

Satsang with Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

Alertness ¹

Question

Swamiji, you have said that alertness is essential for any discipline, for any work to be done on our minds, and for self-inquiry. How can we develop alertness?

Answer

Alertness is a skill. Therefore, to develop it is like picking up any other skill, like swimming. We learn to swim by swimming. We learn to drive by driving. And we become alert by being alert.

Before any skill is acquired, there is a learning type of activity. When we learn to drive, for example, there is a driving instructor sitting beside us and a “driver-in-training” sign on the car so that everyone in the road will know to keep a certain distance. In this way, over a period of time, we pick up the skill of driving.

Here, also, we begin by being alert in areas where we are not usually alert. We start with behavior because this is an area where the skill of alertness can be developed. There are certain mechanical aspects to behavior that we consciously become conscious of. In other words, we start with the simple avoidance of actions which betray mechanicalness, like fidgeting.

Fidgeting happens because of something in the mind that expresses mechanically in some external movement of the body. We have all seen people sitting and jiggling one leg while they are talking. This is usually referred as mannerism, but

all mannerisms are really problems because they are mechanical expressions of the mind. There is no thinking involved, no conscious expression.

Therefore, we start with these mannerisms, these mechanical actions. We either stop them altogether or convert them into conscious action. We can even be conscious of opening and closing our eyelids unless, of course, something comes at our eyes unexpectedly.

There is a renunciate in Rishikesh who has become quite famous by controlling the blinking of eyelids. He sits outside of the Lakshmanjhula temple, so named because it is dedicated to Lakshmana, Rama's brother, and because of the swing bridge made out of steel rope that one must cross to reach it. Because the area is very picturesque and has number of attractions, it draws many pilgrims and tourists.

This particular renunciate wears only a small piece of cloth around his waist, his bare body is covered with ash, and his long matted hair is tied up in a very unusual way. He has a long matted beard and very long fingernails. He is the picture of a traditional yogi, complete with a T-bar on which to rest during his long period of meditation.

He looks at people directly and does not blink. This kind of control means that he is a person of great discipline. Thinking he is a great yogi, people keep giving him money. Of course, not blinking and just keeping the eyes open and looking, is definitely an accomplishment, one that this renunciate has worked for. It is a discipline and he is very good at it. But this accomplishment does not necessarily mean that his mind is enlightened. He may be a beggar who is alert in this particular area. Becoming alert and remaining so is a discipline, nothing more.

Controlling one's blinking is a very difficult thing to do. If this can be done, any other movement can also be controlled. I am not suggesting that you stare at people all the time. I am only saying that to do so implies alertness and the ability to control the mechanical movements of your body. Thus, we can start with simple mannerisms.

Certain forms of meditation are also helpful in developing alertness. Witnessing your thoughts can help because, by doing so, you become aware of the ways of thinking. Once you are aware of the ways of thinking, there is no mechanical thinking and any expression will be a conscious action. To accomplish this, however, we need to have a value for alertness and conscious expression.

Alertness and conscious expression also imply being careful about what we say because the organ of speech is also an organ of action. Therefore, words also can be mechanical. This means we can choose our words, which does not mean that we should resort to talking very slowly. We can be alert regardless of the talking speed we maintain. This alertness is a discipline. We say that we want to say, which entails talking whenever necessary. Talking may be either an escape route or a necessity. If we find that we have to talk to someone, it is good to talk, but we should do it consciously. Conscious talking is not a problem.

While the value for alertness is general, the areas in which we need to be more alert is an individual matter. Therefore, each person has to determine which area requires more alertness—and then try to be conscious in his or her actions and responses in these areas.

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