

Satsang with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
Dealing with Our Mind (Alertness, Japa)

Question

What is the cause of the thoughts occurring in our mind?

Answer

Our thoughts are a result of our *saṃskāras*, impressions. These *saṃskāras* are implanted in our mind by our past *karma*, actions. When we perform an action, an outcome or result is created. This result is stored in the form of impressions, and when the impression fructifies, a thought occurs in our mind. Impressions can also fructify as situations. Thus the situations that we meet outside as well as the thoughts that occur in our mind are a result of our *karma*.

Question

Can we have a commitment to cheerfulness?

Answer

We cannot command cheerfulness. It has to happen. Our commitment can be to do things that are conducive to cheerfulness. We can perform those actions that we would perform when we are cheerful. We can bring about a smile on our face. We can be courteous. These are under our control. But to be cheerful is not under one's control. When we realize that our thoughts are not so cheerful, we have the freedom to distance ourselves from our thoughts so that they do not impact us. This way we can stop further buildup of these thoughts. Sadness is a result of buildup of thoughts.

When we find that a certain thought keeps occurring over and over in our mind, we have the freewill to change the thought process. Though thoughts occur as a result of our destiny, we can use our freewill to change the direction of our thoughts, plant other thoughts and do some other activity. But we cannot determine what our next thought is going to be, unless we planted it ourselves. This is what we do in *japa* -- repeating the same thought over and over again. When we do *japa*, or chant a prayer, or repeat a *stotra*, we perform a deliberate action making our mind think those thoughts. The idea is to repeat the same prayer or *stotra* long enough to form impressions in our mind so that the mind will repeat those thoughts. These new impressions will slowly erase the impressions created in our mind due to our past actions. This is possible by one's self-effort alone.

Question

If we do not really believe in *japa*, are we tricking our minds by doing *japa*?

Answer

Japa is not tricking our mind, but using the process of the mind itself. By *japa* we are inserting desirable flow of thoughts. When we feel that there is no desirable flow of thoughts in our mind, then by an effort we can insert desirable flow of thoughts. Typically, we do *japa* to deliberately insert a desirable flow of thought and to completely transform our thought flow.

Thoughts have a tendency to flow in the channels already created. By a certain pattern of thinking and reacting, we have already created channels through which the thoughts flow. By *japa* and prayers, we are creating new channels so that new thoughts can flow through these channels. It is not just

any thought that is created here. *Japa* is repeating the name of the Lord, who is the purest of the pure. Therefore, by repeating the Lord's name, we are inserting healing and purifying thoughts in our mind to slowly transform the composition of our mind. In *japa*, we are allowing our mind to think the way we want it to think. When we are solving a math problem, for instance, we make our mind think what we want it to think. Similarly also when we do *japa*, we engage the mind and let the thoughts flow only in that direction.

Question

Can we concentrate better if we meditate?

Answer

Meditation requires that we focus our minds on some object of meditation; therefore, it hones our ability to concentrate through constant practice. This, in turn, is bound to cause beneficial effects in other activities that demand concentration too. Therefore, meditation definitely does help us concentrate better.

Question

How do we develop alertness of the mind?

Answer

To explain with an example, let's take any action, say, the action of eating. It is important to commit ourselves to alertness by saying that for the 10 to 15 minutes that I will be performing this action, I will be alert about every activity that I perform, every gesture that I make. This mental awareness will help to make this a conscious project in working on alertness.

Another method of effectively practicing alertness is *japa*. That is, I

can tell my mind that I cannot move to the next *mantra* unless I have chanted this *mantra* ‘*om namaḥ śivāya*’ with complete awareness. Usually in *mantra*-chanting, the *mantras* are recited one after another continuously. If the mind does get distracted, it is usually in the time interval between the *mantras*. Once I am focused on the chanting without worrying about the number of times that I have chanted, it is a meaningful action.

On the contrary, when the intention is to finish ten *mālās* in ten minutes, the priority is misplaced, as the act of finishing the chanting becomes more important. The accomplishment of time-based completion (like wanting to better somebody’s record of reciting the *Vishnu Sahasranamam* in 15 minutes by completing it in 7 minutes) makes the entire exercise mechanical and futile.

When *japa* is viewed as an act of worship, the *nāma* is important; mainly because the devotee is conscientious in his/her effort that the *nāma*-offering be pure and sacred. Mahatma Gandhi was a great example of cultivating alertness of the mind very conscientiously, through his *Rāma-nāma japa*¹.

¹ Summer 2003 *satsang*, transcribed and edited by Subbalakshmi Chandrasekaran, Jaya Kannan and Chaya Raj.