love their ideas. So until we reach realization we should study their lives and have great love for them.

If you connect your light with the electric current from a power station you get plenty of light. The dynamo gives all the necessary current, but you must connect your wires to the dynamo. By coming into touch with the Great Ones, we also are magnetized, as it were; but we must first become attuned. Our attempts at meditation are for polarizing the mind. When the contact is established, the current flows automatically. So you must make yourselves good conductors. We do not give a stimulus to something that is non-existent, but to something that is at all times, and then, as a result of that stimulus, something arises in us to the conscious plane.

If you throw a stone into a pond you see a reaction; but you did not create the water. So, in a way, prayer is like the stone thrown into the water: the water is there, but the stone gives a stimulus to it, and the reaction follows as a matter of course.

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Before you sit in Meditation

Swami Ashokananda

I believe that through meditation, which is the uninterrupted flow of the same thought of God, one can easily attain the Highest, for the mind eventually succumbs to a thought to which it is subjected uninterruptedly for a long time. If we continue to imbue the mind with a certain kind of consciousness—whatever may be the condition of mind in the beginning, whether spiritual or not, whether filled with love for God or with restless desires—in the course of time the desired change will take place.

Sri Ramakrishna laid much stress on this fact. It took me a long time to comprehend one of his teachings on this subject, but when I understood it—and I hope I have understood it—I found great promise and assurance therein. He used to say that the mind is like a laundered cloth which takes the colour of the dye in which it is dipped. At first, I thought he meant that the mind must be made absolutely pure before it is plunged into the thought of God to take His colour. There was nothing particularly encouraging in this because the great problem of almost all spiritual aspirants is the attainment of purity of mind. Such purification is three-fourths of the battle; for when it is fully accomplished, spiritual realization comes spontaneously. But as I pondered over Sri Ramakrishna's simile, I began to understand it differently. In likening the mind to a laundered cloth, he spoke of the average mind, the mind which is so crowded with worldly and contradictory thoughts and feelings, and which is so averse to the thought of God. It was not the purified mind that he likened to a laundered cloth, but the mind in whatever condition it may be. I saw he meant that even this average mind, if dipped in the thought of God, would take on spiritual colour.

Here is a psychological truth, wonderfully encouraging and helpful, but often forgotten by spiritual aspirants. Once a man came to Sri Ramakrishna, saying, "I cannot control my mind—I don't know how." The Master, astonished, said, "Why do you not practise *abhyasa-yoga*?" Bringing the mind back again and again to the thought of God—that is what *abhyasa-yoga* means. This practice is particularly commended in the Bhagavad-Gita. Does it matter very much if the mind wanders in the beginning, so long as you bring it back to Him? If we could remember this, half the battle would be already won, but unfortunately, we often do not, and then we think of other things and completely forget the spiritual quest. Such being the case, I may profitably discuss certain points concerned with the means of self-control and meditation.

What is the condition of mind suitable for meditation? It is known to all of you, I think, as quietness. This is not a forced calmness, but a calmness resulting from the cessation of most of the strong desires. The things which disturb the mind, whether rising from within or coming from without, are connected with our secret, basic desires. We are always trying to realize certain ends. Though we strive desperately, we often fail, and failure exasperates the mind. Even when success is ours, there are strange results. Because the objects of our desires sometimes elude us while we are enjoying them, we feel disappointed and cheated; and when we are not thus frustrated, we become attached to the objects of enjoyment, in which case, since enjoyment cannot be continually intensified, satiety follows. All these reactions keep the mind continually restless, whether pleasantly or unpleasantly. Thus we find that the thoughts which do not allow our mind to dwell on the Presence of God are connected with the objects of our desires; and that only when we succeed in ridding ourselves of our predominant desires does the mind become comparatively quiet.

We call this state of relative calmness the beginning of *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the mind), a condition in which the mind, though sometimes restless, is at other times quiet—restless when it comes in contact with the objects of desire, but fairly quiet when it does not do so. This is a very favourable state. If you find that your mind is naturally quiet when you are not in actual contact with disturbing things, that you like to be alone and that you have a feeling of serenity, recognize this condition as most desirable. In this condition you should try your best to practise meditation; you should never neglect it.

