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Newsletter April 2005

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Never think you are weak. You may be weak, but the One you have taken refuge in is all powerful. Therefore, deem yourself strong in His strength. When one is firmly convinced that God is his all in all, he feels an upsurge of supreme strength in his heart.

-Swami Turiyananda

Words To Inspire

One gets a human body as a result of great merit in past lives. Once one is born as a human being, the gate to liberation is open. Having a human body, if one fails to strive for liberation, who knows when such an opportunity will come again? Therefore, one must make every effort to attain illumination in this very life. So it is mentioned in the scriptures: "As a result of many acts of virtue you received this body as a boat to cross the ocean of misery. Make proper use of it while yet it is not destroyed." Even upon reaching the gate of liberation, a person falls again and again because of his attachment to wealth, relatives, home, or his own body. Therefore, one should shift his attachment from the world to God. Thus the attachment to and love for God make a person free. There is no other way. God is extremely compassionate. If one takes one step towards God, he comes a hundred steps, nay a thousand steps, towards him. It is absolutely true. It is a matter of doing and not talking. If someone could say wholeheartedly, with mind and speech united, "Lord, I take refuge in you; I have none else," the Lord will definitely accept him. It cannot be otherwise. One must say and feel:

Thou art my other and father;
 Thou art my friend and companion;
 Thou art my wealth and wisdom;
 Thou art my all in all, O Lord. [Prapanna Gita]

Can the Lord keep from accepting a person who prays like this? Now the question is: Who is truly praying and thinking in this way? Lord Chaitanya said:

So vast is Thy mercy, O Lord!
 How huge, then, is my wretchedness
 Who finds, in this empty life and heart,
 No devotion to Thy name. [Shikshashtakam]

One needs love and longing, then only will one get the results of spiritual life. Pray: "Master, give me longing for you; give me devotion." The Master answers the sincere prayer. Pray sincerely and wholeheartedly, then the Master will be pleased. When He is pleased, you will attain everything, your heart will be filled with love and devotion, and your life will be blessed.

-Swami Turiyananda, from *Spiritual Treasures* (p. 36-37)

The Power of Mantra

(Based on a talk delivered by Swami Kripamayananda at the Vedanta Society of Toronto, January 30th, 2005.)

Words have great power. This is true not only of 'religious' words, but of ordinary, secular words as well. Once, the story goes, a man brought a lawsuit against another man for defaming him. In the court, the judge asked the plaintiff what the other man had done. "He called me a rhinoceros," answered the man. "How long back?" inquired the judge. "Two years ago," the man replied. "Why then," asked the puzzled judge, "are you complaining now?" "Because," replied the indignant man, "I saw the animal only this morning!"

This humorous story illustrates the power that a simple word can have. In particular, names carry great clout. If someone calls us by a nasty epithet, we quickly lose our temper and may even resort to violence. If someone misspells or mispronounces our name, we become annoyed. And we respond immediately when someone calls us by our name—even if we are asleep. As persons, we identify very strongly with our names. If our own names hold so much power, how much more powerful must be the Divine Name, the name of God? This is the power which is embodied in the mantra.

Mantra literally means a syllable or group of syllables which, when repeated, directs the mind towards God. In most cases, the mantra contains at least one of the many names of God. The mystic syllables which are used in performing ritualistic worship are also referred to as mantras, as they too invoke the divine presence. The mantra is really thus an invocation, a 'calling' of God to the worshipper, a means of drawing the Divine Being towards him- or herself. It is a 'direct line' to the Absolute, in the form or manifestation that the worshipper loves best.

Not only does the mantra connect us with God, but it also forms a link between the guru and the disciple. The guru transmits the personal mantra, imbued with power, to the disciple in private during diksha, initiation. The disciple is generally instructed to keep the mantra secret from others, and meditate on it privately. By chanting the mantra, whether vocally or mentally, the disciple draws upon the power instilled in the mantra by the guru and also reinforces the connection between him- or herself and the preceptor. The mantra is a means of spiritually maintaining our bond with the guru even when separated by distance, or even death.

