

## Swami Brahmananda on the Necessity of Spiritual Practices–I

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In recent years meditation and yoga have become very popular, even in the West. Yet for many people they are practised simply to gain calmness of the mind, more mental alertness, or a healthy body. Such people are not so concerned about spiritual benefits. Rather, their interest in them is primarily for the benefits they get for working in this world. On one hand, this is good in the sense that anything which increases our concentration and brings calmness to our life will make life more meaningful for us. But on the other hand, there is something disconcerting about the fact that spiritual techniques which have been passed down from great spiritual leaders to their disciples for thousands of years are now being used to help people make more money.

Then there are many people who, with great enthusiasm, take instructions or initiation from a guru, but after a short time they hardly do any spiritual practices at all. Whatever enthusiasm they had for it at the beginning soon dries up. Such people are often looking for quick results, or quick benefits for their life in this world. And if these don't come easily, well then, it's just not worth the effort.

Again, for some, God-realization may seem like a distant or unattainable goal, so they might feel discouraged about practising spiritual disciplines. But is God really unattainable? Why would Ramakrishna tell

us that realizing God is the goal of human life if it were really unattainable? As he said, 'To realize God is the one goal of life.' And again, 'One can certainly see God through the practice of spiritual discipline.' And, 'The vision of God is the only goal of human life.'<sup>1</sup>

But it is true that spiritual practices have to be done with earnestness and in the right way, following the instructions of the guru. As Sri Krishnaprem wrote:

Even as the water-pot is filled by the falling of drops, so a wise man becomes full of good even if he gathers it little by little. Why should he gather good? Because he wants it. But if he doesn't want it? . . . If he doesn't want it, better leave the whole subject alone. There is no such thing as unearned income in the spiritual world. . . . Individual effort always bears fruit *if it is intelligently and rightly directed*, but you may spend a hundred years in trying to jump at one bound up on to the roof of a house and nothing whatever will come of such misdirected effort.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps if we take another look at these disciplines from the standpoint of the goal, we might get a better understanding of them—and we also might get some renewed enthusiasm for practising them.

Once when Swami Vijayananda was a young monk, Swami Brahmananda gave him some wonderful instructions regarding this very topic. Maharaj told him:

By a very long habit of many lives, your mind has become so attached to the body, to the objective world and to alien opinions, that it has forgotten that it can remain aloof, free from the gross body and that it may reason independently, without the necessity or pressure of the opinion of others. Commonly the mind behaves through the impulse of the desires, and the majority of them are on sensual pleasures, limited by time and space. The common mind cannot think of something outside the kingdom of 'name and form'; it cannot conceive of something eternal. It wakes up in the body and remains attached to the body throughout the day. That is why by only saying that 'God exists', that 'He is all-merciful', we will not change our attachments at all. . . .

Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that you change your mentality, submitting it to a severe daily discipline at the same time [every day]. In a short time, in a year or maybe within six months, you will see how the mind will slowly learn the new lesson and will work directed towards God and helped by the remembrance of the ideal; during the day, in all actions, the mind will gradually accept the new change. Now it sees and believes that outside the transitory world of the senses, nothing else exists, but through the force of constant practice it will feel that its only duty is to direct itself towards God. Practise something; practise with determination (*and looking at me*), 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.

Reason like a Jnani, act like a Karmayogin, and feel like a Bhakta. Reason, discover without preconceived ideas and you will see that the world is losing its identity. 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. Try to feel now, like a true devotee of God, that the Antaryamin (the internal knower) is in you. The mind has to feel it through all its movements.

Of course, first the mind has to idealise all this, and then, through dedicated practice it will become completely transformed. All the windows through which the mind goes out to experience sensual perceptions should be hermetically closed. This is Yama and Niyama (internal and external control). A pure mind means an unattached mind. Dedicate yourself, my son, dedicate yourself completely to God and your life will become glorified.

All ideas of 'I will do it tomorrow' must be eliminated. If you don't control Tamas (indolence) how will you be able afterwards to control the tremendous Rajas (activity) that will make you dance ceaselessly? 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.<sup>3</sup>

As we can see here, Swami Brahmananda, like Ramakrishna, has a very positive approach to spiritual life. The mind *can* be trained. God *can* be seen. But we need some discipline in our lives to attain the Lord. This path is not for the lazy. According to what Maharaj says here, there are three basic things that happen when we practise spiritual disciplines with earnestness and sincerity, and they all have to do with training the mind: First, the mind is trained to become free from the idea that we are the body and to develop control over the sense organs; second, the mind is trained to be in

control of the mental waves and to think clearly; and third, the mind is trained to develop love for the goal, and determination and enthusiasm to reach it.