I should like to add that the mind is a very changeable entity. Do not think that any desired condition will continue to exist simply because you have once reached it. Something may arise from within or come from without to distract you, and it may sometimes take five or even ten years for the mind to quiet down again, just as the sea takes days to regain calmness after a storm. I do not mean that we shall never be absolutely safe. Undoubtedly there is a mental condition in which one need have no fear at all, but that is a very high state. When a person has reached that one-pointed state he has burned his bridges behind him. He has reached a condition in which the things of this world can no longer attract him; his mind will never hark back to the world he has left behind. He is secure.

Suppose we have reached the state in which the mind, though at times restless, is at other times quiet. What shall we do then, if we want to succeed in meditation?

(1) We must at the beginning make a firm resolution to be very regular in our practice. Whatever may be going on, we always manage to attend to our urgent bodily needs: we should be equally faithful to the practice of meditation. Meditation should be as much part of life as breathing. In my country, when a person is very busy he says, "I have no time to breathe." Actually, however, he does

breathe. And so it should be with meditation, though at first the desire to practise it may appear artificial. Make up your mind: say to yourself, "I must meditate."

Sri Ramakrishna often praised the Muhammadans for their punctuality in prayer. There are not many Muhammadans in this country, but there are multitudes of them in India. Wherever a Muhammadan may be, when the time for prayer comes, he stops everything, washes his hands and face, and then, spreading his rug even by a roadside if necessary, prays for at least fifteen minutes. Never does he fail to do this. There is no justification for anyone to say that he has no time to meditate. Extraordinary occasions may arise when one actually has not the time. But to say, "I am too busy to find time for it" or "I am so tired in the evening that it is impossible to meditate" is mere evasion. Nothing prevents the one who thus rationalizes from saving some of his energy for the evening. But he spends it all in the daytime doing other things—sometimes actually harmful things—and when evening comes, he gives himself false justification for failing to meditate. Ask him about it and he will say, "I need more sleep; I am tired. When I get up I must hurry to the office—where is the time?"

We have a song about a man who, after spending all his life foolishly, finally realized his mistake and spoke: "I had time for everything else, O Lord, but I did not have time to think of Thee!" Notice this peculiarity of the human mind: there is a time and a place for everything else in our life, but we do not have even fifteen minutes daily for meditation! If you tell me you have no time or energy, do you think I shall believe you? I shall say you are deceiving yourself. Where there is a will, there is a way. If you are determined, you can always find time to meditate.

Here I should like to make a suggestion, for I know that discouragement comes. Sometimes in meditation the mind behaves

wonderfully: it becomes calm and concentrated easily, and you are encouraged. But if at other times it behaves badly, refuses to quiet down, and is restless with all kinds of thoughts, you may be tempted to say, "It is no use for me to meditate. I try, but reach nowhere." I want to tell you this: unless you are born with wonderful qualities of mind and in a very advanced state of spiritual development, you are subject, like every other man who has tried to become spiritual, to these fluctuations of consciousness. Do not let them discourage you, and do not think you are not fit to meditate when your mind is not sufficiently spiritual. Some have asked: "How can I approach God with a low state of mind?" If you were cold, would you say, "I am cold, so let me get warm before approaching the fire." Or would you say, "I am cold and therefore the first thing to do is to go to the fire and warm myself." If you feel yourself lacking in spirituality, that is the time of all times to think of God.

Do not let your mind mislead you. The mind can trick you in many different ways: sometimes it will tempt directly, and again it will mislead in the very name of religion. This reluctance to meditate because you are "not spiritual enough" is a trick the mind plays on you. Whatever your mental condition, even if your mind be filled with low thoughts, try to think about God. Of course, you may not be able to think about Him or meditate on Him as you would wish, but what does it matter? Keep trying. A vicious horse kicks, rears, and attempts to throw the rider, but if the rider manages to stay firmly in the saddle, the horse quiets down, knowing it has found its master. The mind behaves in the same way. It will try to dislodge you, but upon finding that you cannot be shaken off, it will become your slave. That is the secret of the mind, so do not bother about its condition. Make the determination to ride it, and this determination, which implies concentration, is itself a victory.

(2) Next, you must have a fixed time for meditation. In my opinion, a person should meditate not less than twice a day. If you cannot meditate twice, meditate at least once, either in the morning or in the evening.

