

How To Become Spiritually Awakened

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Sitting at the feet of the great disciples of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, the religion that we learnt taught us not to be egocentric, but to be dedicated to the service of the Lord in man. Some words of Swami Vivekananda come to my mind always. From America he wrote, and these were also the last lines in his reply to the Madras address, 'First let us ourselves be gods and then help others to be gods.' Swamiji put this idea before us in another form: each one of us should lead our life in such a way, that we attain to our spiritual realisation, freed from all bonds. Not only that, we must also be able to promote the welfare of others. The ideal is, that in the innermost core of our being, we have to realise the God-head; again, we have to experience Him as manifest in all. Out of this realisation of his have come into existence all the various forms of service of the Ramakrishna Movement: Medical Service, Educational Service, Preaching and Publication. The ideal is to serve the Divine in others. Just as we ourselves try to be free we should also try to help others to be free.

I would like to read to you some passages from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.

A Devotee: "Sir, is it necessary to have a Guru?"

Master: "Yes, many need a Guru. But a man must have faith in the Guru's words ...

"One should constantly repeat the name of God. The name of God is highly effective in the Kaliyuga. The practice of Yoga is not possible in this age, for the life of man depends on food. Clap your hands while repeating God's name, and the birds of your sin will fly away.

"One should always seek the company of holy men. The nearer you approach the Ganges, the cooler the breeze will feel. Again, the nearer you go to a fire, the hotter the air will feel.

"But one cannot achieve anything through laziness and procrastination. People who desire worldly enjoyment say about spiritual progress: 'Well, it will all happen in time. We shall realise God sometime or other.'

"It is said that, in the Kaliyuga, if a man can weep for God one day and one night, he sees Him.

"Feel piqued at God and say to Him: 'You have created me. Now you must reveal yourself to me.' Whether you live in the world or elsewhere, always fix your mind on God.

"Go forward. The wood-cutter, following the instructions of the holy man, went forward and found in the forest sandalwood and mines of silver and gold; and going still farther, he found diamonds and other precious stones.

"The ignorant are like people living in a house with clay walls. There is very little light inside, and they cannot see outside at all. But those who enter the world after attaining the knowledge of God are like people living in a house made of glass. For them inside and outside are light. They can see things outside as well as inside.

"Nothing exists except the One. That One is the Supreme Brahman."

Why Do We Not Make Progress?

As in our worldly affairs so also in the world of the Spirit there must be systematic practice. We all must be able to prepare ourselves, so that we may be in the proper mood to follow the spiritual path. Many of you might know this story: Sri Ramakrishna had a great disciple, Saint Durgacharan Nag - Naga Mahashaya as he used to be called. His father was very much attached to him, and again the old man used to do a lot of `Japa'. Once when he was told, `Your father is a great devotee', Naga Mahashaya replied, `What can he achieve? He is so much attached to me. An anchored boat does not move'.

There is a story behind this saying. Some drunkards, one moonlit night, took it into their heads to go on a boat ride. They went to the Ghat, hired a boat, sat at the oars and started rowing. They rowed and rowed and rowed, the whole night. Early in the morning, when the effect of the drink was gone, to their surprise they found they had not moved an inch. `What is the matter? What is the matter!' they asked. They had forgotten to raise the anchor.

I hear constant complaints from people, `We are doing our spiritual practice, but we do not make any progress'. The reply is here. At the time of your spiritual practice, are you able, at least to some extent, to free your mind from worldly matters and give your purified mind to God? That is the point. We need training in all paths. Some of you might have read Swami Vivekananda's Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Raja Yoga. Whatever path one may follow, one needs discipline, proper training of the mind and creation of the proper mood. If the mind is trained and the mood is created, one can carry on one's spiritual practice with great success. Our trouble is: in worldly matters we may follow some method, but in spiritual affairs we are like children. I have seen grown-up people and big officials talking like children. So an inner personality is to be built up. Many of us are persons but have no personality. We are individuals, but have no individuality. Through moral practice, through fulfilment of duties, through regular worship, a spiritualised personality is to be built up. It is then that our spiritual practice becomes fruitful. Our prayers and meditation will prove to be a source of great blessing. I repeat, in all the paths, in all of the Yogas, disciplines are necessary. If I follow Karma Yoga, my mind must be comparatively calm. I must try to be detached from the things of the world and from the fruits of my Karma. I must try to dedicate the work to God. If I follow Bhakti Yoga, I must have a great yearning for God. It is a spiritual hunger that cannot be appeased by anything in the world. Through prayer, through Japa, through meditation and ultimately through Divine contact, the spiritual seeker appeases this spiritual hunger and finds Peace and Bliss in Divine realisation. Many want to follow Jnana Yoga, but the mind is to be trained so that it can follow the path of extreme self-analysis - `I am not the body; I am not the mind; I am not the ego nor the senses; I am the spirit.' Our teachers of Jnana Yoga say: one must have perfect dispassion for enjoyment, dislike for any future life and power to discriminate between the real and the unreal. One must have mental discipline. One must have infinite faith (Sraddha) in the Supreme Spirit. One must be able to practise concentration.

