

Questions and Answers

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Answers given by the Swami to questions put by devotees during a spiritual retreat.

Q: Assuming time is limited, what proportion should be spent on meditation and japa?

A: There are two ways of looking at this question. The time which we spend in meditation, exclusively keeping a few minutes in the morning and evening is of great necessity. But real benefit from meditation does not depend upon the increase or decrease of time. It depends upon our intensity. This is a psychological fact of which most of us are ignorant. We always think, "My meditation is not progressing because my time is so limited, but if I had a lot of time, I definitely would be able to improve the quality of my meditation." In the beginning at least, that is not right because each one of us has at any given time a certain measure of intensity. Whether we sit for ten minutes or half an hour or three hours we can only take advantage of that intensity. It cannot be increased all of a sudden. That's why we find sometimes when we have a long holiday, we try to sit a long time for meditation, but after a few minutes there comes a bit of fidgeting, the mind becomes very fidgety. So, during our working time we should try to prepare ourselves for that period of meditation. Whatever we may be doing, we must try to analyse our mind, try to keep a watch on our thoughts and try to recollect God, spiritual life and the incidents which we read from the lives of holy people. This preparation is absolutely necessary.

As for japa, this is what Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and all the direct disciples recommended. Japa is much more effective. Why? One reason is that we are not fit for meditation. Meditation needs a long preparation. Unless we are well prepared we cannot really meditate. We sit in a meditative pose, no doubt. That is not really meditation.

But japa, that is somewhat easier. Japa means repetition of God's name, and that has a wonderful effect. There is also a bit of confusion regarding japa and meditation. You see, the devotional path always emphasises the repetition of God's name which, with the development of bhava or devotional feeling, gradually takes the aspirant towards his Chosen Deity and finally they become merged, which is the last stage. But meditation is actually a term borrowed from the path of meditation and contemplation, Raja Yoga. These two meanings have very often

become combined. In devotional terminology, the word `meditation' does not mean the same thing, so I will try to explain what it is.

Normally, when we meet our devotees, we advise them "Do japa and meditation." What we mean by this is quite different from what Raja yogis mean by meditation. Japa means repetition of God's name with devotion, and meditation means concentration on His Divine Form. In Raja Yoga meditation means concentration - any object can be taken for one's concentration and its discipline is to go on concentrating, suppressing all other thoughts. No emotion there, no discrimination there. One must only put one's mind on the object which one chooses oneself. In time one is sure to reach the goal.

Whereas on the devotional path, one does not kill one's thoughts but concentrates them on a Divine Form. So, in that sense we do the repetition of God's name and imagine the Form of God at the same time, and this can be done even while driving a car or any work. Because you see, while we are driving or doing something else, a portion of the mind seems to be thinking something else. Perhaps it is planning: "Tomorrow I shall do that or this," which shows what the mind is capable of doing. With a little bit of its energies it can perform whatever duties need to be done while diverting another portion to something else. That secondary diversion can be directed towards thinking about spiritual subjects, towards recollecting the various incidents that happened in the lives of the great saints or repeating the name of God.

If we can thus practise thinking of God at other times, it becomes a good preparation for meditation. Then when we return to our homes and sit quietly meditation becomes easy and intense. Even fifteen minutes of such meditation produces great results.

Q: What is the significance of arati - waving lights, flowers, cloth etc, to the image?

A: When we perform worship to any deity, especially in the evening, we do Aratrikam, i.e. vesper service. At this Centre we wave lights every day and on five special days during the year - namely the celebrations of the birthdays of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Krishna, and Durga - we do special Aratrikam. What is its significance?

According to Hindu cosmology, the entire universe is created out of five elements: akasha (space), vayu (air), agni (fire), apah (water), and prithvi (earth). All the things in the universe are the permutations and combinations of these five elements. When we are worshipping any particular deity, that deity is considered the Supreme. Hindus worship millions of deities, but they are not worshipping millions of different deities. The same One God is manifesting through different names and in different forms.

So, how do we worship Him? We have a beautiful saying in Bengali, "Ganga jele Ganga puja" i.e., worship of Ganga with Ganga. The waters of the Ganges are considered to be very sacred. That is why, when we worship any god, we use that water to purify items to be offered to Him.

When we want to worship the Ganges river itself, then what do we do? We take the water from Her and give it to Her. Similarly what can you give to the Lord? He only has become this whole universe. Now, if you want to worship Him you want to offer something to Him. What are you going to do? You take some mud from Him and you give it to Him. You take a flower from Him, His own creation, and give it to Him.

These are the five items offered during vespers: lights, water in a conch, a cloth and a flower and lastly, there is a kind of fan made out of the tail of a special cow found in the Himalayas. It is called chamari.

These five items signify the five elements out of which this whole universe is made. That means you are offering the whole universe including yourself to Him mentally. So these are the five things that are symbolic and that is the significance of Arati.

Q: Swamiji, after the arati, we touch the light to our eyes. What is the significance of this?

A: It signifies that our sight is being purified. The entire universe is supposed to be looked upon as God, but we don't see it as God, do we? But for instance when we offer fruits ... suppose you eat a banana when you are hungry. You just eat it and throw away the skin. But suppose you put the same banana in front of God and sit and pray and imagine that He has accepted it. And you feel a sense of sacredness and holiness associated with it. The way you will eat the fruit then will be quite different from the way you would without offering it, for there is a difference of sacredness and holiness associated with it. In the same manner, when we offer the entire universe back to Him, we are only acknowledging symbolically: "O Lord, I did not know that You Yourself have become this whole universe. But now, through Your Grace, my eyes of knowledge are opened and now I look at it in a different way. So everything becomes sacred to me." That is why the light is considered as sacred. It is not only the light which has become sacred, the fruits which are offered, the flowers - everything associated with it - the cloth, even the plates. This is the beginning of spiritual life, trying to see God everywhere. We have to start somewhere and that is the significance of it. Reverence comes with that.

Q: The Jains, when they do arati, they do not pass the light around. They just do the arati and keep it there.

A: Different traditions have different ways of religious expression. But all these religious actions have only one end as their aim, and that is to perceive reality as it is and not as it appears to us. That Reality is God, therefore we have to see God in everything.

I remember some incidents in the life of Ramana Maharshi. He was a man of God. Sometimes dogs used to come to his ashrama and he would not drive them away. But when someone would take a stick and try to beat them to make them go away, he would say, "Don't do that. God has come, covering Himself with this skin, don't you see it? You have come covered with

one type of skin and the same God has come in another form." That's why he never used to address them in the third person. You know, in Sanskrit, we have three ways of addressing persons: with reverence, with a sense of equality, and as an inferior. But Ramana Maharshi always used to address animals such as squirrels, monkeys, peacocks and all those animals in the most respectful form. This is the kind of divine sight he had.

Sri Ramakrishna used to see Divine Mother even in prostitutes. He saw a cat going into the shrine, and when others would drive it away, he said, "Mother, you have come in this form. Please accept these offerings." He fed the cat with the offerings which were meant for Mother Kali. There was a big complaint against him - that he was feeding only cats and dogs!

You see, that is the altered vision. When we become spiritually advanced we see God, that's all. We don't grow two horns. If we grow horns, that is very bad - it means we are going down!
