

Japam: Instrument Of Love For God's Name

One attains God through Japa. By repeating the Name of God secretly and in solitude, one receives divine grace. Then comes His vision. —Sri Ramakrishna

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS PERTAINING TO JAPAM AND MANTRAM

by Swami Tathagatananda

Brahman is Self-revealed. It is due to the impurities of the mind that we cannot have a vision of God. *Japam*, repetition of *Om* and the *Mantram*, purifies the mind so that we may have His vision. The spiritual vibrations generated by repeating the holy Name wholeheartedly with faith evoke spiritual emotion that purifies the mind and heart.

God is Holy. God's Name is holy because God and His Name are the same—God is not different from His Name. Each holy Name is God and all His attributes. The Mantra is a mass of effulgent energy, the sound-body symbolizing the Supreme Truth. *Japam* is repetition of the Mantra or a holy scripture according to prescribed rules, with concentration and devotion. Earnest *Japam* brings the form of God to our mental eye in due course. Shri Ramakrishna says:

Japa means silently repeating God's name in solitude. When you chant His name with single-minded devotion you can see God's form and realize Him. Suppose there is a piece of timber sunk in the water of the Ganges and fastened with a chain to the bank. You proceed link by link, holding to the chain, and you dive into the water and follow the chain. Finally, you are able to reach the timber. In the same way, by repeating God's name you become absorbed in Him and finally realize Him.

Om is Sabda-Brahman, "Brahman in the form of sound." *Om* is the sound-symbol of the Impersonal and Personal God. Patanjali refers to *Om* as the symbol of *Isvara* or Personal God: *Tasya vacakah pranavah*, "His manifesting word is *Om*." Swamiji says:

Isvara is the Atman as seen or grasped by the mind. His highest name is *Om*; so repeat it, meditate on it, and think of all its wonderful nature and attributes. Repeating the *Om* continually is the only true worship. It is not a word, it is God Himself.

In *Varnamala*, Sir John Woodroffe says:

By worship and meditation or *Japa* of *Mantras* the mind is actually shaped into the form of the object of worship and is made pure for the time being through the purity of the

object (namely *Ishta Devata*—the Chosen Deity), which is its content. By continual practice (*abhyasa*) the mind becomes full of the object to the exclusion of all else, steady in its purity, and does not stray into impurity.

Within this context, it is helpful to point out that Saint John's Gospel reflects the truth of *Om* revealed in the *Vedas*. It begins with the Christian concept of the *Logos*:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

These lines are nearly a precise echo of a verse in the *Rig-Veda*, "In the beginning was *Brahman*, second to Him was the Word which was with Him; the Word is *Brahman*." It means that the Word is a potentiality in *Brahman* before it issues forth as the Power (*Shakti*) of *Brahman*. The Word and the Power of *Brahman* are one and the same. The sacred *Pranava Om* is the first word-symbol of Divine Unity, the first to manifest as the sound-symbol of *Brahman*.

Wandering throughout India as a young monastic, Swami Vivekananda experienced the Impersonal and Personal aspects of God. He wrote:

In the beginning was the Word etc. . . . Thought is impossible without words. Therefore in the beginning was the Word etc. This dual aspect of the universal Soul is eternal. So what we perceive or feel is this combination of the Eternally Formed and the Eternally Formless.

Hindu scriptures refer to manifested creation as mere name and form. The substratum behind all changing names and forms is changeless Supreme Reality, whose highest symbol is *Om*.

Japam is a means to attain Self-realization. Repetition of *Om* accompanied by the Mantra awakens the Self. According to Patanjali, constant repetition of *Om* leads to the awakening of the Self in *Brahman: Tajjapas tad-artha-bhavanam*. "The repetition of this (*Om*) and meditating on its meaning (is the way)." Therefore, the mental and emotional components of *Japam* are equally significant. *Japam* gradually advances to meditation, which unfolds deeper layers of consciousness. The emphasis is on *bhavanam*, "dwelling upon in the mind." When the mind dwells upon God with devotion, *Japam* draws the individual soul to *Paramatma* purposefully.

With the initial utterance of the sacred syllable *Om*, the words of the Mantra are charged with spiritual power; they are calculated to bring forth spiritual realization in anyone who sincerely, wholeheartedly and longingly utters the Mantra with patience, hope, faith and devotion.

Every religion that developed in India gives *Om* as the holiest Name of the Divine. Guru Nanak's *Guru Granth Sahib* begins with the *Om* *karā*. *Om* is sacred to Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs and Zoroastrians as well as Hindus. Indian Christians are also gradually accepting *Om*. Worldwide, Christians with a mystical tendency accept *Om* ("the Word") as their symbol for the highest Supreme Reality, as Saint John's Gospel shows. Eminent western Indologists and Sanskrit scholars have also accepted *Om* as the Supreme Name

and Symbol of the Divine.

Essential philosophy of the Mantra. The value of the Mantra dwells in the correct articulation and reflection of the Mantra transmitted by a competent Guru. Swami Vivekananda says:

Mantra is a special word, or sacred text, or name of God chosen by the Guru for repetition and reflection by the disciple. The disciple must concentrate on a personality for prayer and praise, and that is his *Ishta*. These words are not sounds of words but God Himself, and we have them within us. Think of Him, speak of Him. No desire for the world! Buddha's sermon on the Mount was, 'As thou thinkest, so art thou'."

