

# The Subconscious Mind and Its Control

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## Control the mind to know God

**W**hat is the nature of the human mind? What is meant by 'subconscious mind'? Why should one 'control' it? These are some of the fundamental questions or problems that arise in the minds of all spiritual aspirants. I deliberately use the term 'spiritual aspirants', because, it is mainly those, who aspire to realize God and find the peace that passeth understanding, that feel the need to control the mind. Others, generally, do not feel the same urge.

True, we all, whether we are spiritual aspirants or not, seek peace and happiness. As long as we feel and believe that this objective world can give us what we are seeking for, we feel no need for spiritual life. It is only when we learn through experience that this finite world cannot give us that happiness we feel the need for controlling our mind—conscious and subconscious.

As I have lived in the West, I have heard the complaint against the Oriental religions that they are world-negating. And there is no doubt about it. Yes, they are world-negating. There is a Western religious philosophy which is good as far as it goes. It holds that this is God's world. Why should we negate this? Let us enjoy life with our senses. The senses have been given to us. This is the glory of God again. There is goodness, there is truth, there is beauty in this objective world. Who can deny it? But again, there is sorrow, there is suffering, there is disease, there is death. If things go well, then you

see everything as the glory of God. But when things go wrong one feels that one could have created a better world. There is this philosophy which says, well, there is suffering, there is poverty, there is disease, and it is given to us to eradicate such things.

Once I went to a church and there on the board was written—'God needs your help.' Yes, they believe that God needs our help and we must be active. We must do something to eradicate this poverty, disease and all kinds of things that men suffer from. This is a wonderful philosophy. I do not see anything wrong in it, except that, as I said, this is not enough. Some people—great ones—go about doing good to the world. But, again, when their hearts have become purified through such selfless deeds, they realize that this is not enough. Something is missing. *Something*. And what is that? We are still ignorant of the nature of this universe. We are still ignorant of God. And then one asks: Where can one find peace? Where, indeed, can one find God? Then gradually comes this understanding that God is here. The kingdom of God is within. Then one realizes that there is no joy in the finite. In the Infinite alone is the joy. It is then that the words of Christ come to us with a deeper meaning: 'These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.' So ultimately, in order to reach the kingdom of God within, one has to overcome this world.

Experience is a great teacher only if we learn from our experiences. Nature is for the soul, not the soul for Nature. This whole universe is given to us so that we may gather experience. So it is not that you are to be blind and deaf. No. Gather experience. If the world is like a book, we have to turn the pages, one after another. However, instead of doing that, we remain stuck on one page. Christ says: 'In me you shall find peace.' But Christ also gives us a word of hope when he says, 'I have overcome the world'. It really means that, you and I, and everyone have to overcome the world. I shall come to the point later. But remember that spiritual life is not merely about having faith in Christ, in what he did and achieved. Christ is an example before us. We too have to achieve that which he achieved. In other words, everyone of us has to become a Christ. That is religion. So when he says, 'Be of good cheer I have overcome this world'—it means each one of us can overcome this world.

Now, what is meant by overcoming this world? Where is this world anyway? As I already pointed out, it is all in the mind. When things go very well, everything seems so wonderful. But when things go bad everything seems bad. So where is it? It is in our own mind.

When the great philosopher Shankara was asked the question, 'By whom is the world overcome?', his answer was, he who has conquered his own mind. So it is the mind that creates all the experiences. It is the mind that deludes man; it binds him with the bonds of the body, the sense organs and the life breath. In fact, it makes him wander endlessly around the fruits of actions it has caused.

Now, again you see, when this very mind is transformed—not only controlled but transformed—the divine sight opens and this very world that caused the suffering,

tribulation, misery becomes a mart of joy. Then we truly see this creation as the glory of God because it is God who has become all, as the Upanishadic seers tell us. They declare that from joy springs the universe, in joy (i.e. God, i.e. Brahman) it dwells and again, unto the joy (i.e. Brahman) it goes back. So it is the mind that is to be conquered, that is to be transformed. The Upanishads tell us again, that behind the changeable universe, the world of appearances, the eternal unchanging Reality is Brahman or God.

Therefore a spiritual aspirant has this one ambition, that is, to find the Reality and the divine bliss. In other words, from another angle, we have to realize what indeed I am truly. You see, each of us is living in a world of his or her own. I seek this; I seek that; I want this; I want that. But who is this 'I'? That should be our first concern. Jesus said, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God'. And in order to find the kingdom of God, we have to realize our Self which is God, which is the eternal Reality. I am that Self existing in everyone of you; I am God. The same God dwells in all of us. That is the most wonderful fact. That is the grand reality. The *Gita* points this out and says very emphatically that the uncontrolled mind does not perceive that *Atman* or God who is present in all of us. To realize this truth, we meditate. Without meditation there is no peace and without peace there is no perpetual happiness.

