

# Japa

## A Practical Handbook

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## Introduction

Japa is a Sanskrit word which means, depending on context, 'repetition' or 'speaking under the breath'. It is derived from the root (dhātu) jap; 'to softly repeat'. It is a spiritual discipline (sādhana) that is highly regarded in Vedānta, because it helps to condition the body-sense-mind complex in preparation for what is known as Self-inquiry (jñāna-yoga).

The practice of japa mantra meditation is mentioned in numerous Vedic and non-Vedic texts; most notably the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (Ṛgveda), the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (Yajurveda) and the Uddhava Gītā (13:34), which lists japa as the second niyama\* out of eleven.

The practice of japa is recommended for all students of Vedānta, because it is a practical and powerful spiritual sādhana. One simply sits in a comfortable position and softly repeats one of the many names of God (Īśvara) one hundred and eight times using a rosary (mālā). It may seem easy, but developing a deep, daily, disciplined japa practice takes a fair amount of dedication. Once japa is abiding in one's daily life, the practice becomes second nature.

At the outset, it is recommended that one make a firm commitment to a daily practice of at least one round (108 repetitions) for 48 consecutive days (one maṇḍalam). If, at the end of that time one has seen a change in behavior, attitude, and/or mental activity (for the better), then it will hopefully be clear to the student that the discipline has value.

Over time, a dedicated japa practice, combined with other spiritual sādhanas, performed with the attitude of gratitude for the-infinite-given, will have sufficiently prepared the spiritual seeker for the practice of Self-inquiry.

\*A niyama is a spiritual discipline which is cultivated with a deep appreciation of, and gratitude for God's (Īśvara's) infinite Grace.

# Japa Mantraḥ

## Exploration One

There is no japa meditation without some form of sacred utterance (mantraḥ). Actually, 'japa mantra' is a misnomer. There are no mantras which are used specifically for the practice of japa. One may choose any mantra for the practice of japa, with the understanding that the mantra itself is explicitly a name of God/Īśvara, that the mantra be memorized and that one chants the mantra for at least one round of 108 repetitions for every sitting.

One may request a personal mantra from one's teacher for the purpose of japa meditation. The student may approach the teacher with humility and a strong desire for gaining knowledge. If the teacher says yes, then a simple initiation ceremony is performed and the mantra is given to the student. What makes this blessing so powerful is that the teacher who performs the initiation has gained complete mastery (puraścaraṇam siddhi) in the mantra. This means that the teacher has chanted this mantra consciously (not mechanically), and with deep devotion and gratitude to the Lord/Īśvara, a total of 100,000 repetitions for each syllable (akṣara) in the mantra. For example, for the practitioner to gain puraścaraṇam siddhi, a ten-syllable mantra would require one million prayerful repetitions. Puraścaraṇam siddhi blesses the practitioner with the ability to neutralize reactions by simply thinking the mantra (śānta vṛtti). This brings the devotee up, and will not only reduce the frequency of reactions but will also decrease the intensity and reduce the recovery time from these reactions.

It is also recommended that the mantra which is given remain private between the teacher and the student. This is a beautiful expression of trust and gratitude to one's teacher, and highly recommended for all students of Vedānta. Once the student is given the mantra, it is strongly recommended that she perform 1000 repetitions of the mantra within the next 24 hours, and at the very minimum, 108 repetitions of the mantra daily for the next 48 days.

# Japa & Nāma

Japa is a repetition of a complete mantra in the form of one of God's infinite number of 'names'. God, in the Vedic world-view is not some bearded fellow sitting away from us in heaven, judging our every action, ready to cast us into 'hell' for even the smallest infraction (because he loves us). The Vedas 'see' the Lord/Īśvara as infinite-intelligent-order being; the non-separate knowledge- and material-cause of the universe. The Lord/Īśvara, is both immanent and transcendent, and may be personified by any and all 'objects' within space-time (from the Higgs boson to galactic clusters). If God can assume any and all forms, then all names (nāma), forms and functions are God's alone. In japa mantra meditation, one invokes the name (nāma) to get to the named (nāmi); the Lord/Īśvara. However, a japa nāma must come from the Śāstra (scripture). These scriptural names are symbolic Vedic and Puraṇic sacred mirrors, reflecting Īśvara's virtuous qualities in absolute measure:

