

Satsang with Sri Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
Meditation

Question

What is meditation and what is it not? What are the different kinds of meditation?

Answer

Meditation is defined as maintaining a flow of thought on the same subject. Typically, *īśvara* or *saguna* Brahman, the Lord with attributes, is the subject matter of such a flow of thought. You can maintain this by repeating a name in your mind, focusing your attention on a form, thinking about the glories of the Lord, or performing mental worship. Meditation is all these different processes. It is called *upāsana* or mental worship of the Lord. Here, there is a duality between the devotee and the Lord, the one who is meditating and the Lord who is meditated upon.

Many different kinds of meditation have come up, but traditionally, we describe meditation as maintaining a thought-flow centered upon the Lord. It requires some support in the form of a word, a mantra, or an image to keep the mind focused. It is not emptying the mind of thought, or thoughtlessness. *Yogaśāstra* defines meditation as the stoppage of thoughts or the stilling of the mind completely. As long as there is identification with the thoughts, there is bondage. The purpose of stilling the mind is to de-identify it from the thoughts so that there is no bondage. When there are no thoughts there is no identification and there is only the Self and thus, we gain knowledge of one's own Self. Rather than emptying the mind, we prefer that there is mental worship that invokes the devotee in the person who meditates. This is conducive to the purification of the mind and securing the grace of God.

Another form of meditation is contemplation upon the nature of one's own Self; it is a meditation upon the person who is meditating. This meditation is of the nature of 'seeing' rather than worshipping. In mental worship, some kind of visualization may be involved, but here, we see the order, for example, the order that obtains in the universe. There can be meditation upon your own Self where you see the Self as Consciousness, or you can contemplate on the Reality: seeing the Reality as it is. You can meditate upon acceptance, compassion, or the order. You can choose a topic and contemplate on it.

When meditation involves the worship of God, it is soothing, healing, and purifying for the mind. It is desirable that *īśvara* be involved in the meditation. Ideally, meditation should have a spirit of worship. The Upanishads suggest that we meditate upon *pranava* or *om* and superimpose *īśvara* on *om*. The repetition of *om* then becomes meditation. If one reflects upon Brahman with the help of *om*, it becomes contemplation. Thus, one worships *om* as *īśvara* in the first instance, and sees the self as *om* or *īśvara* in the second one.

In the Upanishads, we find *upāsanas* that are meditations upon the Lord, which are done with the help of a certain model. For example, we find a meditation upon the harmony and oneness obtaining in the universe. In another meditation, the sun serves as the eyes of the Lord; the fire, His mouth, and so on. Seeing the cosmic person as one organic whole can be a form of meditation. These are some kinds of meditations that are taught in the Upanishads.

Question

If I try to transform my mind to become a devotee of God, would that be a form of meditation?

Answer

Yes. When you invoke the Lord by means of different actions such as washing the Lord's feet and offering flowers, garments, and food in a *pūjā*, all these activities are centered on the Lord. That way, a train of thought focusing on the Lord is maintained. It is meditation, but not an intense form of meditation because several activities are involved. Similarly, when you are working and the thought of the Lord is maintained in the mind, it is a kind of meditation. In the 12th Chapter, Lord Krishna says that those who offer all their actions unto him and meditate upon him, worship him. That way *karma-yoga* also becomes a means of meditation.

Question

For meditation, is it better to have one mantra or different mantras?

Answer

It is desirable to have one mantra. However, that does not mean that you cannot repeat different mantras. It is easier for the mind to repeat one mantra; a pattern is established and it is easier to develop a focus. One way to use different mantras is to have a primary mantra and then combine it with other mantras for a period of time.

Question

What is the difference between meditation and *japa*?

Answer

Japa itself can become meditation. It is called *japa dhyānam*. When you repeat the mantra in your mind and the mind becomes focused on the mantra, it becomes meditation. Ramana Maharishi said that *japa* can be done in three ways: reciting loudly so that others can hear, reciting softly so that you alone can hear, and reciting mentally. When it is done mentally it is a form of meditation.

Question

Is there an optimal time for daily meditation? Should it be done at the same time?

Answer

The appropriate length of time for meditation is 48 minutes, or the length of one *muhurt*. Ramana Maharishi has recommended 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening. The duration of the meditation depends on two factors – the availability of time, and the ability of your mind to focus during the practice. Initially, the mind, given its restless nature, tends to wander and has to be brought back making it a little exhausting and difficult to meditate for long. Practice meditation for as long as you can in one sitting. You can have more than one sitting.

It is good to maintain a certain consistency in terms of time, place, and duration because the mind tends to form a habit. However, it is not compulsory; it is merely a matter of convenience. The important thing is to do it, and do it regularly. You can begin with a short length of time and increase the duration as the habit becomes ingrained. If *japa* is preceded by some yoga *āsanas* or breathing exercises, it may help in preparing the mind. In the *Yoga-sāstra*, the sequence practice is *āsana* or posture, *prāṇāyāma* or regulation of breath, *pratyāhāra* or withdrawal of the mind, *dhāraṇa* or fixing the mind, and *dhyāna* or meditation¹.

¹ Transcribed and edited by Malini, Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey, and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.