Shankara says that the seeker after liberation must work carefully to purify the mind. When the mind has been made pure, liberation is as easy to grasp as a fruit in the palm of your hand. One might compare this declaration with the assurance given by Christ, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' The great Shankara affirms that if one strives earnestly for liberation, one's lust for sense objects will be rooted

out. So, to devote oneself to the practice of spiritual disciplines is the only way.

Vedanta says, you are Brahman, God is dwelling in you, be aware of It. In the name of Zen Buddhism, this is being taught in this country (USA) by some irresponsible teachers. You are That. Yes, but is it so easy to be aware of It? The uncontrolled mind does not even guess that He is present within itself. So spiritual disciplines are needed. But, you know, spiritual disciplines are also within *māyā*, within the sphere of universal ignorance. Scriptures also are within *māyā*. Teachings are all within *māyā*. Through spiritual disciplines, gradually you have to go beyond all disciplines, beyond all scriptures. You have to attain that state when scriptures become no scriptures. In other words, there is a state where you realize that knowledge of God is something that none can express in words, and that is the state we have to achieve. But you cannot jump out of your own body. So you have to go step by step.

*Māyā* again has two aspects: one that leads you to liberation and to God, another that brings greater bondage. So scriptures are needed, teachings are needed and disciplines are needed too. The question is: what is the principle behind these spiritual disciplines? The great Indian psychologist Patanjali has dealt with the inner principle of this discipline. He says, the union with God is achieved if we can control the waves of thought in the mind. If you study the mind you will find how the mind is constantly lashed by waves of thought. To stop that from happening you have to control these waves of thoughts through regular practice. Then and then only God, who is already within you, reveals Himself.

Incidentally, the idea of controlling the thought waves is often misunderstood. I know when some Western teachers go to teach Yoga, they tell their students to make

their minds blank because meditation means making the mind blank. But no, there is a scope for misunderstanding. Our minds may become blank in deep sleep, or, when we become unconscious, as an effect of some drugs for instance. But that does not reveal the truth. So the waves of thought are not just the waves on the surface of the mind, but deeper underneath. In other words, the mind has three layers and you have to gain control over all these three layers of the mind. Not that there are three minds—conscious, subconscious and unconscious, but they are the three regions of the same mind.

### Three regions of the mind

Now let us try to understand what is subconscious and what is unconscious. You see every thought we think, every work we do—good or bad—immediately creates an impression. For instance, you think something, or you do something, and then you forget; but that thought and that deed have already created impressions in your mind and they go into the subconscious region of the mind. That is why it becomes possible for you to remember—‘O, yes! I thought this or I did that.’ But then again, the impressions of certain thoughts and deeds sink to the bottom of the mind in a manner that it is almost impossible to recall them and that is the region of the unconscious mind.

So these are the three areas—conscious, subconscious and unconscious. What is the nature of the subconscious and unconscious mind? Its nature is determined by the nature of our conscious actions, and conscious thoughts. The sum total of all our actions and thoughts form what is known as our character. Now, all the impressions existing in the subconscious mind may not have been acquired during the course of a single human life. Here we find a difference

between Western and Eastern psychology. Western psychology admits that a child is born with a character, which the Western psychologists try to explain in terms of heredity. The Eastern psychology, on the other hand, points out that the child has a past. He acquired some tendencies and traits of character by his past deeds. That is why a child is born with a particular character. Heredity factor is again caused by the affinity of the individual child to its parents. Otherwise, why is it that a child is born in one particular family and not in another? It is because there a child can best express its own character. So to explain by heredity the character of the individual child is like putting the cart before the horse.

Your subconscious mind is forcing you to act and think in a particular way. You have created that bundle of habits. And it is that bundle of habits that guides your conscious life. So it is the subconscious mind that controls your conscious mind. It is your conscious mind that has created that subconscious mind and this subconscious mind in turn controls your conscious mind. For instance, a man who has formed the habit of stealing cannot resist himself when something attractive comes his way. You may say, well, we have a free will. But here again, you see, the habit is so strong that our will to a great extent is coloured by our own character, by our own habits. So where is the way out? A man, who is good, creates his good habits. But what about the person who has created his bad ones? According to one kind of philosophy, that person will get worse and worse. But no. Admittedly he will not be free, but through the will, freedom is asserting itself—the freedom of the *Atman* or the indwelling God. Take the example of an alcoholic. Perhaps he wants to give up the habit, but he cannot. Now some day, the same man,

out of desperation, says: God! Help me. And, well, His help comes. His will in desperation to free itself from the toils of habit has appealed to God or *Atman* and one day grace descends upon him and he comes out of the destructive habit.