In India, we think there are four auspicious hours for meditation. Early morning—at least an hour before sunrise, while it is still dark—is a very good time. Of this, more later. The second auspicious hour is noon. I do not know whether any special advantage can be derived from it in the city, but undoubtedly in villages, especially in a tropical country, all is hushed at this time and nature seems to stand still. It is so hot that even birds are silent and hide themselves among the leaves of the trees. People are quiet—often they rest at that time—and there is a definite lull: at least I used to feel it in my country, where many use the noon hour for meditation and worship.

The third auspicious time for meditation is early evening. In this country it is unfortunately difficult to meditate then, because it is usually the dinner hour. Yet evening is certainly one of the best times in which to meditate. If you can, you may practise meditation shortly before dinner, but it is not advisable to meditate immediately thereafter, as digestion may be impaired, and your health affected.

The fourth hour is midnight. In this part of the world it is not very quiet even at twelve o'clock, yet I think one does feel a certain stillness. Where it is fairly quiet, midnight is wonderfully suitable. As a matter of fact, many believe that midnight is the best of all hours for meditation.

Morning meditation has a certain advantage over evening meditation, in that the mind is quiet when you waken from the night's rest. All the impressions of the preceding day are erased, as if someone had come after school and wiped the blackboard clean.

Then, too, nature is quiet in the early morning and the city is not yet fully awake and stirring. Consequently, you find it easier to quiet the mind. There is another advantage: by meditating before the day has begun, you give a spiritual impetus and direction to your mind. Though it may tend to lose some of the spiritual strength and enthusiasm as the day progresses, these will nevertheless remain for many hours and sustain you through most of the day.

I should mention here that some may find meditation more successful in the evening than in the morning. There are those who 'wake up' gradually as the day advances. In the morning they are only half-awake, but towards evening wide awake with clear, sharp minds behaving wonderfully. Such persons undoubtedly will find evening or night meditation more successful. If you cannot avail yourself of any of these hours which are especially suitable for meditation, you should choose the one most convenient to you and make every effort to stick to it. The observance of regular hours of meditation is very important, because the mind functions according to habit. If it is made to think and feel in a certain way at a given time for many days consecutively, it will spontaneously think and feel in the same way whenever that time arrives. If we meditate on God at a specified hour, whenever that hour approaches, our mind, without any effort on our part, will be filled with the consciousness of God. This is no mean advantage to derive from regularity of practice.

(3) Just as you should have regular hours of meditation, so should you have a fixed place in which to meditate. That is one great advantage of temples and churches. Since such places are used for thinking of God, the very air in them becomes charged with His presence and the feeling of purity. You are uplifted by merely going there. An atmosphere similar to that of a temple or church can be created even in a corner of your own room. For wherever an intense

thought is held uninterruptedly, the place becomes charged with the quality of it, probably because the material atmosphere and surroundings are connected with the body, which vibrates in accordance with the thoughts of the mind. If our thoughts are pure, our bodies likewise attain to a purity which may be called a spiritual vibration; and naturally, with such a change in the body, the outside atmosphere is also changed.

Thus, the fixed place where you meditate will become charged with energy: it will be so permeated with a spiritual quality that your mind will be filled with the thought of meditation as soon as you come to that place. It will be quieted as if by a magic touch, and you will be conscious of a palpable Presence. What a great advantage! You can indeed perform this seeming miracle through the one practice of keeping apart a certain place consecrated to thoughts of God.

(4) When we measure the strength of the subtle enemies which hide in our minds—the passions, impulses, greed and desires—these devices that I have prescribed seem to provide a very frail protection. I admit this. When I say 'hide', I mean that even the best of us have not completely escaped their influence. It is said that one is not wholly free of them until one has actually touched the feet of God. Just as in winter the garden is cleared of weeds and old growth but with the first rain of spring the tiny seeds left lying in the earth sprout to cover it with green, even so, many subtle thoughts, impressions and desires lie hidden in our minds, waiting to spring up at the first opportunity.

Therefore, we must be very careful. We know that all these wrong impulses are in our minds and that they would easily cover our whole consciousness if we did not restrain them. Our problem is to keep a great part of our mind—and by degrees a greater and yet greater part of it—free from the domination of wrong impulses and

desires, so that with the mind thus freed we can think about God. In the meantime, what should we do to conquer our desires and adverse impulses? Sometimes they succumb to direct attack, but a flank attack is usually better. Fighting a state of mind directly in order to conquer it can do more harm than good, for thereby the mind often becomes more and more entangled. The wiser course is not to allow oneself to dwell on the condition of mind to be eradicated. Remember this psychological fact: the more you dwell on a mental condition, the more it is strengthened.