This proverb suggests the importance of combining understanding with devotion when repeating the Mantra. The *Chandogya Upanishad* says, "Whatever is performed with knowledge, faith, and meditation, becomes spiritually effective."

The Mantra's spiritual sound-vibrations during *Japam* purify the body, mind and life force (*prana*) within and without. They reveal to us the vision of our *Ishta-Devata* and our indivisible unity with God and His Name. Vivekananda says, "Each *Ishta* has a Mantra. The *Ishta* is the ideal peculiar to the particular worshipper; the Mantra is the external word to express it."

Science of the Mantra. Four syllables are usually contained in the Mantra: 1) *Om*. *Om* is the supreme symbol of the Divine, which is both Impersonal as well as Personal. 2) *Bija*. The *bija* ("seed") represents the unique characteristics and powers (*kala*) of the *Ishta-Devata*. It is a mystic symbol linking the Impersonal *Brahman* and the Personal Deity. The *bija* arouses the creative power of the *Ishta-Devata* within us. 3) The holy Name of the Deity. 4) A term indicating one's salutation or surrender. To understand the meaning of the key conceptual terms *Bindu*, *nada*, *bija* and *kala* in the practice of *namopasana*, meditation on the holy Name, is to understand the entire secret of the science of the Mantra. It is beyond the scope of our treatment here.

Essential psychology of the Mantra. The entire concept of the Mantra is founded on a profound psychological truth: nearly all thought depends upon sound symbols. Each Mantra repetition is a link to the next repetition, culminating in the constant thought of God. The mind (which receives sense impressions), the memory, the faculty of discrimination and the intellect all participate in the Mantra. Shri Ramakrishna liked to say that the body of the devotee is the "playground of Consciousness." The Mantra is Divinity; it is all-pervading, infinite Spirit. The Mantra fully awakened by *Japam* is no longer limited to the heart or throat of the aspirant. It expands, spiritually transforming the individual and any external object it touches.

The Mantra is God's powerful purifier and protector. The purifying effect of correct *Japam* with devotion enlivens latent spiritual tendencies and increases one's spiritual aspiration and dedication to the practice. As the Mantra penetrates the mind and inner consciousness, it calms and concentrates the mind. With the organs of perception and the entire personality purified, the body becomes the temple of God. After some time the

power of the Name mysteriously makes itself felt and counteracts negative thoughts in the mind, removing all obstacles, uplifting the soul, and uniting it with God.

Repeated with intense spiritual faith, the Mantra is a powerful protective ally. It removes negative impressions in the mind (fear, anxiety, anger, depression, etc.) and gives partial control of impulses. Greater intensity in one's heart gives greater mental control. Troubles will always appear; remembering the words of John Damascenus, "We must learn to invoke God's name more often than we breathe, at all times and everywhere and during all our labors." Swami Vivekananda says:

Great work requires great and persistent effort for a long time. Neither need we trouble ourselves if a few fail. It is in the nature of things that many should fall, that troubles should come, that tremendous difficulties should arise, that selfishness and all the other devils in the human heart should struggle hard when they are about to be driven out by the fire of spirituality. The road to the good is the roughest and the steepest in the universe. It is a wonder that so many succeed, no wonder that so many fall. Character has to be established through a thousand stumbles.

Mantra-shakti, the sacred power of the Mantra, liberates. When sincerely reflected upon, the Mantra has the power to liberate. Its literal meaning is *Mananat trayate iti*, "that which frees the soul through reflection," i.e., Mantra saves (*trayate*) through reflection on it (*manana*). The Mantra protects us from physical, mental, moral and spiritual dangers. Salvation is certain for one who meditates on the Mantra with burning faith in *Mantra-shakti*. Each Mantra in the *Vedas* is a storehouse of infinite *Shakti*, which true aspirants rely on for success in spiritual life. Constant *Japam* of the Mantra with faith, devotion and purity enhances the aspirant's *shakti* as he or she imbibes the virtues and powers of its presiding Deity that bestows illumination and freedom.

Gayatri Mantra and Gayatrijapa. The *Gayatri Mantra* is the Supreme Mantra for Hindus. Its illuminating power transforms the intellect's body-consciousness to divine consciousness:

Bhur, bhuvah, svah! Tat saviturvarenyam bhargo devasya
dhimahi; Dhiyo yo nah prachodyat.

This world, the higher world, and the highest world! That Sun, the adorable
One, On the glory of that luminous One we meditate; May
He endow us with pure intelligence.

Recitation of the *Gayatri Mantra* beginning with *Om* has three stages. The first invokes the full significance of *Om* and the three worlds of the earth, the sky and the celestial sphere. The second invokes the sun, the radiant symbol of the Personal God. It stimulates fervent desire in the mind for real contact with the Divinity behind the symbol. The *Yajna-valkya Samhita* declares: "The spiritual reality behind the Sun and the divine consciousness in man are self-same." In the third stage, aspirants pray for steadfast, humble surrender to the Divine, the sole attitude for receiving the spiritual influence of *Gayatrijapa*. Through *Gayatrijapa*, we may approach the Personal or

Impersonal aspect of Brahman and realize unity in diversity, the *summum bonum* of life for all serious spiritual aspirants.