The Hindu philosophy behind the practice of japa, or the repetition of the mantra, has its roots in the Upanishads, where the sacred syllable Om is equated with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. For example, the Katha Upanishad states: "The syllable Om is indeed Brahman. This syllable is the Highest. Whosoever knows this syllable, obtains all that he desires." As the primordial sound, or Neda Brahman, Om is the 'unmanifest' precursor to all other sounds. Considering the matter from the other side of the equation, because all sounds and syllables are considered to have their fundamental origin in this divine sound, all language is to be regarded as part of a sacred and powerful Reality. Therefore, whenever we speak, we bring into manifestation-into concrete form-one aspect of Brahman. It is no wonder that words, especially sacred words like mantras, should have such great power to bring us into unmediated contact with God.

The form that the mantra takes varies between traditions, but most commonly, in Hinduism, is comprised of a name of God and one or more sacred syllables (called bijas, 'seeds'), as well as sometimes a salutary word, such as namah or swaha. Some of the best-known mantras, such as Om namah Shivaya ('Salutations to Shiva') and Hare Krishna, Hare Rama are variations of this type. Others, such as Sivoham ('I am Shiva') or Aham Brahmasmi ('I am Brahman') are assertions of the worshipper's own fundamental unity with the Divine, and are intended to awaken the consciousness of this reality. The latter mantra, Aham Brahmasmi, is one of the four Mahavakyas, or 'Great Sayings' identified in the Upanishads as mantras of special power and significance. The others are Prajnanam Brahma ('Brahman is Consciousness'), Ayamatra Brahma ('This Atman is Brahman'), and Tattvam asi ('That art Thou'). Some mantras, such as the well-known Gayatri mantra, are lengthier invocations to some particular aspect of the Divine, praising particular qualities and/or requesting blessings.

Other religious traditions also utilize mantras, though they may not label them as such. In Buddhism, phrases such as Buddhah Saranam Gacchami ('I go to the Buddha for refuge') and Om mani padme hum ('Salutations to the jewel in the lotus') are recited in a similar manner to Hindu mantras. In Judaism, particular prayers or biblical passages (such as Adonai, Adonai, El Rahum ve-Hannun, 'Lord, Lord, merciful and compassionate', or Barukh Atah Adonai, 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord') may be repeated as a form of public or private prayer. In Christianity, various traditions stress the repetition of certain phrases as important forms of prayer-for Catholics, the most common is the 'Hail Mary'; for Eastern Orthodox Christians, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me' is a long-established mantra-type recitation. Islam encourages believers to practice dhikr, or the repetition of phrases such as Allahu Akbar (Allah is the greatest), as a means of focusing the mind and heart during prayer on the supremacy of the Lord. Many of these religious traditions also employ strings of prayer beads (known as malas by Hindus and Buddhists; rosaries by Catholics; sibhahs by Muslims) as a way of counting the recitation and of keeping the devotee's attention from wandering.

In all of these forms of chanting or prayer, the repetition is designed to aid the mind in achieving a high degree of concentration. The ideal of japa is not a 'mechanical' repetition, however, but an intense, heartfelt calling upon God, an activity which unites the heart, mind and soul of the devotee with his or her 'Chosen Ideal' (Ista-

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Devata). Jesus' exhortation, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy mind" should be the attitude with which we approach the recitation of the mantra. Effective japa goes hand-in-hand with the cultivation of a profound emotional and spiritual relationship with God. The repeated impressions inscribed upon the mind by repeating the name of the Lord helps us to develop an unconscious attraction towards Him. In time, with continuous practice, this attraction blossoms into a strong attachment, and, eventually, a fervent desire for God. According to the teachings of the Tantric tradition, spiritual fulfillment can be brought about through the practice of japa alone, even without the aid of formal meditation. When the mantra is recited with faith and devotion, the restless mind is gradually stilled, and one becomes purified. It has long been a tenet of the bhakti (devotional) traditions that the surest route to salvation is the development of selfless love for God through the chanting of His name and glories.

Sri Ramakrishna described japa thus: "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 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." Ramakrishna himself was very fond of repeating God's various holy names, and often entered into a deep state of samadhi while so doing.