There is a story of a monk who used to sit under a roadside tree to pray and meditate. A woman of ill repute often passed by, and he would say to her, "You should give up your evil ways and try to be good. If you do not, terrible things will happen to you after death." Every time the monk saw the woman, he admonished her similarly. In course of time, they both died, and the messengers of death came to claim their spirits. It is said that a bright messenger brings a golden chariot to carry a good person to heaven, whereas a dark messenger comes when an evil person dies. It happened that the dark messenger came for the monk and the celestial messenger for the woman.

The monk was astonished. "I think there has been a mistake," he said. "No," answered the messenger, "there has been no mistake. All is quite right." "How can that be?" asked the monk. The messenger replied gravely, "Though seeming to meditate, you were all the while thinking of the woman and her evil deeds. Did not your mind dwell continually on evil? But the woman asked God for help, saying, 'Lord, I am weak. Save me!' Did not her mind dwell on God more than yours?" The monk could make no answer.

This may be an extreme illustration, but it contains a deep psychological truth. It points to a fundamental fact concerning mental action, a fact that you can utilize in your own struggle for

self-conquest. When the mind is allowed to dwell on some undesirable quality, it certainly creates a new impression that is many times stronger than the original one. Further recognition of this quality will only make it stronger and stronger until it may even become a complex. I am not saying that you should not restrain your mind, that you should let it be uncontrolled, or, as it is called, 'natural'. Nor do I mean that you should ignore your weaknesses. But truly it is often safer not to grapple with these directly. The better strategy is to train the mind to dwell on a new level. First divert it from the thought of your weakness to some innocent and pleasing subject, then lift it by degrees to a higher consciousness. This method of self-restraint does not repress the mind, but rather lifts it from dangerous associations by substituting desirable for undesirable thoughts.

If at present you have some serious fault that seems almost impossible to eradicate, you must have lent it strength and support by thinking of it and indulging in it. Take away that support, and the fault will become weak and will finally die through lack of nourishment. I do not say that this is easy to do, but with practice you can form the habit, and it is a sure way of making spiritual progress. After starving your undesirable thoughts for some time, you will probably find that, while many of them have died, some have still remained. Do not be too concerned. Let them remain, so long as they do not gain strength. Keep them cornered, and eventually they also will die.

(5) Bad company is one of the most potent causes of mental conflict and disturbance. It would be very well to mix with all kinds of people if we could remain unaffected by their company, but this rarely happens. I do not know of anyone who can do it. Right contacts and associations are therefore very important in spiritual life. If you share the company of impure persons and are in frequent

contact with wrong things, you will be unable to keep under control the thoughts you are trying to check; they will grow and will finally overcome your mind completely.

(6) A certain amount of asceticism is absolutely necessary for spiritual progress. Some of you, not eager to meditate, may say, "We shall leave that for our next life" or "We shall take it up a few years hence." Many think that youth is the time to enjoy life, that it is well enough to practise religion after beginning to grow old. In other words, when the world has turned sour, they will go to church wearing a long face and think they have religion. That is not and cannot be religion. What do we bring to God in such a case? A worn-out body and a worn-out mind scarred through and through. Do you think He is pleased with these? We do not take worm-eaten fruits or wilted flowers to His altar, but perfect offerings. In the same way, we should give Him the best of ourselves. The offering of a fresh and pure mind pleases Him most. Those who think religion is exclusively for the old make a profound mistake. The young especially should try to be spiritual, for if religious life begins early and the practices I have mentioned are undertaken while the mind is still fresh and pure, then by keeping a close watch over the mind one can keep it unspoiled. Under no circumstances should we allow the mind to become affected by the world. Youth is the propitious time for setting to work.

Sri Ramakrishna once said to a young college student: "When a man makes a brick, he puts his trademark on it while it is still soft. Then, when the brick is dried in the sun and baked in the kiln, the mark becomes permanent. Even so, if you can put the imprint of God on your mind while it is soft, that imprint can never be effaced, but will remain forever."

Practise asceticism—the more the better—and this does not mean making a wry face as if you have bitten into a sour apple. Practising

asceticism should give a pleasure similar to that of riding a spirited horse. Gain the strength to control the forces of your body and mind so that you are not dominated by them. This asceticism is necessary, for without it meditation is impossible.