Japam is a definite path to liberation. The *Yogachudamani Upanishad* extols *Japam* as the means to purify the self and attain Self-realization. Reasoning cannot establish the glory of the Divine Name. One must have a pure body and mind and deep aspiration for the experience of the vision of God. To this end, we can practice *Japa Sadhana* at all times, in all places and in all circumstances.

JAPAM IN THE LIVES OF THE HOLY ONES

We will want to know something about the Holy Ones of India and of other religious traditions outside of India, because many of these saints and sages attained God by repeating His holy Name. If they did not lay claim to God-Realization, they gave personal testimony of the efficacy of God's name in their lives to illumine their understanding. Swami Vivekananda says, "We can now understand what is meant by repetition. It is the greatest stimulus that can be given to the spiritual *Samskaras* (sum total of impressions in the mind). 'One moment of company with the holy makes a ship to cross this ocean of life'." (C. W., I: 220).

Moreover, Shri Ramakrishna taught his disciples:

Know for certain, my children, that there is God's manifestation where people have practiced for a long time austerities, *Japa*, meditation, steady abstraction of mind, prayer and worship in order to have His vision. Their thoughts of God have become solidified there, so to speak, on account of their devotion; that is why holy thoughts and visions are so easily attained there. Numberless Sadhus, devotees and perfected souls came from age to age to these holy places in order to realize God, gave up all desires, and called on Him with all their heart. So, there is a special manifestation of God in these places, though He is uniformly present everywhere. It is like the easy availability of water in wells, pools, ponds or lakes, though it can be had in other places also, if one digs for it there.

Holy Mother placed the greatest emphasis on daily *Japam* and meditation: "The mind will be steadied of itself if aspirants repeat God's name fifteen or twenty thousand times a day. I myself have experienced it." Through her own austerity of *Japa* and meditation, Holy Mother conveyed the efficacy of *Japa* in her life, which she also practiced for the good of her disciples. Remembering this should give us great encouragement and faith in the guru who transmits the holy Name.

Japam overcomes the deepest sorrow. Seven years after the *Mahasamadhi* of Shri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother was still inconsolable. She practiced *Japam* and meditated from morning to evening for seven days while performing the *Panchatapa* austerity along with Yogin-Ma sometime in 1893 in the home of Nilambar Babu.

A moving anecdote of Shri Ramakrishna's disciple, Gopal Ma, is an authentic testimony to the glorious effects of the holy Name. Widowed at fourteen, she lived alone in a room beside the Ganges and gave herself entirely to the spiritual life. In her acute loneliness, she uttered "Gopala," the consoling name of Lord Krishna. "Gopala's Mother," as she was called, was rewarded at an advanced age by the constant presence of the Divine Child for two months. Disciples and friends of the Ramakrishna Order honor and love "Gopala's Mother" to this day.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), a votary of *Ramanama*, realized the spiritual benefit of *Japam* in his life and dying breath. *Rama* was enthroned in his heart as, "the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God . . . I worship God as Truth only." _ Gandhiji made the Mantra the verification of his life:

One must be completely absorbed in whatever *mantra* one selects. One should not mind if other thoughts disturb one during the *japa*. I am confident that one who still goes on with the *japa* in faith will conquer in the end. The *mantra* becomes one's staff of life and carries one through every ordeal. One should not seek worldly profit from such sacred *mantras*. The characteristic power of these *mantras* lies in their standing guard over personal purity, and every diligent seeker will realize this at once.

Each repetition . . . has a new meaning, each repetition carries you nearer and nearer to God. This is a concrete fact, and I may tell you that you are here talking to no theorist, but to one who has experienced what he says every minute of his life, so much so that it is easier for the life to stop than for this incessant process to stop. It is a definite need of the soul.

Japam in Hinduism and Buddhism. Though all religions prescribe some variation of *Japa* of the holy Name, using various types of rosaries (seeds, crystals, etc.), this practice is predominant in Hinduism and Buddhism, where the *mala* is formed using the sacred *rudraksha* or *tulasi* beads. The wheel of *Japa* is practiced by Tibetan Buddhists, as well as the Mantra, *Om mani padme hung*. Japanese Buddhists of the Nichiren sect study and repeat the Mantra of Nichiren's *sutra* of the "Lotus of Truth," *Namu-Myo-Ho-Ren-Ge-Kyo*, as the sole means to liberation. Householders of that tradition are restricted to repeating the Mantra alone. The universal efficacy of *Japam* of the Mantra to dispel unspiritual impulses is absolute.

Japam is prescribed by nearly every Hindu sect as a valuable spiritual practice. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Shri Krishna says to Arjuna, *Yajnanam japayajno'smi*, "Among all the *yajnas* or sacrifices, I am the *Yajna* of *Japa*, the repetition of Lord's Name."

The eighteenth-century voice of the mystic-saint Ramprasad is heard today in one of his well known hymns to Divine Mother:

O my mind, you can worship Mother Kali in any way you please, as long as you repeat the *mantra* given by the guru day and night. Ramprasad declares with great delight that the Divine Mother is present in every activity. When you lie down, know that you are making obeisance to her. Meditate on Mother even while you are asleep. When you

walk around the town, think that you are circumambulating the Divine Mother. All sounds that you hear are her *mantras*. . . . When you eat, think that you are offering an oblation to her.

