

## Swami Brahmananda on the Necessity of Spiritual Practices—II

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**T**hird, Maharaj is stressing that we must train the mind to develop love for the goal, and determination and enthusiasm to reach it. ‘Practise something’ he said; ‘practise with determination . . . practise with the spirit of the true researcher, and you will see that everything that I have said is true. The needle of your mind (like that of a compass) should always be directed towards God.’

The basic fact is that our mind is fixed on whatever we love. And that’s what we will meditate on. Quoting from an old Chinese writer, Sri Krishnaprem wrote: ‘Anyone can talk about meditation, but he cannot master it if he does not know what the word means. If people sit and meditate one or two hours looking at their own egos and call it contemplation, how can anything come of it?’<sup>6</sup>

If we love our ego, we will meditate on our ego. If we love our spouse, we will meditate on our spouse. If we love our iphone, we will meditate on our iphone. If we love our dog, we will meditate on our dog. The needle of our mind will always be drawn towards that which we love. And if we do not love God as much as we love our ego, our spouse, our iphone, or our dog, then it will be difficult for us to direct the needle of our mind to Him.

Yet we should also consider the ‘Kamsa effect’<sup>7</sup>—that is, meditating on what we

despise or fear or are jealous of. Attraction and aversion—*rāga* and *dvesha*—basically come from the same source. Thus we must watch where our mind goes and reflect on why it goes there. Only then can we get it intelligently and rightly directed.

This is why Maharaj says, ‘The needle of your mind (like that of a compass) should always be directed towards God.’ But this also takes some practice. Day after day we must make time in our lives to put God first, and to remind ourselves that He is our true goal, our most beloved. And we should not merely remind ourselves of this at certain fixed times, but also try to feel it continuously. By putting this impression firmly on our mind like this, we will gradually come to have absolute conviction that the Lord is our all-in-all, the Life of our life.

There are a myriad ways to discipline ourselves regarding putting the Lord first in our life—including, as we said earlier, practice of the presence of God, constant remembrance of God, and constant repetition of the mantra. The Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition also uses the technique of constantly repeating a prayer in the heart, as the Hindu tradition does with a mantra. Father Maximos, of the Greek Orthodox Christian tradition, had this to say about the constant repetition of the Jesus Prayer:

This continuous repetition of the Jesus Prayer [‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’] gradually energizes our hearts and minds and replaces all other thoughts . . . . You see, our minds are so constructed that they never cease to work. The Fathers claimed that the mind is like a flour mill that never stops turning round and round. If in that mill we throw good, healthy seed, it will give us good, healthy flour with which we can bake nutritious bread. . . . Our aim, therefore, should be to inject in these constantly working minds the Jesus Prayer, which, according to the Fathers, we must try to recite at all times and in all places.

By energizing the mind through the repetition of the Prayer, Grace gradually comes and propels the person from the first stage of verbal prayer to what the Fathers call the Prayer of the Heart. The Prayer, that is, becomes self-activating and an effortless and natural activity of our minds and souls, just like breathing. . . . Prayer now becomes natural to the soul, feeding it with very sweet honey. The prayer never stops, whether the person is asleep or awake.<sup>8</sup>

This technique, taught by a guru, works with Hindu mantras as well. When the mantra begins to repeat itself continuously on its own, it is called *ajapā-japa*.

Another beautiful practice to make the Lord first and foremost in our life comes from the writings of Søren Kierkegaard: In one of his works he gives a deeply moving observation about Jesus’s teaching, ‘Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness.’ How do we know when we are putting God first in our life? According to Kierkegaard, it is when, in our prayer and meditation, we become silent before God. He says: ‘You shall in the deepest sense make yourself nothing, become nothing before God, learn to keep silent. In this silence is the

beginning, which is *first* to seek God’s kingdom.’<sup>9</sup>

And what happens when a person comes to God in his prayers and becomes silent? Kierkegaard says: ‘He had thought that to pray was to talk; [then] he learned that to pray is not only to keep silent, but to listen. And that is how it is; to pray is not to listen to oneself speak, but is to come to keep silent, and to continue keeping silent, to wait, until the person who prays hears God.’<sup>10</sup>

In fact, according to Kierkegaard, our silence before God is our total surrender to Him, as silence is the sign of absence of all desire for our own will.<sup>11</sup>

At other times one can pray for devotion and knowledge, as Ramakrishna says. Yet there is an incomparable beauty in Kierkegaard’s discipline—the discipline of silence. Spending some time every day in this meditation is a powerful reminder of how God is first and foremost in our life—a reminder that will stick with us throughout the day. For, if we truly feel that we have come before the Lord in our prayer or meditation, how can we even think of anything else but Him? Moreover, it does not matter whether we think of God with form or without form. The same result is attained.