When Concentration Becomes Beneficial

Let us remember one point. Many people say, `Oh! I am not able to practise concentration'. Knowing the persons, that their mind is not pure enough, I say to them `It is good that you don't have concentration'. If an impure mind gets concentrated, it becomes like a bombshell. Aren't we

concentrated when we are angry, when we are full of hatred and jealousy? That concentration is no good. It is actually dangerous. So an amount of spiritual discipline is necessary. In the path of Yoga, Patanjali speaks of Yama and Niyama. You have to practise these disciplines as much as you can. One cannot be established in the spiritual life all of a sudden.

Ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya, aparigraha (non-dependance on others' charity) are the first disciplines; Niyama - which consists chiefly of Saucha, purity of body and mind, Santosha, contentment - has to be developed. If one is always grumbling and complaining, can one with such a mind, ever do anything successfully either in this world or in the world of the spirit? No. We must adjust to the things in this world and try to improve ourselves.

Tapas: There should be an amount of austerity in life. Without rigour in spiritual practices, each generation is becoming softer than the previous one. Nothing can be achieved by these soft people.

Swadhyaya: We study books. Does anything enter our mind! We hear a lecture and say it was wonderful; and when asked 'What did you hear?' we would not be able to repeat anything. The words enter through one ear and pass out through the other. They are not retained. Swadhyaya means to reflect on what you study. Make it a part of your own. 'Srotavyah': First you hear or read, then you have to reflect on what you have heard or read, i.e. 'Mantavyah'. That is the way. When we are established in the moral path, to some extent, then we will surely get the benefit of spiritual disciplines.

Asana: You may sit like a statue for many hours; what do you get? Pretty nothing. At least there should be spiritual aspiration; then your sitting posture helps you in your spiritual practice.

Pranayama: In the practice of Pranayama you stop your breath. What do you gain? If it is merely a physical phenomenon, a football bladder then must be a great Yogi. What do you get by it? Nothing by itself. But when the mind is greatly disciplined, when the mind is in a spiritual mood, Pranayama helps one to rise to a higher plane of consciousness.

Pratyahara is detachment. From everything the mind is to be detached. When you are attending to some work you banish all other thoughts and give your mind to that particular object. If you fail to practise detachment you invite worries. When you go to sleep, and think of too many things, you don't get sleep, you suffer from insomnia and fall ill. The mind is to be detached from all things at will.

Similarly if you wish to meditate, what should you do? Detach your mind, as much as you can, from the things of the world; even from the pictures, the thoughts and the feelings that arise within you. But detachment should not create a vacuum in your mind. A vacant mind will fall asleep. Be wide awake. Take the name of the Lord and meditate on Him. Then there would not be any fear of falling asleep. Instead the mind will rise to a higher plane.

Dharana: Fix your mind on some divine theme and that is Dharana.

Dhyana: Fix the mind on a holy word or on a holy blissful form - that is a step to attain to what is called Dhyana or contemplation. You remain absorbed in Divine Consciousness and that leads to the higher state, the superconscious state.

But before we proceed we will ask ourselves a question and that is very vital. We identify ourselves with the body and think that we are men and women. We worship a certain Deity - Male or Female. We begin our spiritual life that way, and end also in that way; what do we gain?

At the very beginning of our spiritual life, it is essential on our part to be conscious that we are all souls. The Atman, the spiritual entity, has become bound by ego, bound by the mind, bound by the senses, bound by the body. This Atman is to be freed.

Worship of God

What then is worship of God? What is the conception of God? In Europe a devotee said to me 'Swami, never utter the word "God". It calls up our childhood image, viz., there is one beyond the clouds, in the Heaven, ever eager to punish those who break His laws. I cannot think of that.' I said, 'All right, use the word Ishwara. I use the word Brahman.'

If we wish to worship God we must feel our nearness to Him. In a way He is the Creator, the Protector and the Destroyer. He takes things back to Himself, which we call destroying; but He is much more than that, He is the Soul of our souls, nearer than the nearest, dearer than the dearest. He comes to us as Father and Mother. He comes to us as the Guru and He comes to us also as Ista Devata - the deity chosen for worship. According to the dualistic Vedanta, and most of us should start as dualists, the soul and the over-soul - the Atman and Paramatman - are ever connected. They are ever in union; yet owing to the impurity of our mind, we become attached to the Lord's creation but not to Him. A great Western psychologist, seeing the ways of ordinary religious people, once remarked, 'People do not want God. They want to use God!' They want to pray to God so that He may grant all their prayers and if He does not grant these prayers, some become sceptical and say "Oh, God does not exist, and even if He exists, He is deaf, He is blind, He does not respond". That kind of childish conception is no good. Again you want only the good God, as if He has no other task but to grant you boons.