### Spiritual practice

So, when we talk about controlling our thought waves, what we mean is a kind of overhauling of our minds. The mind is like a lake. At the bottom of the lake there is a diamond. But the water of the lake is so dirty and full of ripples that you don't see the diamond. But suppose you try to dig out the mud. What happens? The water of the lake becomes muddy in the beginning. But later the lake becomes calm and crystal-clear. And then you see there is a shining diamond at the bottom of the lake. The same with us. If we can transform ourselves, and purify our heart and mind, the truth gets revealed.

Yes, we have to be transformed as St. Paul pointed out. In this connection I will tell you exactly how Arjuna felt and what we all feel. In the beginning, the disciple Arjuna tells Krishna in the *Gita*:

*Cancalem hi manah krishna  
pramāthi balavat dridham /  
Tasyāham nigraham manye  
vāyoriva sudushkaram // 6.34*

—‘O Krishna! The mind is unsteady, turbulent, strong and obstinate. To control it, I think, is as difficult as controlling the wind itself.’

Now, the teacher, Sri Krishna answers:

*Asamshayam mahābāho  
manoh durnigraham calam /  
Abhyāsena tu kaunteya  
vairāgyena ca grihyate // 6.35*

—‘Yes, Arjuna, the mind is restless, no doubt, and hard to subdue. But it can be

brought under control by constant practice and by the exercise of dispassion.’ So two things are needed—constant practice and dispassion.

Please understand, it is not that as soon as you take to spiritual life or begin to practise spiritual disciplines you become perfect immediately. I often like to give the example of an ink bottle, which is fixed. You can’t throw out the ink and clean the bottle. How do you solve the problem and clean it? You pour clean water into it and the ink begins to spill over. As you keep pouring clean water into the pot a time comes when all the ink has come out and the bottle is clean once again. When you first begin your spiritual life, the ink oozes out. And when you see this you become restless. But then suddenly calmness comes.

Now let us consider what these spiritual practices are. Actually, there are certain virtues that we have to acquire, certain habits of mind that are to be cultivated. We have already created a bundle of habits and now it is to be replaced by a new set of habits. These practices which include moral and ethical virtues are very important. For instance, every religion teaches you not to hurt anybody or any creature in word, thought or deed. Also we must learn to feel for others and have sympathy, love, and compassion for all. Such feelings begin to come to you as you devote yourself more and more to God. That is the first virtue. Truthfulness, chastity, and non-covetousness are some of the other virtues that we must struggle to practise. We may not be perfect at once, but we must keep struggling—and keep the ideal high. If you cannot attain the goal at once, crawl towards it.

Also certain habits have to be formed. First, physical cleanliness—you must clean yourself everyday by bathing. Secondly mental cleanliness—everyday we must clean our mind by means of meditation. If you think you are a sinner, impure—sinner you will be. Think yourself pure and pure you become. So, concentrate on purity. Then again, do regular study of scriptures. This study will strengthen and deepen your thought of God. It is very important. Study also means repeating a prayer or repeating the name of God. That is *japa* which must be done regularly. You must do your work, perform your duties, and learn to surrender the fruits of your actions to God and do that everyday. These are some of the habits you have to form.

Of course, you have to practise. You have to create the habit of concentrating on God. The *Gita* says, patiently, little by little, a man must free himself from mental distractions with the aid of intelligence and will. Try not to live on the surface of the mind. Try to go deeper and to feel deeply the presence of God. With patience and perseverance try to control the vagaries, the distractions of your mind. Gradually there comes the power of concentration. When concentration comes, you begin to feel actually the presence of God. When you begin to feel the divine presence, the path becomes smooth, because you begin to feel the sweetness of love. Love for God grows. And it is that love that brings sweetness in your life. To grow that love you have to just do this—God, God, God [the swami claps his hands thrice]. Think of Him, think of Him, think of Him. That is the way to grow. ■

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\* This is a slightly abridged version of the lecture Swami Prabhavanandaji Maharaj delivered on 6 September 1963 at Santa Barbara Vedanta Temple, USA. The Swami was the founder of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood, and a disciple of Swami Brahmananda.