(7) All the things I have discussed so far are important preliminaries; they should be practised each day of our lives and not merely at the beginning of our spiritual quest. He who practises them rightly can at will withdraw his mind completely, because he has gained tremendous control over it. But until you have been fully established in these practices, many of you may find that during meditation the mind takes some time to reach a state of quietude. This fact should be given careful consideration. If you rush about doing and thinking many things immediately before meditation, what success can you expect?

For some time prior to meditation, you should try to be quiet and to feel that you are unrelated to the world, that you have nothing to do with it. As husband, wife, mother, father, child and so on, you have many duties, and there are a thousand things demanding your attention. When approaching God, do you know what you should do? You should go to Him as though the world had never existed for you, as if you had no husband, wife, parents, friends, country—nothing at all. This would be the right feeling in the hour of meditation.

Approach meditation with the feeling of eternity. Who succeeds best in meditation? He who at the time of meditation can feel absolutely unrelated. Do you understand what that means? Try to imagine what eternity is. It is beyond time and consequently beyond all phenomena: it is a condition—if we may call it so—in which none of these relative things exist. When seeking to think of the eternal Lord, you are making an effort for the time being to go beyond all relationships. You must say, "I have no body, no mind.

Time and space have disappeared. The whole universe has vanished. God alone is." Then only will the mind have that subtle perception which will enable it to feel God's gracious presence. Thus, before you enter the place of meditation, you must leave everything relative outside.

In our monasteries, the monks who are very strict do not allow visitors to speak of their wives, husbands or children, or about worldly things, however important. It is not that they discountenance a person's doing his duty, but that they know that the mind in order to be spiritual must partake of the character of the eternal. There must indeed be some time during the day when you feel absolutely unrelated—because to be so is your true nature. Though you seem to be related to people, you know these relationships are impermanent. Your true nature is unrelated, and it is in the unrelated condition that you must enter into meditation.

(8) By fulfilling the conditions which I have specified, real and appreciable spiritual progress can be made. But here I must tell you that all spiritual practices, including meditation, depend upon one thing: a great yearning for Truth. Have you that yearning? You may say, "I do not feel it. What then, is the use of meditation?" But is it impossible to create that feeling? The mind's appetite for God can be stimulated deliberately. When by whatever means the mind is made to yearn for Him, the feeling is no less real than if it had come spontaneously. If you wait for time to bring a natural longing, it may never come. Since this longing is essential, create it. At first your mind will fluctuate. But do not be discouraged by these unstable moods of the mind, and above all do not let yourself be defeated.

Suppose that you are a boy and that another boy in the neighbourhood always tries to browbeat you. He has no right to do it, and you know him to be actually a coward. What is the proper

course to take? Will you submit to the bully, thinking that you are naturally weak and that to fight him is useless? No, you will deliberately call up the feeling of manliness within you. You will say to yourself, "I refuse to be bullied by him." The next time you confront him that feeling may partially decline, but you will nevertheless manage to look him in the eye, and you will eventually be brave enough to challenge him. You will have become manly, and you will say, "This is my true nature; I am really strong!"

We are acting similarly at every moment. In acquiring a skill or gaining knowledge in school or college, we succeed by repeated effort. At first, what we are trying to acquire is not natural to us, but once mastered, it appears an essential part of ourselves. This is even more true in spiritual life, and we must exert ourselves accordingly. At first everything seems difficult, and you say, "What actually is my nature? Maybe I am just not religious. Perhaps I am not destined to be spiritual."

There were times when I too thought the same. I would consider a certain obstruction too great for me and its removal an impossibility. Then I would remind myself that I was not really the body and mind, but the spirit; that the realization of my spiritual self was my destiny. I knew that if I did not conquer the obstruction then, I was just postponing the task for the future. Why not act at once and finish it? I can truly say, my good fortune lay in holding to this thought. True, I was sometimes tempted to give up the struggle, but then I would think, "I cannot escape my spiritual destiny. Let me therefore realize it now!"

Great longing and faith are very important in the practice of meditation, for without intense desire for God and faith in Him meditation proves half-hearted and sterile. Where there is no interest in what you are doing, it becomes a mere formality, and effort is soon abandoned.