You know, Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna worshipped the Supreme Spirit, first in the form of Kali, a representation of the Cosmic Process. Mother with one hand is creating; with another hand She is protecting; with the third hand She is destroying; and with the fourth hand She is holding the decapitated head. This is the formal representation of what one of the Upanisadic seers said. The disciple asked the father 'adhi hi bhagavo brahmeti', 'Master, tell me about Brahman.' And the father replied: 'Brahman is that out of which all things come into being, by which all things live and unto which all things go back.' In our Bhakti Sastras we call it Ishwara, 'God', and in Vedanta we call it Sat-Chit-Ananda. He is Infinite Existence, He is Infinite Consciousness, He is Infinite Bliss. He dwells in our soul and is the Soul of our souls. Again we all dwell in Him. We must feel it, at least His nearness. But even if we cannot feel it, we should try to develop the consciousness that He is nearer than the nearest, dearer than the dearest. What is it that obstructs this consciousness? Our desires stand in the way of this spiritual awareness. So let us try to purify this mind.

Here you come across a big problem. It is the impure mind that runs after the things of the world. The pure mind naturally reflects the glory of God, moves towards Him, meditates on Him, tries to feel His Divine Presence, Love and Bliss. How to purify the mind? First of all you must avoid evil thoughts, evil feelings, evil actions, as much as you can. Entertain good thoughts, good feelings and perform good actions. That is the first step. We should always bear in mind that we are all souls, Atman. This Atman has put on a human personality, with a view to play a part in the Cosmic drama of life. Whatever be the part that is assigned to us, that part has to be played well; that means, we have to perform the duties of life and work in a spirit of detachment, as a form of service to God. But mere moral practice and the fulfilment of duties are not enough to purify the mind; we have to meditate on Him, pray to Him who is the Infinite Source of purity, of Knowledge, devotion, compassion, Love and Bliss.

Here we come to the question: How to worship God, how to pray to Him? But the conception of God is too vast. I give an illustration: We are like small bubbles. The ocean is too big for our conception. So what should we do? We find some mighty waves; let us move towards them,

attach ourselves to them and in course of time we have an idea of the ocean itself. Similarly, we start our spiritual journey with one such mountain-like wave, our Ista Devata, we just worship Him, pray to Him, then we come to have a broader conception of life and a broader conception of Reality. The Ista Devata tells us 'Look here. I may be a mighty wave, you may be a small bubble. But all of us have got the infinite ocean behind us'. When the proper time comes, He reveals to us the highest Truth.

Is A Guru Essential?

Now, we read in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, a devotee asking, 'Sir, is a spiritual teacher necessary?' Sri Ramakrishna replied that it is necessary for many. If there be some unique souls, born with divine consciousness, who feel the Divine presence even from their very childhood, they do not need a spiritual teacher, but all others do need. Once a devotee asked our teacher Swami Brahmananda - and I have been telling many of you to read, if you have not done so, The Spiritual Teachings of Swami Brahmananda - 'Maharaj, is a Guru necessary?' and the Swami smiled and said, 'My boy, even if you want to be a thief, you need a teacher. How much more should there be the necessity of a teacher when you want to know the highest truth!' You know there are gangs of pickpockets; they have to pass through a tremendous discipline and training and then only one can be an expert pickpocket.

In this connection, I wish to tell you a story: Girishchandra Ghosh, the actor and dramatist and a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, used to practise Homeopathy in his old age. Taking the name of the Master he would give medicine. He had naturally tremendous intuition to achieve success in his way of treatment. One day an elderly and very decent-looking gentleman was sitting by his side, when a young man came and said, 'Sir, I have lost my wrist watch on my way'. The other gentleman became inquisitive and asked, 'When and where did you lose it?' He said, 'Sir, I lost it at such and such an hour, at such and such a place', and the man said 'You will get it back'. How could he give the assurance? Because, the fine-looking gentleman was one of the leaders of the pickpockets, one of their Gurus.

I give you another instance. You want to learn Astronomy; you take a book and try to understand it; you get precious nothing! But the Astronomer says something astounding. Every day you see the sun rising and setting and here comes a man who says the sun never rises; the sun never sets; it is all due to the movement of the earth. If we believe our sense perception fully, we do not pay any heed to him. But if we do not, we have to go to him, study under him, make experiments, and then we really convince ourselves what we have seen is an illusion and it is just the truth that the sun never moves, the earth moves.

A spiritual teacher also comes and says something astounding. We are all conscious of our body. We think we are all men and women but the spiritual teacher says that we are the Spirit, distinct from the body and distinct from the mind and distinct from the ego. But if you think as many think, 'He is a cheat', Lord bless you! But if you doubt sometimes, 'Am I this mass of flesh, this mass of filth or is there something living in me, something living in everybody?' If you start thinking like that, your spiritual life begins. I go to a teacher who has been following the spiritual path all his life, has attained illumination, has come to possess a tremendous sympathy, love, compassion and kindness. I sit at his feet, learn from him something of spiritual disciplines and do my spiritual practices regularly. As my mind becomes purer and purer, I get something in the domain of the spirit and my Ista Devata becomes living. I feel within me a presence that permeates my being, a presence that permeates everybody.