The holy Name uttered with devotion brings forth spiritual sensitivity through the calming influence of the Mantra itself, which is charged with divinity. The lower nature subdued and the higher consciousness reached, all nature is seen as divine consciousness.

Hindus worship God by reciting the *Sahasra Nama*, the “Thousand Names” of God—God being all-inclusive of numberless created beings, His Names are therefore, innumerable or myriad; God is Infinite. This truth is reflected in other religions also.

The holy Name in Judaism and Christianity. The Hebrew Prophets recognize the omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence of God by declaring, “The Lord *is* His Name.” _ *Shema Yisrael, Adonoi Elohaynu, Adonoi Ehad*, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One,” is a traditional Hebrew prayer. Hebrews and Christians adore God with many descriptive metaphors—Holy, Everlasting, Almighty, Excellent, etc. The names my Lord, my Beloved, my Shepherd; my Shield, Horn of my Salvation, my High Tower, my Refuge, my Savior, my Rock, my Sanctuary, my Counselor, my Father, etc., are found throughout the Bible’s Old and New Testaments, particularly in the Psalms: “Let them also that love Thy name be joyful in Thee,” _ “For our heart shall rejoice in Him because we have trusted in His holy name,” _ “O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together,” _ “I will praise thy name, O Lord, for it is good.” _ Saint Matthew says: “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” _

Saint Bernard counseled all Christians to repeat the names of Jesus and Mary:

The name of Jesus is not only light, it is also nourishment. All food is too dry to be assimilated by the soul if it is not flavored by this condiment; it is too insipid unless this salt relieves its tastelessness. I have no taste for thy writings if I cannot read this Name there . . . it is honey for my mouth, melody for my ears, joy for my heart, but it is also medicine. . . .

If you will not be submerged by tempest, do not run away your eyes from the splendor of the star! If the storms of temptation arise, if you crash against the rocks of tribulation, look to the star, call upon Mary . . . Let her name not leave your lips, nor your heart, and that you may receive the help of her prayer, do not cease to follow the example of the conduct . . . If she holds you, you will not fall, if she protects you, you need not fear. (Quoted from *Med. on SRK & SV*, pp. 62-3.

Christians practice prayers of praise inspired by verses from the Bible, as well as the *Hail Mary Full of Grace* and *Our Father* prayers on the rosary. Some devout worship all the saints on major days of religious observance, such as Easter. Others invoke particular saints’ names in attitudes of petition or surrender. On holy days, the Catholic Pope appears on the balcony of the Vatican and recites the “Angelus” versicle (which commemorates the Incarnation of Christ) with the devout in Vatican Square.

The profound spiritual benefits of ceaseless repetition of the prayer, *Gospodji pomiloui*, “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me,” was demonstrated in the life of the mendicant-author of *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Directed by his *starets* (monk-teacher), the Russian pilgrim increased his repetition of the Prayer from three thousand, to six thousand and to twelve thousand times a day until he reached the “unceasing activity of the heart.” By “calling on the Name . . . without counting the number of times,” he submitted himself “humbly to the will of God, looking to Him for help.” The Pilgrim wrote:

The continuous interior Prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine Name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart; while forming a mental picture of his constant presence, and imploring his grace, during every occupation, at all times, in all places, even during sleep. The appeal is couched in these terms: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” One who accustoms himself to this appeal experiences as a result so deep a consolation and so great a need to offer the prayer always, that he can no longer live without it, and it will continue to voice itself within him of its own accord.

Many so-called enlightened people regard this frequent offering of one and the same prayer as useless and even trifling, calling it mechanical and a thoughtless occupation of simple people. But unfortunately they do not know the secret which is revealed as a result of this mechanical exercise; they do not know how this frequent service of the lips imperceptibly becomes a genuine appeal of the heart, sinks down into the inward life, becomes a delight, becomes as it were, natural to the soul, bringing it light and nourishment and leading it on to union with God.

St. John Chrysostom, in his teaching about prayer, speaks as follows: “No one should give the answer that it is impossible for a man occupied with worldly cares, and who is unable to go to church, to pray always. Everywhere, wherever you may find yourself, you can set up an altar to God in your mind by means of prayer. And so it is fitting to pray at your trade, on a journey, standing at the counter or sitting at your handicraft . . . In such an order of life all his actions, by the power of the invocation of the Name of God, would be signalized by success, and finally he would train himself to the uninterrupted prayerful invocation of the Name of Jesus Christ. He would come to know from experience that frequency of prayer, this sole means of salvation, is a possibility for the will of man, that it is possible to pray at all times, in all circumstances and in every place, and easily to rise from frequent vocal prayer to prayer of the mind and from that to prayer of the heart, which opens up the Kingdom of God within us.