The Holy Mother taught her disciples that the repetition of the divine name even has the power to alleviate the karmic effects of past deeds. "One must experience the result of prarabdha karma [that karma which is already coming to fruition]," she admitted. "But japa or repetition of God's holy name minimizes its intensity. It is like the case of a man who is destined to lose his leg, but instead suffers only from the prick of a thorn in his foot." She encouraged her disciples to complete as many repetitions as possible, declaring: "The mind will be steadied if one repeats the name of God fifteen or twenty thousand times a day. It is truly so."

Swami Yatiswarananda, the great disciple of Swami Brahmananda, included repetition of the mantra in the preliminaries which he deemed essential for real meditation. In fact, he wrote: "In the beginning of spiritual life you need not bother about real meditation. Do japa and dwell on your Ista-Devata.... Through japa the divine spirit will become more real than the world. And only then real dhyana [meditation] becomes possible." In other words, japa can function as the 'on-ramp' to deeper spiritual practice, concentrating the mind and giving a taste of the spiritual treasures which can be unearthed through a sustained and developed practice of meditation.

The power of the mantra is limitless. The grace which it calls forth from God is also without end. But, for our part, we must put all our focus and effort towards attaining our goal. If we use the mantra wisely and faithfully, it will surely lead us to God-Realization.

Quantum Leap

How To Live A Meaningful Life

Happiness comes from Discipline. It is not easy to discipline us. We have to find ways and means to discipline ourselves.

The simplest ways to discipline us are to learn and come to know about saints. And there are other ways too, to get us disciplined but I found out that it is easier to follow the saints.

We cannot walk in the darkness but if there is a light we can walk on the path. Today's world is full of enmity, jealousy and negativity.

So we need a guiding light to lead us to the right path and make us happy and peaceful and throw away all the bad things in us.

As I said happiness comes from discipline, I wanted to gain peace and happiness in life and be a disciplined person by learning about a saint but finding a saint is not easy. Luckily I found my guiding as soon as possible. I chose Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa as my guiding light.

We need God's Grace to reach the proper place like where the guiding light is. If we listen to the inner self we will get satisfaction, happiness and peacefulness.

By Guru Iyer, Age 10, Student of Vedanta Vidya Mandir

Belur Math News & Tsunami Relief Update

The birthday (tithi puja) of Swami Vivekananda was celebrated at Belur Math on Tuesday, February 1st. Thousands of devotees attended the celebration throughout the day. Cooked prasad was served to about 15,000 devotees.

Tsunami Relief Update

Our centres in India and Sri Lanka continued relief operations among the tsunami victims by distributing food items, utensils, clothes, blankets, medicine etc. Relief given in India to around 4,800 families. Relief given in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka to close to 76,000 persons.

Past Events

The Vedanta Society of Toronto celebrated Sri Ramakrishna's Birth Anniversary on March 12th, with great pomp and joy. Close to 350 devotees attended the special programme of homa, worship, bhajans, readings, meditation, flower offering and distribution of prasad.

Upcoming Events

Sangeetanjali

An Evening of Classical and Devotional Music, Featuring Special Guest Artist - Flute Instrumentalist, **Sridas** - To Raise Funds For Tsunami Relief Work In India and Sri Lanka. Saturday, April 16th 6:30 pm, at the Vedanta Society of Toronto. 100% of funds raised will go to Ramakrishna Mission, Headquarters.

Please visit www.sridas.com for more information on featured artist.

Regular Services

Daily Meditation

Meditation is held at the Centre every morning from 6 am to 7 pm. Devotional singing and meditation is held every evening from 6 pm to 7 pm.

Interviews and Instruction

Swami Kripamayananda grants interviews to those interested in knowing more about Vedanta, Indian Philosophy, and spirituality and its practices. Please call in advance and make an appointment.

Sunday Service

Lectures are given every Sunday at 11 am by Swami Kripamayananda or distinguished speakers. The service includes devotional singing, reading, meditation and refreshments.

Please use front entrance.

Scripture Class

Scripture classes are held every Friday at 7:30 pm. **Please use upstairs kitchen entrance.**

Book Store

The Book Store carries selected titles from Ramakrishna - Vivekananda literature, as well as other material related to Vedanta and Indian Philosophy. Please call for store hours.

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