I will tell you a story. In the Upanisads we come across 'Narada Sanatkumara Samvada', a discourse between Narada and Sanatkumara. Saints are not born perfect, they have to manifest their perfection. Through sadhana they unfold their potentiality. Saints and sages do not drop from the sky. Narada had his period of true studentship, studied all branches of learning, studied

the scriptures, sciences and arts. But having mastered the subjects, he found something was lacking in him. He had studied many things but had not known himself. We all are quite content to read and know of the outer world but we forget to know even a bit of ourselves. It is most unscientific. A great Western physicist has said 'That to which Truth matters must have a place in reality, whatever be the definition of reality'. Without some knowledge about the subject, education is incomplete. Our world is full of half-educated people, of those who don't know themselves, who don't know anything of the higher Reality, but pose to be teachers or saviours of the world. Such persons are about to destroy the world. Now, let us come back to the anecdote: 'Narada felt "I am not an Atmavit".' He felt a deep pain. He says, 'Soham bhagavo sochami - (I, who have not known the Reality in me, am in great sorrow). Please remove my sorrow. Take this sorrow away from me. Give me peace.' The Guru listened to him with infinite tenderness, took him step by step, helped him to have a finer and finer mind and ultimately revealed to him the Truth. 'Yo vai bhuma tat sukham nalpe sukhamasti' That alone which is infinite is bliss. There is no Bliss in the finite.'

How To Purify Our Minds

Our trouble is that our soul longs for infinite joy, infinite love, infinite bliss. But we want, we try to find that in the finite and if we don't succeed we feel frustrated. The Guru said, 'If you want real joy, unbounded joy, you have to reach the Infinite'. So the question was: What is meant by the Infinite? It is that which is everywhere - above, below, to the right and to the left. But how to reach it? Here the great ancient teacher Sanat-Kumara gives us in a nutshell the whole course of spiritual discipline. "Food should be pure. When food is pure, our nature becomes pure, and when nature becomes pure, mind becomes pure, and when the mind becomes pure, we remember our spiritual nature. Gradually we are established in spiritual consciousness and that is emancipation. That is freedom when the Self-Consciousness (Divine) has dawned, when we have realised the Infinite Spirit. Once that is done, one feels oneself one with the Infinite Spirit, and all bonds drop off. Let us now try to understand the meaning of ahara: ahara is what we take. Does it mean pure food? Pure Sattvic food? Pure vegetarian food? How far does it help? It helps a little; but unless you know how to purify the mind, nothing happens. There are plenty of wicked people who are vegetarians. What type of vegetarians are they? Lord bless them! You feed a poisonous snake with the purest of milk. It will manufacture poison, won't it? So something of our poisonous nature is to be discarded. Therefore, Shankara observes: 'All right! you take pure food, but that is for the nourishment of the body. But the food that you take through the eye, through the ear, through the senses and the mind, all that food also should be pure. Then, your nature becomes pure, the subtle body becomes pure, and then comes illumination.'

Some of you might have seen the three Japanese monkeys; you know, one monkey is closing both the ears, another both the eyes and another the mouth. During my stay in Europe, in Switzerland, I came across a stone carving on the beach of the lake on which Geneva is situated. It was in a small town. There also there were the three monkeys, but with this difference, one had only one eye closed, another had only one ear closed and the third had half of the mouth closed. I was taken aback for a moment. I thought: 'What is this?' Then came in a flash. I understood the meaning, 'Don't see what is bad; see what is good. Don't hear what is bad; hear what is good. Don't say what is bad; say what is good.' First I thought it was an original idea. Then my mind turned to the Upanisads. There is a text, a peace chant: 'Let us see what is "Bhadra" - good. Let us hear what is "Bhadra". Let us sing the glory of the Divine Spirit.' That is to be done. And, when you have done that, to some extent, the mind becomes pure. Make the best use of your vocal organ. You may make bad use of it saying some awful things. Don't do it. Take the name of the Lord - any Name that appeals to you. Meditate on any aspect that appeals to you with an amount of devotion. After some time you will find, your mind is becoming pure. The Divine Name, the Divine Form, uplifts you. Later on, you may even have a glimpse of your Ista Devata, a glimpse even of the universal Spirit.

What Is Japa And Where Is One To Meditate?

The Infinite Spirit is there but we cannot reach it. We must follow a path that helps us to reach That, higher and higher, step by step. I want to reach the snow-capped mountains; can I jump and reach it all at once? No. Swami Brahmananda says in his Spiritual Teachings: 'You want to reach the roof. Do you jump to the roof? No. If you do, you fall down and break your legs. Go step by step.' So Japa, as the Master has been saying, is one of the most efficient means. But Japa is not to be done like a parrot. As you repeat the Divine Name, do the Artha-Bhavana. What is Artha-Bhavana? Dwelling on the meaning. First of all, let us think of the Luminous, Blissful Form of the Lord, i.e. the Ista Devata. Then think of Him as an embodiment of Infinite Purity, Knowledge, Devotion, Compassion, Love and Bliss. Then think He is no other than the Paramatman - the all-pervading Spirit dwelling in all beings.

We are asked to meditate in the 'Lotus of the Heart'. Where is this Heart? Is it the physiological heart? We cannot do anything there. It is the consciousness that is in the Heart, the consciousness that permeates my entire body and mind. It is the consciousness of the Atman, the consciousness of the Paramatman. We have to meditate in this Chidakasa. We have to think of ourselves as the devotee, and think of the Ista Devata as the manifestation of Paramatman.