The Pilgrim taught this prayer to other receptive souls. His entire testimony as well as his instruction to a blind man with certain faith in God and power of imagination becomes useful to all spiritual aspirants and ardent devotees, for it spiritualizes the harmonious function of *Prana* in the mind, the heart and the breath:

. . . picture to yourself your heart . . . turn your eyes to it just as though you were looking at it through your breast, and picture it as clearly as you can. And with your ears listen closely to its beating, beat by beat. When you have got into the way of doing this, begin to fit the words of the Prayer to the beats of the heart one after the other, looking at it all the time. Thus, with the first beat, say or think, “Lord,” with the second, “Jesus,” with

the third, “Christ,” with the fourth, “have mercy,” and with the fifth, “on me.” And do it over and over again. This will come easily to you, for you already know the groundwork and the first part of praying with the heart. Afterwards, when you have grown used to what I have just told you about, you must begin bringing the whole Prayer of Jesus into and out of your heart in time with your breathing, as the Fathers [the twenty-five Fathers of *The Philokalia*]taught. Thus, as you draw your breath in, say, or imagine yourself saying, “Lord Jesus Christ,” and as you breathe again, “have mercy on me.” Do this as often and as much as you can, and in a short space of time you will feel a slight and not unpleasant pain in your heart, followed by a warmth. Thus by God’s help you will get the joy of self-acting inward prayer of the heart.

St. Isaac the Syrian counsels, “He who desires to see the Lord within himself endeavors to purify his heart by unceasing remembrance of God.” The holy Name is a filter through which our thoughts, words and deeds must pass in order to be purified. It brings peace and bliss. Christ says, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.” In *Japam*, we set our heart and soul on the holy Name, filling our hearts to the brim.

Japam in Islam, Sufism, Zoroastrianism and Sikhism. Sufi mystics from earliest times have regarded the repetition of the Name of Allah as the highest form of worship. Intoning the *Zhikr*, “*La Illaha Il Allah Hu*” (“There is no God but God, There is none save He”) is superior to the observation of the five daily prayers in the Sufi tradition. Ghazali gives this instruction:

The devotee begins by repeating the Name. Then the tongue should cease moving and the Name be repeated in the mind only. Finally, all forms should go and only the idea remain. At this point the devotee should lay himself open to God’s mercy. The highest ecstasy is produced by *Dhikr*. The ultimate stage is to be completely absorbed in God forgetting even the act of thinking of God.

Sufis repeat His Name until they perceive God and attain to ecstasy: “O Lord, I ever remember Thy Name, I offer my life to Thee, teach me Thy secret mystery . . .” “Very sweet is the Name of the Lord, and likewise does it offer me shelter. To speak the truth, I got no better abode of rest and safety than It. So omnipotent is Thy Name!” Mohammedans glorify God in their recitation of His 99 Beautiful Names. Zoroastrians praise Him in 101 holy Names; They call the ultimate principal source of the Light found in the human heart *Ashem Vohu*.

The Sikhs prescribe *Japam* of God’s Name in the first chapter of their scripture, the *Granth Sahib*: “Let us repeat His name. As He was in the beginning, the Truth, As He was through the ages, the Truth, So is He now, the Truth, O Nanak, So will He be forever and ever.” The Sikhs pray by repeating the Name of God as well as by singing His praises.

THE PRACTICE OF *JAPAM*

The *sine qua non* in the practice of *Japam* is steadfast devotion. Shri Ramakrishna says, “Just as you practice much in order to sing, dance, and play on instruments, so one should practice the art of fixing the mind on God. One should practice regularly such disciplines as worship, *Japa*, and meditation.” It is impossible to repeat the holy Name without devoting even a small part of the mind to God. The *Bhagavad Gita* says: “As a ship is turned from its course upon the waters so is the mind carried away by the wandering wind of the senses.” When Arjuna expresses his doubts to Lord Krishna about the strength of the mind, which is “as uncontrollable as the wind,” Sri Krishna replies that it can indeed be subdued by habit and dispassion. Some practical suggestions support both of these essential prerequisites for *Japam*.

There must be constancy and regularity in *Japam*. The most effective times for *Japam* and meditation are *Brahmamuhurta* and sunset. The mood for *Japam* comes easily when *Japam* is practiced at the same fixed time and clean place, seated in the same asana. A steady, comfortable pose controls restlessness and advances concentration in a steady mind. After prescribing these and other specific suggestions regarding the seat and self-control, etc. the *Bhagavad Gita* says, “There, having made the mind one-pointed, with the actions of the mind and the senses controlled, let him, seated on the seat, practice Yoga for the purification of the self.”

Without help from the Divine, there is no spiritual progress; therefore, invoking the aid of the *Ishta-Devata* of the Mantra elevates the spiritual mood and helps aspirants to receive the help of the Divine before beginning the practice. Thinking of the beauty and grace of the *Ishta-Devata*'s form while doing *Japam* increases concentration and spiritual discrimination. Holy Mother says:

While performing *Japa* take the name of God with the utmost love, sincerity and self-surrender. Before commencing your meditation daily, first think of your utter helplessness in this world and then slowly begin the practice of *Sadhana* (spiritual discipline) as directed by your Guru.

The Psalmist also writes, “So will not we go back from Thee: quicken us and we will call upon thy name.”

Japam can be practiced in various ways with the rosary or *mala*, which facilitates counting and concentrates the mind in the early stages of meditation. When one is without a *mala* or rosary, *Japam* can be done using the fingers. Holy Mother says, “God has given us fingers that they may be blessed by repeating His name with them.”

One can utter the holy Name clearly with proper pronunciation in a voice loud enough to hear (*vachika*), or fix the mind on God and move the lips inaudibly (*upamsu*), or ponder the meaning and practice silently with no movement of the lips (*manasika*), which is preferred.