Then, after the instruction to continuously have the needle of the mind turned towards God, Maharaj gives the following instructions: ‘Reason like a Jnani, act like a Karmayogin, and feel like a Bhakta.’ All three of these disciplines—jnāna yoga, karma yoga, and bhakti yoga—are important for our spiritual life, as each one of them adds a necessary aspect, a necessary flavour of spiritual life all its own. Moreover, these various yogas not only make our spiritual disciplines more

interesting but also more firm and meaningful. Neglecting any of these aspects might even take us off track.

‘Reason like a Jnani’—that is, ‘reason, discover without preconceived ideas and you will see that the world is losing its identity.’ Ramana Maharshi once gave the following instructions to a new visitor at his ashrama:

A dreamer dreams a dream. He sees the dream world with pleasures and pains, etc. But he wakes up and then loses all interest in the dream world. So it is with the waking world also. Just as the dream world, being only a part of yourself and not different from you, ceases to interest you, so also the present world would cease to interest you if you awake from this waking dream (samsara [cycles of births and deaths]) and realize that it is a part of your self, and not an objective reality. Because you think that you are apart from the objects around you, you desire a thing. But if you understand that the thing was only a thought form you would no longer desire it.

All things are like bubbles on water. You are the water and the objects are the bubbles. They cannot exist apart from the water, but they are not quite the same as the water. . . .

All that is meant is that the Self is infinite, inclusive of all that you see. There is nothing beyond It nor apart from It. Knowing this, you will not desire anything; not desiring, you will be content. The Self is always realized. There is no seeking to realize what is already—always—realized. For you cannot deny your own existence. That existence is consciousness—the Self. Unless you exist you cannot ask questions. So you must admit your own existence. That existence is the Self. It is already realized. Therefore the effort to realize results only in your realizing your present mistake—that you have not realized your

Self. There is no fresh realization. The Self becomes revealed.

[Questioner]: That will take some years.

Maharshi: Why years? The idea of time is only in your mind. It is not the Self. There is no time for the Self. Time arises as an idea after the ego arises. But you are the Self beyond time and space; you exist even in the absence of time and space.<sup>12</sup>

Reasoning like this is one way to make the world lose its identity for us, as Swami Brahmananda says.

Then Maharaj turns to karma yoga: ‘Act like a Karmayogin. . . . When you do anything, think more of others. You have to work always in a spirit of selflessness, without attachment, without seeking your own satisfaction, and you will see that your mind will enjoy a happiness never felt before, and it will remain peaceful for the greater part of the day.’

How often do we work grudgingly, as a duty? Yet Maharaj says that the mind will gain happiness and peace from selfless work, and from thinking of others first. Moreover, we have seen from our own experience that this is true. We love to make others happy. We love to help others. But still the mind resists and thus sinks into a *tāmasīc* state. Neither do we get peace ourselves, nor are we of any use to anyone else.

In his book, *Most of All, They Taught Me Happiness*, Robert Muller, an official of the United Nations, told the story of a French priest, Abbé Pierre, who was once asked to visit a poor, helpless man who had tried to commit suicide. It was just after World War II, and the condition of France was very bad then. Abbé Pierre himself was in total despair, seeing the poverty and wretchedness all around him. He saw

absolutely no hope for the poor people of his parish. When he came to the bedside of the man who had tried to commit suicide, he honestly told him, ‘My poor fellow, how am I expected to help you when I am in such desperate need of help myself?’

The poor man was shocked and replied, ‘Father, do you mean to say that there might be on this earth someone more miserable than I, someone who might need my help?’ Abbé Pierre later said: ‘His words were a revelation to me. They aroused me from my lethargy. His message was that man’s greatest need was to be needed by others, to be of service to others. I hastened to confide in him my personal miseries. In return, he confessed to me that he had wanted to die because there was no one left on earth who cared for him.’

From this conversation between two despairing souls, the two men set up the organization Disciples of Emmaus. ‘Hope and joy came back to my life,’ Abbé Pierre said, ‘when we both founded the Disciples of Emmaus, an association of outcasts, desperados, and former criminals. First in Paris and later in other cities of France and Europe, people like us gathered and collected garbage, rummage, and refuse, sold whatever was salable, and from the proceeds helped the poor. This cause gave us a new purpose in life, and with it came health, happiness, and faith.’<sup>13</sup>

We should note here that if one can get so much benefit from working selflessly for the poor and destitute, as these men did, then how much more benefit could one get by working with the attitude of serving these poor people as the Lord Himself, as Swami Vivekananda asks us to? But even if we are doing ordinary work at home or in an office, we can get peace from just knowing that even this small work is of

benefit to others, and is serving the Lord in some way.