Swami Brahmananda used to tell us, "As you do your spiritual practices, you understand what is meant by the word 'Heart'. First you may think of it as the 'Mahakasa', external space; later, you may think of it as the cosmo-mental world." The real heart is in the Chidakasa, in the realm of pure consciousness. In that, the soul, the unit of consciousness, is eternally united with the Infinite Spirit. So you have to meditate on the Ista Devata in the inner world.

It is good to have a picture. Gaze at the picture; watch the picture. But it is much better to install your picture, the Holy form, in your inner world. Then you are not to depend on anything outside. Whenever you want, look within where your Ista Devata is seated, and pray to Him. Repeat His Divine Name; meditate on Him; first, it may be on His Form, then on His attributes, next on His infinite nature. That is how one is to progress.

Let us go back again to the Yoga aphorism of Patanjali, already referred to, wherein he tells us how to do japa. Now if I repeat the Lord's name and meditate on Him, what will happen to me? The Teacher says, "Think of the meaning - the contents, the connotation of the word." What happens if we do that? Obstacles are removed and new spiritual consciousness awakens. Now with the help of Japa and simple Dhyana, obstacles are removed. Psychologists have explained this in a remarkable way. We are always manufacturing worries and anxieties, always manufacturing evil thoughts. These evil thoughts sicken our mind and sicken our body. The more we think of holy thoughts, the more we repeat the holy harmonious sound and the more we meditate on the blissful Form of the Lord, the more the mind is set in abundant harmony. Illnesses, self-created, self-manufactured, drop off. Then harmony is established in the mind. This harmony reflects itself on the body. So, to some extent physical health and mental health improve with the repetition of the Divine Name and we come to know the power of the Divine Name. With the power of meditating on the holy Form, a new spiritual consciousness that was lying hidden, that was potential, manifests itself. Then we discover that we are not just these personalities but we are all souls; and the Ista Devata is no other than the Paramatman, the source of all Peace, source of all Bliss, the source of all Love. Such is the power of the Divine Name.

What is Dhyana? We talk of meditation. You say 'I am meditating'. What are you meditating on? Going on brooding over something or other? That is not what is implied by the word Dhyana. Dhyana is: when as you think of the Lord, you become absorbed in the Divine thought. But this absorption would not come all of a sudden. The Japa we do is a step towards that. Repeat the

Divine Name, think of Him, and the mind becomes a little calm. Even the sound drops off. You can go on thinking of Him. Then, when God or the Ista Devata becomes more real than the things of the world, naturally the mind gets absorbed and you gradually get a taste of the Divine Presence, Love and Bliss. He may come to us in the form of the Ista Devata; as the Supreme Spirit, as Sat-Chit-Ananda, i.e. Infinite Consciousness, Infinite Love, Infinite Bliss. This is what happens if you undergo regular spiritual practice.

In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, the Master has said, 'You must have spiritual yearning'. Spiritual yearning is like hunger. When people ask me 'Why should I meditate?' I say in return, 'Why should you? Don't do it.' But if you had the yearning born in you, you would have come to know what spiritual hunger is. Then you could not but think of God, you could not but pray to Him, you could not but take his Divine Name and think of His glory. This hunger is to be awakened. This hunger is to be maintained. That becomes possible if you do your spiritual practice regularly. You feel the body with material food; you feed the mind through study, with thoughts. But you actually starve the soul in the midst of plenty. Do you not feel starved? The soul yearns for the Infinite Spirit; it yearns to realise the Divine Presence, Love and Bliss infinite, and we do not satisfy the yearning. But when that is done, a new life starts.

The Master has also said that holy company is necessary, company of those who are following the spiritual path, who help in strengthening us in the spiritual path, who reflect something of the Divine Glory, which we also wish to realise. That is necessary.

Follow The Right Path: Begin From The Beginning

Again the Master said, 'One must follow the right path.' Suppose I am thrown in the wilderness. If I follow one path, what happens? I enter the wilderness more and more. If I follow another path, I come out of it. I am reminded of an American story. A motorist was driving at break-neck speed. He wanted to reach a certain place. He asked a schoolboy who had studied a little geography: 'My son, if I go this way, shall I be able to reach the place?' 'Yes Sir,' said the boy, 'You will reach it.' 'How far is it this way?' asked the motorist. 'Sir, you will have to go 25,000 miles,' replied the boy. 'If I go the other way?' 'Then only two miles' was the answer. Do you follow the idea? By one path, you have to come round the world to reach the place. If you go the other way just two miles. Through proper mood, through proper attitude, if you follow the proper directions you reach the goal soon, progress is quickened. A tremendous change takes place within you. But don't try to quicken your steps too much. Go slow, but with determination, along the right path. Gradually you shall reach the highest truth. But, as I said in that illustration of climbing the snow-capped mountain, proceed step by step.