The scriptures say that *Manasa Japa* can be practiced at all times and in all places. Swami Vivekananda says, “The inaudible repetition of the Mantra, accompanied with the

thinking of its meaning, is called the ‘mental repetition,’ and is the highest.” Sometimes, silent *Japam* does not clear away disturbances from the mind. Therefore, it is of the greatest importance to hold on to the center of consciousness while doing *Japam*, despite any restlessness or tempest brewing in the mind during the practice.

To avoid fatigue, it is important to be vigilant and alert; the rosary is very helpful and encourages continuity in *Japam* as well as the resolve to complete a certain number of rounds of the rosary without any break in the thought of God. In the beginning, using a variety of *vachika*, *upamsu* and *manasika* sustains *Japam* whenever a lack of interest or monotony manifests. One Christian contemplative wrote:

In the beginning it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, *cloud of unknowing*. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being. Try as you might, this darkness and this cloud will remain between you and your God. You will feel frustrated, for your mind will be unable to grasp him, and your heart will not relish the delight of his love. But learn to be at home in this darkness. Return to it as often as you can, letting your spirit cry out to him whom you love. For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud.

With faith and devotion, aspirants will feel a genuine need for the practice and cultivate a dedicated taste for *Japam*.

Vigorous *Japam* neutralizes lower thoughts, allowing aspirants to rise to higher spiritual planes of consciousness in meditation. Tensions, restless outgoing tendencies and drowsiness—dangerous when linked to *Japam* and meditation, can be defeated by walking about doing *Japam* loudly. As a drowning person clings to a floating object, aspirants should cling to the purifying practice of *Japam*.

Japam should never be aimless; it should always be directed towards the Divine. Insincere repetitions lead to false complacency or self-satisfaction, not to liberation. Earnest, vigorous love for God brings us to God. Swami Akhandananda, a direct disciple of Shri Ramakrishna, reflects on this point:

How long will you keep turning the rosary beads? Call on Him with intense longing. Gradually everything will come to a standstill. The rosary beads will stop, the fingers will not move, even the lips will not open to utter His name. All bonds will fall off, even that of clothes.

While repeating the name of the Lord, you will see His form—effulgent and smiling. You will also smile and weep, and say, “Why did You not appear before? Why have you come so late?”

Be earnest, be impatient. Not that you have to repeat His name so many hundreds of times, or that you have to do so much penance. But you have to cry aloud earnestly and piteously, “Appear before me, appear You must. To so many devotees You have appeared; why not me? You have declared that whoever shall weep for You, to him You will surely come. Then why are you not coming to me? Show Yourself to me.” Cry to

Him with a heart full of yearning. The Master would ask us, “Did you call on Him with tears today?” If we answered “yes,” he would be very glad. Again he would ask, “From which corner—outer or inner—of the eyes did the tears trickle down?” And then he would proceed to explain that tears coming from the corners near the nose are tears of repentance, and those from the outer corners are tears of love.

Of course, without absolute detachment and deep absorption in Divine Consciousness, we cannot have the full benefit of true Realization. We must proceed systematically, firmly grasping the chain of the repeated sound whatever the difficulty confronting us. We will come in touch with the Divine in course of time.

Swami Brahmananda loved *Japam* and meditation. He instructed:

Try diligently to check this mad outward rush of your mind. You can do this successfully if you do not try to meditate as soon as you sit down. First draw the mind back from its external pursuits by means of discrimination and lock it up inside, at the sacred feet of your Chosen Ideal. Then make *Japam* and meditate. If you try diligently to follow this course for some time, the mind will naturally cease to wander.

The way of *Japam* is the easiest to follow. By constantly performing *Japam* the mind can easily be made calm and steady, and finally it will lose itself in God. Therefore I ask you to perform *Japam* regularly and often and at the same time meditate on the Chosen Ideal. This combined practice brings quick success.

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi used to say that it was more arduous to concentrate the mind on the Chosen Ideal than to dig the earth with a spade. She also recommended diligence:

One has to be up and doing; can anything be achieved without diligence? One should find some time even in the midst of domestic duties. What to speak of myself, my child! I used to begin my *Japa* in those days at Dakshineswar after leaving the bed at three in the morning, and lose all consciousness.

Holy Mother always addressed the practice of *Japam* when she was with sincere devotees:

All perform this or that discipline because they think it is their duty to do so. But how many seek God? No doubt you must do your duties. It keeps one’s mind in good condition. But it is also very necessary to practice *Japa*, meditation and prayer. One must practice these disciplines at least in the morning and in the evening. Such practice is like the rudder of a boat. When one sits in the evening for prayer, one can discriminate whether one has done good or bad things in the course of the day. Then one should compare the mental state of that day with that of the previous one. Next, while performing *Japa*, one should meditate on one’s Chosen Ideal. In meditation one first sees the face of one’s Chosen Deity, but one should try to meditate on the entire body from the feet upward. Unless you practice meditation side by side with your work, how will you know whether you are doing the desirable or undesirable thing?