If you believe in a personal God, pray to Him. By "personal God" I do not mean God with a body, but God with self-consciousness, who is our Father, Mother, Friend and Lord, who is the all-pervading Creator of the universe. He listens when we pray to Him: we can approach Him in full confidence, just as children approach their parents. Believing in a personal God and loving Him will make it very easy for you to meditate. Dwell on the thought of Him more and more. Do things for Him. Success in spiritual life lies in concentrating every thought, every feeling, every ounce of energy on God.

(9) How will you do it? When you speak, speak of God. When you walk, go to His temple. When you work with your hands, do something in His service. Every function of body and mind must somehow be directed toward Him. If you have to go to an office instead of a temple, make your office the temple of God! If your work is honest it can be done. If it is dishonest, change that work. If changing means even facing starvation, then face it! Courage—that is always necessary. Do not forget this: He who created the world is still behind it and will never let us starve. If we really want the Truth and hence are willing to discard whatever is wrong and untrue, we shall never lose by following the Truth. It is not that things will happen just as we wish, but they will happen with a minimum of suffering and a maximum of benefit.

If your occupation is honest, you can certainly conceive it as a work for God. Whether you are at a desk or doing housework, whatever the nature of your work, meditate on God. Offer to Him what you have done throughout the day, though it was apparently done for your employer. Have you typed twenty letters and taken them to him?

Let him sign them, but afterwards close your eyes and offer all to the Lord. You will thus give a new turn to your thoughts. Yes, it

is a different way of doing things. It may appear a little unusual at first but undertake it anyhow. Little by little a deeper meaning will be revealed, and you will find that this practice is not what you originally thought it to be; it will become tremendously effective.

In this way, whenever we do anything for others or for ourselves, we may think we are doing it for the Lord. Everything in life can then be converted into spiritual activity. There may be some who are able, consciously and deliberately, to do things directly for God. How fortunate they are! That is why people perform elaborate worship. That is why they grow flowers and offer them on the altar, why they burn incense and light candles. Perhaps you do not like such practices? But how else would you spend the hours of the day? Don't you see that time and energy are wasted by serving the little self? Would it not be better to offer whatever you do to Him? Out of this feeling has come ritualism. Out of this feeling have been built temples, all over the world, where people bring offerings for worship.

However, I am not insisting that all should practise ritualism. Each must worship according to his spiritual temperament. But in some manner, you will have to discover how to bring your own thoughts, emotions and actions to the service of the Lord. The more you do it, the closer you will be to Him. Then, when you sit in meditation, everything else will be forgotten, and God alone will fill your heart.

(10) Perhaps you are accustomed to convince yourself of the reality of spiritual truths by means of reasoning. But until you have experienced these truths yourself, let me say that the greatest blessing would be for you to meet one who has realized them in person. You know, the proof of spiritual truths does not lie in reason, argument or any kind of outward demonstration. Their proof lies in the sincere conviction carried by the words of a man who has

realized what he expresses. Though others may disagree, I think that this is the one objective proof on which one can rely.

If such an illumined person were to say to me, "My son, you are not really this body and mind: spirit is your true nature: the immortal and eternal being is the real you. Passing things do not belong to you. Try to penetrate the depths: try to realize your true self," I should be forced to accept and to act upon his words. As he spoke, something in his voice would sink deep into my heart: I should not be able to resist it.

How I wish you could all find someone from whose lips such words would fall! You would not then be able to doubt or ignore them, and conviction of your true nature and glorious goal would grow within you. For a time, failure might cause you to despair, but eventually you would say, "Alright, let me try again." And you would win.

I have now told you what should be done preparatory to meditation. Your mind can be drawn ever closer to God by undertaking all the various measures I have enumerated. In conclusion, let me stress a few points. Do whatever work is required of you, but direct it to the Lord, then your mind will not be disturbed. Be unrelated. Identify yourself with eternity, then meditation will be very easy. Do not let your mind wander, or worldly thoughts will enter and cloud it—this should never be permitted. Before you sit in meditation, think of the things I have suggested.

When nothing extraneous enters your mind, it will grow calm. Then, in the temple of your heart, you will begin to see the shining face of the Lord. Meditating upon it, you will find it more and more beautiful, and plunged in its infinite beauty, you will forget all else. You will at last be wholly absorbed in Him.