But who is it that trains the mind? It is our higher Self. And as the mind gets more and more trained, we gradually come to realize this.

First, and foremost, Maharaj is stressing here that at present, in all our thoughts and actions, we think we are a body. We might assume that this is perfectly natural, yet this is a serious problem for spiritual seekers. Again, we might protest, saying that intellectually we know better. But what do we invariably find? Our words and actions speak otherwise. When our body is ill, we think *we* are ill; when it is in pain, we think *we* are in pain. The body is like a weighed anchor that prevents our ship from crossing the sea. In order to make any progress in spiritual life, we must become free from attachment to the body and from the downward pull that it exerts on the mind. And at least at the time of meditation, we must try, as much as possible, to become free from body-consciousness.

This is why Maharaj first says we must remove our attachment to the body. How? Teachers of many traditions—Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and others—recommend that we continually remember the impermanence of the body. By reflecting again and again on the drawbacks of the body, such as old age, disease, and death, we not only acquire dispassion towards the body, but also continually remember why we are practising spiritual disciplines. The idea of these teachers is that by reflecting on the defects and impermanence of the body we will acquire a certain sense of disgust for it.

But Maharaj has a different solution, a positive one—and that is, we should attain mastery over the body by attaining mastery

over the mind. In these instructions Maharaj again and again refers back to the mind and how it works. At present the mind is a slave to the body and the sense organs. What we want is to make the body, mind, and sense organs our slaves.

As Maharaj says, ‘By a very long habit of many lives, your mind has become so attached to the body . . . .’ Do we want to continue this cycle of birth and death and go on and on like this, life after life? If we are serious about realizing God, then we will want to put a stop to these lives right now.

Yet, as Maharaj says, life after life we have continually reinforced the idea that we are the body. And not only do we identify ourselves with the body, but we also identify ourselves with our sense organs—the eyes, the ears, the tongue, etc. All of these senses have bound us tightly to the world and to alien ways of thinking—alien ways of thinking in the sense that we don’t realize that these senses are not part of us. As Maharaj says: ‘Commonly the mind behaves through the impulse of the desires, and the majority of them are on sensual pleasures, limited by time and space. The common mind cannot think of something outside the kingdom of ‘name and form’; it cannot conceive of something eternal. It wakes up in the body and remains attached to the body throughout the day.’

Obviously then, as Maharaj says, we need more than just an intellectual affirmation that we are not the body. We need to come to a point where we feel ourselves to be separate from the body, mind, and organs—and, even more important, to feel that we are in control of them. This takes practice and firm determination. And this is where spiritual disciplines come in.

‘Therefore,’ Maharaj says, ‘it is absolutely necessary that you change your

mentality, submitting it to a severe daily discipline at the same time [every day]. In a short time, in a year or maybe within six months, you will see how the mind will slowly learn the new lesson and will work directed towards God and helped by the remembrance of the ideal; during the day, in all actions, the mind will gradually accept the new change. Now it sees and believes that outside the transitory world of the senses, nothing else exists, but through the force of constant practice it will feel that its only duty is to direct itself towards God.’

It is the mind that must change, as Maharaj says. And this takes practice—every day. But why should we do it at the same time every day? Because when the mind gets used to a routine like this, the practice becomes easier. The idea is that gradually the mind automatically begins to feel a pull at the same time every day to practise spiritual disciplines. Moreover, as the mind gets used to this new way of thinking, it very soon begins to like it. It begins to get a taste for a spiritual mentality. Then, throughout the day, it will turn more and more to these new thoughts, and it will gradually become attached to thinking of God.