Holy Mother recommended mental *Japam* even while traveling, and advised Sri Rajendrakumar Datta:

Do not adopt anything as a mere fad. You may do *Japa* of any *Mantra* you like after finishing first the *Japa* of your chosen *Mantra*. True it is that there is no hard and fast rule about the time of *Japa*, yet morning and evening are the favorable periods. Whatever the time be, you must do *Japa* every day; it is not good to forego it any day.

When a devotee wanted to know the secret of *Japa*, Holy Mother pointed to a small clock and said, “As that timepiece is ticking, so also go on repeating God’s name; that will bring you everything. Nothing more need be done.” “When a pure soul performs *Japa*,” she said on another occasion, “he feels as if the holy Name bubbles up spontaneously from within himself. He does not have to make an effort to repeat the Name.”

Even mechanical repetition successfully keeps the mind engaged in *Japam*. Faith purifies the mind and heart in *Japam*, which strengthens faith. However, the mind turns inward only when meditation accompanies *Japam*. Holy Mother cautions:

If the mind is deranged, one’s life becomes useless. A man’s intelligence is a very sensitive thing. It is like the thread of a screw. If the thread is crooked, then the screw jams. If a man’s meditation is not directed properly, he goes crazy or becomes trapped in the net of delusion. He feels he is quite all right. If meditation is correctly practiced, then one enjoys peace and happiness. How many are there who can practice meditation and *Japa* all the time? Very soon their brains get heated on account of their constantly sitting on their prayer rugs. They become vain. They also suffer from mental worries by brooding on different things. It is much better to work than to allow the mind to roam aimlessly. When the mind is given free scope to wander, it creates much confusion. Repeating the name of God once, when the mind is controlled, is equivalent to a million repetitions when the mind is away from God. You may repeat the name for the whole day, but if the mind is elsewhere it does not produce much of a result. The repetition must be accompanied by concentration. Only then does one obtain God’s grace.”

Faith and patience overcome dryness in *Japam*. Swami Brahmananda says:

You practice meditation and *Japam*; you progress a little, then comes a period of dryness. It seems that the doors are entirely closed. At that time it is necessary that you stick to your spiritual practices with infinite patience; by so doing you will find one day that all of a sudden the doors are opened. What a great joy it is then! In spiritual life many such thresholds have to be crossed.

Japam ultimately brings the fruit of spontaneous love and devotion for God. Shri Ramakrishna says:

When, hearing the name of *Hari* or *Rama* once, you shed tears and your hair stands on end, then you may know for certain that you do not have to perform such devotions as the *sandhya* [ceremonial practice of *Japa* and meditation] anymore. Then only will you have the right to renounce rituals; or rather, rituals will drop away of themselves. Then it will be enough if you repeat only the name of *Rama* or *Hari*, or even simply *Om*.

Holy Mother reminds us:

Through *Japa* and austerity the bondage of Karma is torn asunder, but God cannot be realized except through love and devotion. As for *Japa* and such other things, do you know what they stand for? Through them the senses, etc. become subdued. . . . Did the cowherds get Krishna by *Japa* and meditation or by talking to him chummily as ‘Come here, dear,’ or ‘Take this, dear,’ or ‘eat this, dear?’ ”

When the period of *Japam* is over, aspirants should continue to sit quietly contemplating the *Ishta-Devata*, reflecting on the infinite love of God or praying silently for ten or fifteen minutes. Devout prostration or salutation to the Lord helps aspirants retain the spiritual vibrations awakened by *Japam* and meditation. These observances make it easier to keep the mind on God during all worldly activities.

JAPAM LEADS TO DEEPER MEDITATION

From external prayer and worship, aspirants progress to the practice of *Japam* and then to *Dhyana*, deeper meditation on the form and attributes of God. Increased physical and mental purity in thought, word and deed along with correct, faithful practice of *Japam* and meditation ultimately guides aspirants to experience the Personal and Impersonal aspects of God through the continuous flow of one idea of God.

Japam is meditation with breaks, as it were. Meditation is the natural, spontaneous expansion of *Japam* in the heart—the result of *Japam* correctly practiced with devotion and dedication. In other words, *Japam* certainly strengthens devotion but it is only when *Japam* occurs together with true *Dhyana*, or meditation, that the mind spontaneously turns inward, away from outer things. After practicing *Japam* along with meditation for some time, *Japam* ceases by itself and the aspirant becomes established in meditation alone. Holy Mother says:

It is wrong if the mind is drawn to worldly objects. By “worldly objects” I mean money, family, and so on. But it is natural for the mind to think of the work in which one is engaged. If meditation is not possible, repeat God’s name. If a meditative mood comes, well and good; but by no means force your mind to meditate. Real meditation is spontaneous.

True meditation is never forced or artificial; it is a natural consequence of intense attraction or love for the object of meditation. This idea is easily grasped when we consider that our intense longing for someone or something far away inevitably brings it clearly to our mind and we are delighted to think about it. Even so, Holy Mother says:

If you cannot meditate, repeat the Name. *Japat Siddhih*—“Realization will come through *Japa*.” Yes, *Japa* will eventually bring spiritual realization. It is good if you can meditate, but you need not do it forcibly.

Holy Mother emphasized that truth by repeating it three times: *Japat Siddhih*, *Japat*

Siddhah, Japat Siddhah.