So in our spiritual practice, first comes 'Pratima Puja', i.e. worshipping the Lord in some aspect with the help of a form, a symbol, a picture, or an image. Next, the repetition of the Lord's Name, thinking of Him and singing of His glory. Later on as I said, the mind gets a little absorbed; you feel the Divine presence. That is Dhyana, and Dhyana leads to the highest goal, the highest realisation. In order to move, we should proceed step by step. So the Master says, 'Go forward, step by step; from the sandalwood, come to the silver mine, come to the gold mine and then come to the diamond mine'. Similarly, if we sincerely follow the spiritual path and begin from the beginning, we will reach the Truth. But, if we begin from the end, we reach nowhere. Some want to practise Advaita sadhana. I tell them, 'I know nothing of Advaita sadhana: go to some other teacher.' But if you want to begin from the beginning, I can tell you something of it.

So, first of all, begin with the form-aspect. I have body consciousness, I am an embodied being. I am a person amongst persons. How can I think of the Infinite Spirit? I can't. So let me begin as Maruti said. Hanuman was asked by Sri Rama 'How do you think of Me?' Hanuman said: 'Lord, when I consider myself as a personality, as an embodied being, I think of myself as Your servant and You as my Master; and Lord, when I think, I am a soul distinct from the body and mind, I

consider myself as a part and You as the whole. But at other moments, my Lord, when I rise above all limitations I think You are myself and I am Thyself.' So let us begin from the beginning.

Sri Ramakrishna is very practical. He speaks to us of three types of ananda: vishayananda i.e. the ananda that comes to us through the contact of the senses with the sense objects; bhajanananda, the ananda that comes to us through bhajana, through Japa, through Dhyana; and then finally comes brahmananda as the result of the realisation of the Infinite Spirit. In spiritual life let us have as much bhajanananda as we can. It is within the reach of all of us. The ananda that comes to us through Japa, through Dhyana of the Blissful Form of the Lord - let us have that. And as we have it, let us try to share this Ananda with our fellow spiritual seekers. That is why, when devotees with such a spiritual outlook meet together, they repeat the Lord's Name, sing His glory. At least for the time being they forget the troubles of the world. The mind is transported to a higher plane, something of the ananda of the Supreme Being, something of the peace of the Supreme Spirit comes into our soul, but as I said, we should not stop with that. Our great teachers used to tell us always, 'as you advance, you help others to advance.' One who is illumined can alone be the real teacher; but in order to be of service to others one need not be at the beginning fully illumined. Now, I may be a student of a senior class and when teachers are lacking I can take one of the lower classes, I can be of service to those who are in the lower class. Let us not wait for fullest illumination. At every stage it is possible for us to be of service to our fellow beings.

The highest ideal, as Swami Vivekananda has said, is this: First let us ourselves be gods and then help others to be gods. If we advance to some extent, we can help others also to advance. Here comes the ideal: 'To work for our own illumination and spiritual emancipation and at the same time to render service to others.' As we improve, we also help others to improve. There is a wonderful prayer. We have it in the Universal Prayers: 'Let the wicked become virtuous and the virtuous attain peace - tranquillity. Let the peaceful and tranquil attain illumination and freedom. Let the free help others to become free.' Let us do it in our own humble way. As we do our spiritual practices, as we progress in our spiritual path, let us try to be of service to others. So, my own individual spiritual practice and service to others - these are the two-fold ways which will help me to attain inner purity, which will help me to attain Divine Presence, Divine Love, Divine Bliss. There is the whole of this ideal before us, and let us proceed, each one in one's own way, towards this truth, step by step; let us be sure of every inch of the ground. And as we do our spiritual practice, let us not be egocentric. Let us offer all the fruits of our labour to the Supreme Spirit. Sri Ramakrishna has said, 'If we move towards God one step, He comes towards us ten steps'. It is a fact to be realised in the world of Spirit. So proceed. The Lord will protect you. The Lord will guide you. The Lord, the Supreme Spirit, will fill your heart with Divine Presence, Purity, Love and Bliss.

Let us all offer our salutations to the Supreme Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of us all. He is the Supreme Principle of Existence, the Supreme Reality, the Supreme Light and the Supreme Self. Out of this infinite, all-pervading Spirit we all have come into being; in that we rest and unto that we return. Let us for a few moments meditate on the Infinite Spirit. Let us do it each in his own way. Let us try to feel something of the Divine Presence, Divine Love, and Divine Bliss. May the All-pervading, All-Blissful Divine Spirit, the Soul of our souls protect us all. May He guide us all. May He nourish us all. May He bless us all. May the teachings that we learn become fruitful and forceful through His Grace. May peace and harmony dwell amongst us all. Om Shantih, Om Shantih, Om Shantih.

Oh! Lord, all spiritual paths are like streams leading to Thee, the one ocean of Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. Thou art our Mother. Thou art our Father. Thou art our Friend. Thou art our Comrade. Thou art our Knowledge. Thou art our Wealth. Thou are Oh Lord! our all in all. From unreality lead us to Reality. From darkness lead us to Light. From death, lead us to

Immortality and Bliss. Reach us through and through - Oh Lord! May we find Thee in our heart of hearts; May we discover Thee in all our fellow-beings. May we love Thee and serve Thee in all. May we thus realise the highest goal of human life.