Elsewhere Maharaj says: ‘Unless you have a regular routine the mind will not allow you to do anything. It will always prompt you to loaf. If you follow a routine, you can command your mind: “Listen, mind. You are subject to this routine. Whether you like it or not, you will have to follow it.” You have to bring the mind under control forcibly. And when the mind comes under your control, all routine will fall away by itself.’<sup>4</sup>

As we begin this discipline, however, we must continually remind ourselves why we are doing it. As Maharaj says, ‘In a short time, in a year or maybe within six months, you will see how the mind will slowly learn

the new lesson and will work directed towards God and *helped by the remembrance of the ideal.*’

But we should also remember that our spiritual disciplines are not limited to specific times when we do japa and meditation. If we want to train our body, mind, and sense organs, we need to maintain control of them throughout the day. By putting some restraints on what we see, hear, taste, etc., we can prove to the sense organs that we are in control, and not them. As Maharaj says, ‘All the windows through which the mind goes out to experience sensual perceptions should be hermetically closed. This is Yama and Niyama (internal and external control).’ For example, instead of reading or looking at whatever is in front of us—such as a newspaper or magazine—we can tell our eyes not to see it. Keeping up a discipline like this for a long time with each of the sense organs is immensely helpful.

This is why Maharaj says: ‘During the day, *in all actions*, the mind will gradually accept the new change. Now it sees and believes that outside the transitory world of the senses, nothing else exists, but through the force of constant practice it will feel that its only duty is to direct itself towards God.’

As Maharaj indicates, the purpose of these disciplines is to train our mind to understand that the higher Self is in control, and not the body-mind complex with all its desires. And again, it is to remind ourselves that we *are* this higher Self—a Self that is pure and blissful in itself, and that does not need petty mundane pleasures to be happy. For, as long as we are attached to these petty mundane pleasures, we ‘cannot conceive of something eternal’, ‘outside the kingdom of “name and form”’, as Maharaj says.

Second, Maharaj is stressing that we must train the mind to be in control of all

mental waves and to think clearly. What does Maharaj mean when he says that the mind can 'reason independently, without the necessity or pressure of the opinion of others'? First of all, at present much of our behaviour and thinking is a reaction to others' words and actions—what other people say or do. Even if we do not physically or verbally react to others' words or behaviour, we often react mentally. And it is amazing how much mental energy is expended this way. We seem to be bound by what others say or think—whether it is good or bad, whether it is about some spiritual topic, or about politics, or about us, or something or someone else. These other people may not even be in a position of authority, yet somehow, in our mind, we give them authority. If their words are of anger, hatred, or jealousy, these words might ring in our mind the whole day. Just our reaction alone to their words gives power to them. Thus, we must be able to detach ourselves from our mental waves and bring our mental impulses under control. Otherwise we are in danger of becoming a slave not only to our own *tāmasic* impulses, but to other people's as well.

But suppose these other people's words are kind, or full of praise for us. Is that bad? It is bad if we react to those words with pride or egotism. Any type of reaction like this makes us a slave to others' opinions.

We should also remember that, just as diseases can be contagious, so also are attitudes and behaviour. No doubt we have all seen how happiness and love are contagious. Yet so also are anger, jealousy, hatred, and even lying and crude or violent speech or behaviour. History has shown again and again how the racist and provocative words of a leader of a country can affect the whole country—and even other countries as well. A similar kind of

thing can also happen on a smaller scale in organizations, villages, or groups.

We must be able to hold on to the higher Self to keep ourselves above these things, and this is possible when we practise meditation on God or the Self. A mind that is trained in discrimination, concentration, and meditation—that is, trained to control the mental waves—can penetrate through the layers of distracting or destructive speech and behaviour, all vying for our attention.

Here we can also remember Maharaj's words, '. . . helped by the remembrance of the ideal.' Constant remembrance of God (or of the Supreme Self), or the practice of the presence of God, or the constant repetition of the mantra—these are the best antidotes to distracting or destructive speech and behaviour.

Moreover, we must be able to examine our own mind to uncover the tricks that our ego plays on us. Swamiji used to say that what we see outside is actually what we see inside ourselves. This very same principle is behind Holy Mother's advice: 'My child, if you want peace, then do not look into anybody's faults. Look into your own faults. Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own.'<sup>5</sup> A peaceful mind is a pure mind. By refraining from finding faults in others, our mind can be at peace, and a peaceful mind can meditate more easily.

Again, as Maharaj points out, at present our ideas about God and spiritual life are based simply on what we have read, or what we have heard from others. Here we must remember that not everything we read is meant for us. Some teachings, though good, may not suit our temperament at all. Then again, though it is extremely important to have faith in the instructions of the guru and

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