Spiritual practices open the physical centers of power, which increases energy and restlessness. The attempt to control lower urges results in some nervous symptoms. There are reasons for this phenomenon. *Japam* and meditation awaken *Kundalini*, the spiritual energy that is “coiled up” like a snake in a dormant state at the base of the spine. Awakened *Kundalini* passing through the centers of consciousness in the body manifests in the form of mystical experiences culminating in illumination. Swami Brahmananda says:

According to some there are special exercises by which the *Kundalini* can be awakened, but I believe it can best be awakened by the practice of *Japam* and meditation. The practice of *Japam* is specially suited to this present age; and there is no spiritual practice easier than this, but meditation must accompany the repetition of the *Mantram*.

Regular *Japam* is a very important aspect of deeper meditation. Correct practice with self-control and self-discipline gradually brings all mental activity under control. The subtle, silent vibrations of *Japam* pacify gross vibrations in the mind. When a little experience of the Mantra comes, an aspirant becomes calm and peaceful, elevated by a concentrated mind and gradually convinced about the efficacy of the holy Name of God.

JAPAM OF THE SACRED SCRIPTURES

Scripture, the revealed word of God, is the living God. It brings us nearer to God. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Shri Krishna says to Arjuna: “Hear again the glory of My Word. I speak for thy true good, because thy heart finds joy in me.” Arjuna wants a glimpse of the Divine Glory and says, “I have faith in all Thy words because these words are words of truth.” He repeatedly ponders the Lord’s words in order to have full knowledge of Him.

Svadyaya or study of the scriptures, leads us to God. Scripture can be uttered aloud, chanted, repeated or pondered in silence. Certain scriptural verses on the holy Name are particularly meaningful or inspiring. Praying to God to open our heart and hear His voice, we should open the scripture calmly and reverently. After reading the verse several times and committing it to memory, we should slowly and reverently lay aside the scripture and begin reflecting on the verse with closed eyes. The idea is to discover what God is saying to us personally through the verse, which suggests the spirit in which we are to call upon His name or repeat the verse.

Mental reflection precedes *Japam*. Correct repetition of the holy Name or Mantra actively engages the spiritual heart, which has become one with the intellect or *Buddhi*. Shri Krishna teaches Arjuna: “I have given thee words of vision and wisdom more secret than hidden mysteries. Ponder them in the silence of thy soul, and then in freedom do thy will.” Real *Japam* engages our heart, wherein God is found. The devotee’s heart is God’s parlor. Devotion is the string, rope, or cord with which a devotee binds God, who loves the devotee. Shri Ramakrishna says, “The more longing for God increases, the

more His grace will be felt.” A single step towards God impels Him to take one hundred towards His devotee. No effort, however small, is lost.

Devotional *Japam* of the Name and meditation on the sacred texts bestow the same experience:

Reciting the name of the Lord has also the very same effect [as the exclusive reading of the sacred texts]. The name is the nearest expressive symbol of the experience of the Divine, and it is believed that constant repetition of the name together with meditation (*bhavana*) may result in yielding the very same experience. . . . The name . . . is the spontaneous expression in sounds of the deepest spiritual experience, and forms the vibrational symbol of the same.

Devotional *Japam* of scripture fires up our heart with love for God. Silent, loving contemplation upon the chosen verse without reasoning constitutes *nididhyasana*, in which the Name or Word of the scripture goes from the mind to the heart, wherein its transforming power is realized. Mental devotion, the knowledge of God through reasoning (*jnana*) becomes transformed into affirmative knowledge of God in the heart (*vijnana*) which prepares us for His vision. This is the correct practice of *Japam* of the Divine Name or scriptures. The *Bhagavad Gita* offers inspiration, justification and support for all devotees in whatever spiritual path they have chosen.

The saints are a living scripture. Their exemplary lives inspire us to meditate on them. They have left us sayings, teachings, poems, songs and anecdotes of their lives, which we cherish over the centuries. Relying utterly on the Name of God, they overcame all obstacles, even death, and attained to God. *Japam* of their teachings about the Name of God is excellent form of *Japam* that enables us to inherit their legacy.

REPEATING THE HOLY NAME IN THE *KALIYUGA*

The *Bhagavata* says, “Unknowingly or knowingly the chanting of the supreme, praiseworthy Name burns away man’s sin, even as fire reduces fuel to ashes.” Humanity is in a profound state of spiritual ignorance and consequent suffering in this particular age of *Kaliyuga*. The humble practice of repeating the divine Name is the way to reach the goal of God-realization. Shri Ramakrishna gave a general instruction to all:

Devotion according to Narada, is the only path in the *Kaliyuga*; people will be saved if they but sing loudly the name of God. People of the *Kaliyuga* depend on food for their life; they are short-lived and of meager powers; that is why such an easy path for the realization of God has been prescribed for them.

Properly reflected upon, the Mantra snaps the bondage of worldliness. True devotees are convinced that *Japam* dispels all difficulties; they remember and repeat the holy Name with joy even at the moment of death. This should encourage all seekers to utter the holy Name or Mantra unceasingly in every condition of life.

For the sake of devotees everywhere, we have highlighted the efficacy of repeating the divine Name with devotion for spiritual growth. Repetition of the divine Name has been in vogue among spiritual seekers in all religious traditions throughout the ages. Because it is simpler than any other spiritual practice, it can be practiced by the multitude.

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