Again, Maharaj says: ‘Feel like a Bhakta. . . . Try to feel now, like a true devotee of God, that the Antaryāmin (the internal knower) is in you. The mind has to feel it through all its movements.’

Generally we think that a bhakta, a lover of God, wants to feel a relationship with God—such as a relationship of a servant, or friend, or parent. So we do not think of a bhakta as desiring to feel that the Lord is within us. ‘I want to eat sugar, not be sugar.’ But here Maharaj says that the *true* devotee of God feels that the *Antaryāmin* is within.

The fact is, we first have to feel that we are inseparably united with the Lord—that the Lord is within us. Unless we first awaken that consciousness of the Lord within, how can we feel that we have any real relationship with Him? If we feel that we are forever and intrinsically separate from something, then we can never feel a relationship with it. We can never feel an intense desire to be united with it. We would know that it has nothing to do with us. But the very fact that the devotee knows without a doubt that he or she is eternally and intrinsically united with God creates a painful feeling of separation when the immediate realization of that union is not experienced.

This is the feeling that one must arouse in oneself—that the Lord is within us, nearer than the nearest, dearer than the dearest. According to A.K. Ramanujan: ‘A bhakta is not content to worship a god in word and ritual, nor is he content to grasp him in a theology; he needs to possess him and be possessed by him.’<sup>14</sup> Nammalvar’s greatest and most delightful songs, in fact, are those in which he is ‘possessed’ by the Lord.

When this kind of love for God dawns in us, we immediately attain peace and joy and bliss. This is the state of *sattva*. As Maharaj says, ‘Only with the development of Sattwa (tranquillity, serenity), comes the true understanding of the Reality; then an intimate feeling will come, the direct knowledge, which does not need any further proof. Then you will know and enjoy true independence, and the purpose of life will be fulfilled.’

Swami Brahmananda was a master teacher, and he understood very well the struggles of spiritual life. But he also knew that, with sincerity and earnestness, the goal was absolutely attainable. Once Swami Vishuddhananda heard Maharaj say: ‘You practise meditation and japam; you progress a little, then comes a period of dryness. It seems that the doors are entirely closed. At that time it is necessary that you stick to your spiritual practices with infinite patience; by so doing you will find one day that all of a sudden the doors are opened. What a great joy it is then! In spiritual life many such thresholds have to be crossed.’<sup>15</sup>

But Maharaj also knew that we must really *want* the Lord. Once a close devotee

(Boshi Sen) asked Maharaj why he did not just give God-realization to people, when he had the power to do so. Maharaj answered gravely, ‘Who wants God?’<sup>16</sup> Again, regarding the vision of Sri Ramakrishna, Maharaj told a young monk: ‘He [Sri Ramakrishna] exists always. Pray to him day and night for his vision. He will dispel all your doubts and will make you understand his true nature.’ The young monk then asked, ‘Do you see the Master nowadays?’ ‘Yes,’ replied Maharaj, ‘I see him whenever he shows himself out of his mercy. Anyone who has his grace can see him. But how many people have that love and longing to see him?’<sup>17</sup>

So it all boils down to whether or not we really *want* God. If we really want to realize Him, then enthusiasm to practise spiritual disciplines will automatically be awakened within us, and we shall attain the grace of the Lord. But if we don’t care, then there will always be one excuse or another to keep us from attaining the goal of life. Then our life will be wasted. This is why Swami Brahmananda said, ‘Dedicate yourself . . . dedicate yourself completely to God, and your life will become glorified.’ ■

#### REFERENCES

- 6 *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p. 201.  
 7 It is said that Krishna’s enemy Kamsa despised and feared Krishna so much that his mind was continuously meditating on him.  
 8 *Inner River*, by Kyriacos C. Markides (New York: Image Books, 2012), pp. 295 & 301.  
 9 *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses*, by Søren Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 17.  
 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.  
 11 see *Ibid.*, p. 24.  
 12 ‘Be the Water and Not the Froth’, by Mary Ellen Korman; in *Parabola*, vol. 43, no. 2, summer 2018, pp. 36-37.  
 13 *Most of All, They Taught Me Happiness*, by Robert Muller (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1978), pp. 106-07.  
 14 *Hymns for the Drowning, Poems for Visnu by Nammalvar*, trans. by A.K. Ramanujan (n.p.: Penguin Books, n.d.), p. 116.  
 15 *God Lived With Them*, by Swami Chetanananda (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1997), p. 115.  
 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.  
 17 *Ibid.*, p. 128.