How To Purify Our Minds

Our trouble is that our soul longs for infinite joy, infinite love, infinite bliss. But we want, we try to find that in the finite and if we don't succeed we feel frustrated. The Guru said, 'If you want real joy, unbounded joy, you have to reach the Infinite'. So the question was: What is meant by the Infinite? It is that which is everywhere - above, below, to the right and to the left. But how to reach it? Here the great ancient teacher Sanat-Kumara gives us in a nutshell the whole course of spiritual discipline. "Food should be pure. When food is pure, our nature becomes pure, and when nature becomes pure, mind becomes pure, and when the mind becomes pure, we remember our spiritual nature. Gradually we are established in spiritual consciousness and that is emancipation. That is freedom when the Self-Consciousness (Divine) has dawned, when we have realised the Infinite Spirit. Once that is done, one feels oneself one with the Infinite Spirit, and all bonds drop off." Let us now try to understand the meaning of ahara (food): ahara is what we take. Does it mean pure food? Pure Sattvic food? Pure vegetarian food? How far does it help? It helps a little; but unless you know how to purify the mind, nothing happens. There are plenty of wicked people who are vegetarians. What type of vegetarians are they? Lord bless them! You feed a poisonous snake with the purest of milk. It will manufacture poison, won't it? So something of our poisonous nature is to be discarded. Therefore, Shankara observes: 'All right! you take pure food, but that is for the nourishment of the body. But the food that you take through the eye, through the ear, through the senses and the mind, all that food also should be pure. Then, your nature becomes pure, the subtle body becomes pure, and then comes illumination.'

Some of you might have seen the three Japanese monkeys; you know, one monkey is closing both the ears, another both the eyes and another the mouth. During my stay in Europe, in Switzerland, I came across a stone carving on the beach of the lake on which Geneva is situated. It was in a small town. There also there were the three monkeys, but with this difference, one had only one eye closed, another had only one ear closed and the third had half of the mouth closed. I was taken aback for a moment. I thought: 'What is this?' Then came in a flash. I understood the meaning, 'Don't see what is bad; see what is good. Don't hear what is bad; hear what is good. Don't say what is bad; say what is good.' First I thought it was an original idea. Then my mind turned to the Upanisads. There is a text, a peace chant: 'Let us see what is "Bhadra" - good. Let us hear what is "Bhadra". Let us sing the glory of the Divine Spirit.' That is to be done. And, when you have done that, to some extent, the mind becomes pure. Make the best use of your vocal organ. You may make bad use of it saying some awful things. Don't do it. Take the name of the Lord - any Name that appeals to you. Meditate on any aspect that appeals to you with an amount of devotion. After some time you will find, your mind is becoming pure. The Divine Name, the Divine Form, uplifts you. Later on, you may even have a glimpse of your Ista Devata, a glimpse even of the universal Spirit.

What Is Japa And Where Is One To Meditate?

The Infinite Spirit is there but we cannot reach it. We must follow a path that helps us to reach That, higher and higher, step by step. I want to reach the snow-capped mountains; can I jump and reach it all at once? No. Swami Brahmananda says in his Spiritual Teachings: 'You want to reach the roof. Do you jump to the roof? No. If you do, you fall down and break your legs. Go step by step.' So Japa, as the Master has been saying, is one of the most efficient means. But Japa is not to be done like a parrot. As you repeat the Divine Name, do the Artha-Bhavana. What is

Artha-Bhavana? Dwelling on the meaning. First of all, let us think of the Luminous, Blissful Form of the Lord, i.e. the Ista Devata. Then think of Him as an embodiment of Infinite Purity, Knowledge, Devotion, Compassion, Love and Bliss. Then think He is no other than the Paramatman - the all-pervading Spirit dwelling in all beings.

We are asked to meditate in the 'Lotus of the Heart'. Where is this Heart? Is it the physiological heart? We cannot do anything there. It is the consciousness that is in the Heart, the consciousness that permeates my entire body and mind. It is the consciousness of the Atman, the consciousness of the Paramatman. We have to meditate in this Chidakasa. We have to think of ourselves as the devotee, and think of the Ista Devata as the manifestation of Paramatman.

Swami Brahmananda used to tell us, "As you do your spiritual practices, you understand what is meant by the word 'Heart'. First you may think of it as the 'Mahakasa', external space; later, you may think of it as the cosmo-mental world." The real heart is in the Chidakasa, in the realm of pure consciousness. In that, the soul, the unit of consciousness, is eternally united with the Infinite Spirit. So you have to meditate on the Ista Devata in the inner world.

It is good to have a picture. Gaze at the picture; watch the picture. But it is much better to install your picture, the Holy form, in your inner world. Then you are not to depend on anything outside. Whenever you want, look within where your Ista Devata is seated, and pray to Him. Repeat His Divine Name; meditate on Him; first, it may be on His Form, then on His attributes, next on His infinite nature. That is how one is to progress.