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Sri Ramakrishna's Parables

Dr. Vayu Naidu

What the Divine Mother Revealed to Me

"Do you know where those who speak of the formless God make their mistake? It is where they say that God is formless only, and that those who differ from them are wrong. But I know God is both with and without form. And he may have many more aspects. It is possible for Him to be everything." (*Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 172, Ramakrishna Math, 1947)

This selection of the Parable is a revelation. It is a vision that is communicated for the understanding of all of us on the journey to the spiritual goal. It was 'revealed' to Sri Ramakrishna in a vision, and not by an intellectual construct. Through his vision he deconstructs for us the true meaning of Brahman. By affirming that there is appearance of form, formlessness and more, he also analyses where the mistake of those who speak of God as formless lies. In his characteristic way to harmonise, he analyses the 'mistake' this group of seekers make by alienating themselves from those who follow the path of form in all-pervasive Brahman. Sri Ramakrishna's experiences, also referenced by the scriptures and their commentaries, declares he 'knows' This—form, formless, multiple aspects, pervasive—as Truth. From this we recall from the Kena Upanishad both sides of the mistake:

"If you think, 'I know it well', then indeed you just know a little about the nature (form) of Brahman, that part of it which is yourself and that part of it which exists amongst the gods. I think, therefore, thy should consider more deeply that which you seek to know." (2:1; OCHS)

In referring to two Upanishads, Kena and Isha, that establish a psychological and cosmic framework respectively, it enables us to understand what Sri Ramakrishna speaks of as 'known'.

As Upanishads that are influential in contemporary Hindu beliefs, the Kena Upanishad and the Isha Upanishad in retrospect can be seen as the foundation and manifestation of Hindu belief. It could be understood in the example of the lotus and its stalk: the Kena being the stalk as foundation, supporting the lotus whose petals touched by sunlight are opening out as a manifestation, like the Isha.

Both are Upanishads and share the property from the meaning of 'sitting beside and listening'. The text as we have it are expressions that have culminated from deep meditations. Following an experience of authentic states of Universal consciousness, the utterances are expressed in concise poetic aphorisms. The primary aim is to channel the spiritual seeker toward liberation or moksha from the wheel of births to evolve.

The Kena takes on the psychological dimension to go beyond the mind by using the mind to ask the fundamental question. Its very name 'Kena' questions – 'By which'. It is part of Sama Veda; it has mythopoeic elements beginning in verse as an address to all through time and space and people. In unravelling its contents, it works across levels and is to be read as poetry with symbolism and that as an expression of divinity. It also uses the analogy of story that is embedded in mythology to explain the cosmic dimension with a psychological predicament.

The fundamental question that forms the refrain in a way across the Upanishads is 'by which knowing, everything is known?' It introduces the concept of something beyond time, as body-mind is only matter. The story within the Upanishad introduces us to the 'gods' who are extensions of the senses, Indra, Vayu and Agni. In curbing the pride of Indra, Uma, the embodied force of dynamic energy, is defined as a feminine force.

It is an Upanishad that becomes the subtle force awakening the seeker to look beyond the mind and thinking, and to begin to understand the matrix of form within form absorbed within formlessness. It starts with the premise of a seeker going beyond material wealth to ask what is underlying its joy, but considering it not enough, the seeker wants the secret of what is it by which all this is known, acquired, or enjoyed? There is no anthropomorphised 'god' here.

However, when it comes to defining this consciousness known as Brahman, the birth of the story emerges as a revealed truth. The dynamic or manifest aspect of this Brahman is defined in the essence of a feminine force. The story that plays out in the anthropomorphised forms of the *tanmatras* or the organs of action and perception have Indra as Ego, Vayu as Breath, and Agni as Fire. When Indra has won the war against the 'dark forces', he rides with his ablest generals on either side. The Indra/Ego identifying with his/its ownership of victory and success sees a blade of light ahead. When Vayu asks "who are you?" the blade of light echoes the question 'who are you?' Vayu shows its willpower and might by causing storms, tempests, and winds but cannot blow the blade of light out. The same plays out with Agni. The exhausted deities of breath and energy now watch Indra/Ego climb down from his horse. From the blade of light emerges Uma, the feminine force that is the dynamic manifesting sameness of Brahman which transforms Indra/Ego's understanding that just as the war seemed to be won by Indra/Ego, it is in fact the Light that shines in the individual consciousness that illuminates the seen. This illustrates the fundamental question, who then is the Seer? From that is revealed that Brahman is the eternal Seer.

The emphasis in the Kena Upanishad is about establishing the inner landscape, the psychological dimension of the journey for the seeker. The quest is in the question.