Let us go back again to the Yoga aphorism of Patanjali, already referred to, wherein he tells us how to do japa. Now if I repeat the Lord's name and meditate on Him, what will happen to me? The Teacher says, "Think of the meaning - the contents, the connotation of the word." What happens if we do that? Obstacles are removed and new spiritual consciousness awakens. Now with the help of Japa and simple Dhyana, obstacles are removed. Psychologists have explained this in a remarkable way. We are always manufacturing worries and anxieties, always manufacturing evil thoughts. These evil thoughts sicken our mind and sicken our body. The more we think of holy thoughts, the more we repeat the holy harmonious sound and the more we meditate on the blissful Form of the Lord, the more the mind is set in abundant harmony. Illnesses, self-created, self-manufactured, drop off. Then harmony is established in the mind This harmony reflects itself on the body. So, to some extent physical health and mental health improve with the repetition of the Divine Name and we come to know the power of the Divine Name. With the power of meditating on the holy Form, a new spiritual consciousness that was lying hidden, that was potential, manifests itself. Then we discover that we are not just these personalities but we are all souls; and the Ista Devata is no other than the Paramatman, the source of all Peace, source of all Bliss, the source of all Love. Such is the power of the Divine Name.

What is Dhyana? We talk of meditation. You say 'I am meditating'. What are you meditating on? Going on brooding over something or other? That is not what is implied by the word Dhyana. Dhyana is: when as you think of the Lord, you become absorbed in the Divine thought. But this absorption would not come all of a sudden. The Japa we do is a step towards that. Repeat the Divine Name, think of Him, and the mind becomes a little calm. Even the sound drops off. You can go on thinking of Him. Then, when God or the Ista Devata becomes more real than the things of the world, naturally the mind gets absorbed and you gradually get a taste of the Divine Presence, Love and Bliss. He may come to us in the form of the Ista Devata; as the Supreme Spirit, as Sat-Chit-Ananda, i.e. Infinite Consciousness, Infinite Love, Infinite Bliss. This is what happens if you undergo regular spiritual practice.

In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, the Master has said, 'You must have spiritual yearning'. Spiritual yearning is like hunger. When people ask me 'Why should I meditate?' I say in return,

`Why should you? Don't do it.' But if you had the yearning born in you, you would have come to know what spiritual hunger is. Then you could not but think of God, you could not but pray to Him, you could not but take his Divine Name and think of His glory. This hunger is to be awakened. This hunger is to be maintained. That becomes possible if you do your spiritual practice regularly. You feed the body with material food; you feed the mind through study, with thoughts. But you actually starve the soul in the midst of plenty. Do you not feel starved? The soul yearns for the Infinite Spirit; it yearns to realise the Divine Presence, Love and Bliss infinite, and we do not satisfy the yearning. But when that is done, a new life starts.

The Master has also said that holy company is necessary, company of those who are following the spiritual path, who help in strengthening us in the spiritual path, who reflect something of the Divine Glory, which we also wish to realise. That is necessary.

Follow The Right Path: Begin From The Beginning

Again the Master said, `One must follow the right path.' Suppose I am thrown in the wilderness. If I follow one path, what happens? I enter the wilderness more and more. If I follow another path, I come out of it. I am reminded of an American story. A motorist was driving at break-neck speed. He wanted to reach a certain place. He asked a schoolboy who had studied a little geography: `My son, if I go this way, shall I be able to reach the place?' `Yes Sir,' said the boy, `You will reach it.' `How far is it this way?' asked the motorist. `Sir, you will have to go 25,000 miles,' replied the boy. `If I go the other way?' `Then only two miles' was the answer. Do you follow the idea? By one path, you have to come round the world to reach the place. If you go the other way just two miles. Through proper mood, through proper attitude, if you follow the proper directions you reach the goal soon, progress is quickened. A tremendous change takes place within you. But don't try to quicken your steps too much. Go slow, but with determination, along the right path. Gradually you shall reach the highest truth. But, as I said in that illustration of climbing the snow-capped mountain, proceed step by step.

So in our spiritual practice, first comes `Pratima Puja', i.e. worshipping the Lord in some aspect with the help of a form, a symbol, a picture, or an image. Next, the repetition of the Lord's Name, thinking of Him and singing of His glory. Later on as I said, the mind gets a little absorbed; you feel the Divine presence. That is Dhyana, and Dhyana leads to the highest goal, the highest realisation. In order to move, we should proceed step by step. So the Master says, `Go forward, step by step; from the sandalwood, come to the silver mine, come to the gold mine and then come to the diamond mine'. Similarly, if we sincerely follow the spiritual path and begin from the beginning, we will reach the Truth. But, if we begin from the end, we reach nowhere. Some want to practise Advaita sadhana. I tell them, `I know nothing of Advaita sadhana: go to some other teacher.' But if you want to begin from the beginning, I can tell you something of it.

So, first of all, begin with the form-aspect. I have body consciousness, I am an embodied being. I am a person amongst persons. How can I think of the Infinite Spirit? I can't. So let me begin as Maruti said. Hanuman was asked by Sri Rama `How do you think of Me?' Hanuman said: `Lord, when I consider myself as a personality, as an embodied being, I think of myself as Your servant and You as my Master; and Lord, when I think, I am a soul distinct from the body and mind, I consider myself as a part and You as the whole. But at other moments, my Lord, when I rise above all limitations I think You are myself and I am Thyself.' So let us begin from the beginning.

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