The Isha Upanishad is also a realisation of the completeness of infinity expressed through the seeming finite, and even if divided, is contained in the undivided whole. But the Isha, as the Upanishad's name suggests, takes on a variation from the abstract. It unravels the re-cognition of Isha, the inner self, the inner controller, Ishvara, the worshipped, taking form from the infinite.

While the Kena is psychological, the Isha is cosmic. The element as theism is significant. From the One, the other emerges and the forms of devotional love, and the schools of Bhakti take supremacy. The idea of the avatar, the personal god, the 'dvaita' starts taking precedence. The reformist movements validate this. It is as John Brockington suggests an 'innovation' from the concept held by the not-two or Advaita or non-dualists.

The significant evolution of this realisation appears in the Mahabharata's Bhagavad Gita. Adi Shankaracharya's Gita commentary indicates from the Advaita perspective the "self of all Beings" (OCHS, 3 Upanishads, session Four, Isha part one). But in Vaishnava thinking as illustrated by Swami Prabhupada, Isha is 'controlled and owned by the Lord'. The innovation of the Lord as proprietor indicates the efficacy of a relationship where competition, the ego, the lesser self is urged to surrender, also signposting a path to peace while in life.

Both Upanishads are inspired from the Vedas. They are also the realisations of practitioners. Commentaries by Shankaracharya and many gurus before him and after him while extolling the great truths contextualise the evidence of their own discipline, the nuances of the great utterances or Maha vakya—Aham Bhramasmi or Tat Tvam Asi, among others—stating Oneness of all.

The influences of contemporary Hindu beliefs take forward the principles of Oneness as seen in Kena. But in practice, the Isha Upanishad is possibly closer to daily Hindu household and temple practice in India and by its diaspora worldwide. The Bhagavad Gita

as a foundational and instructional text of morals, ethics, dharma, and salvation through a personal Lord who steers the chariot of unwieldy senses offers the symbolic and practical path of universal harmony through the love of a personal god.

But while devotional practice continues in commemorating rites of passage, even among the Hindu diaspora communities worldwide, there is the foundational residue of Kena—'What is that great wonder that holds us all together?' The wonder of understanding it through an advaita is sparked in landscape, creating an unspeakable awe, while Covid-19 and the dramatic change in lifestyle and movement has enforced a lack of movement. For some it has engaged with a stillness and reflection.

The great question, of how could a tiny invisible multiple-spoked virus plunge the planet into such subordination, is a matter for both advaitins and dvaitins to consider. While there are arguments supporting each side, the emerging thought is about seeing how indiscriminate the virus is, how collectively all believers and unbelievers are facing the consequences of what this has brought about.

There are no answers, but there is a surrender to a force that is present. For many Hindus the belief in a personal god offers sanctuary, and for the advaitin the acceptance that this is life, but seeking for a bliss within, even if difficult, offers a choice, and leads the millennial mind to ask: is this the quest for 'moksha'?

To arrive at this concept of consciousness, many mystics over the centuries have endeavoured with interpretations and commentaries.

Sri Ramakrishna's revelation through a parable, non-confrontationally, analytically harmonises the binary oppositions by which seekers claim to 'know', and urges all to focus, to practice, to realise this.

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starve to death. I can get a job if you but say a word." Golap said to him, "Child, whom should I speak to?" She said to herself: "Ah, the poor brahmana! He has been suffering too much." The candidate said to her, "I am sure to get the job if you just put in a word about it to the manager." Golap said, "I shall speak to him today and settle the matter." The very next morning a man called on the candidate and said, "You are to work in the manager's office, from today." The manager said to his English boss: "This man is very competent. I have appointed him. He will do credit to the firm."

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The Mantra-shastris (upholders of the Mantra theory) believe that some words have been handed down through a succession of teachers and disciples, and the mere utterance of them will lead to some form of realisation. There are two different meanings of the word Mantra – chaitanya. According to some, if you practise the repetition of a certain Mantra, you will see the Ishta-devata who is the object or deity of that Mantra. But according to others, the word means that if you practise the repetition of a certain Mantra received from a Guru not competent, you will have to perform certain ceremonials by which that Mantra will become Chetana or living, and then its repetition will be successful. Different Mantras, when they are thus “living”, show different signs, but the general sign is that one will be able to repeat it for a long time without feeling any strain and that his mind will very soon be concentrated. This is about the Tantrika Mantras.

- Swami Vivekananda