**yad bhāvaṁ tad bhavati**

**"As one worships, so one becomes."**

## Japa Mālā

Mālā is the Sanskrit word for rosary or garland. Traditionally, mālās have 108 small beads (shorter japa mālās may have 54, 36 (kaṇṭa), or 27 beads). If one adds up the numerals in each of these numbers, the result is 9. The number 9 happens to be a very powerful number in the context of Vedānta, symbolizing completeness. In addition to the already mentioned 108 'counting' beads, each mālā will have one larger bead called a meru (head; upper-most; axis-mundi/center point of the universe). Only the small beads are actually used for counting the repetitions of the mantra; one 'round' of the mālā being 108 repetitions.

Hindu mālās are traditionally made out of rudrākṣa seeds; the 'eyes of Rudra' (Śiva). It is recommended that one have a mālā assembled to specification by an experienced mālā-maker.

Many orthodox Hindus will never allow the mālā to touch the ground or let people outside the immediate saṁgha touch it. They will cover the mālā in a special cloth sack while practicing japa and will store the mālā in the same cotton sack when not in use. They will almost never count over the meru, but will flip the mālā after the 108<sup>th</sup> bead is counted to begin the next round. Traditionally, the mālā is worn with the meru in the top-most position behind the neck.

Japa mālās are very personal and sacred objects and should stay covered, even while being 'worn'. Mālās generate reverence in the student by being a type of sanctified jewelry, and are worn as an expression of one's devotion to the Lord/Īśvara.

## Japa and Volume

There are three gradations regarding volume in the context of japa meditation; vācika, upāṁśu and mānasa.

Almost all first-time japa practitioners start with vācika japa; the chanting of the mantra out loud. It is much easier to stay with the practice when chanting the mantra in this way. It is important to practice vācika japa with clear enunciation in order to deepen the practice in preparation for upāṁśu japa.

Upāṁśu japa is done with repetitions of the mantra actually muttered; an almost sub-vocal whisper so that even someone close to the practitioner will have difficulty deciphering what is being chanted. Even though the 'chanting' in upāṁśu japa is whispered, the pronunciation should be explicitly clear and exact.

The most difficult of the three practices mentioned in the Vedas is mānasa japa, which is completely mental in nature; the mantra being 'chanted' only in the mind. Mānasa japa is also the most difficult of the three levels of volume because of the challenge of chanting above the noise generated by a frenetic, undisciplined 'mind'. Mānasa japa is performed only on the thought level and has no connection to the breath or throat. It takes a tremendous amount of concentration and focus to practice this type of japa, and it should be studied under the guidance of a traditional teacher of Vedānta.

Japa is predominantly a sound-focused spiritual practice (śabda pradānam). During the course of japa meditation, one does not focus on any specific 'meaning' or indulge in some type of visualization practice. However, during the practice, the student will pay as much attention to the silence between the mantras as to the 'chanting' of the mantra itself.

## Japa & Āsana

Getting the most out of one's japa practice benefits from a proper place and time; early morning while the stars are still clearly visible (brahma muhūrta) is an excellent time to practice japa. However, the student is encouraged to practice japa at any time. It is also important as to how one occupies that space. A seated position facing one's altar is preferable. The choice of āsana (literally; 'seat') is up to the practitioner. Any āsana which the practitioner is able to sustain for at least 48 minutes (one muhūrta) is recommended; cross-legged postures being the preference. One need not assume the lotus position; comfortably seated in a chair with the back in a neutral 'S' curve and the head balanced and level on top of the spine is perfectly acceptable. The posture should be stable and firm; the environment clean, with ample pure drinking water available.

'Āsana' also has the implied meaning of 'set and setting'. In the context of japa, a 'set' is an environment that has been 'constructed' to facilitate relaxation and inner observation. To this end, a dedicated pūjā room is strongly recommended. Setting means the time and condition that the environment is set within. The Vedas speak of settings that will potentiate (enhance) certain spiritual practices; for example, during an eclipse of the sun or eclipse of the moon or near a body of water. These settings will give one's japa practice 'mantra ākarṣaṇa śaktiḥ'; a ten-fold increase in the power of the practice. These favorable settings include the presence of water, the presence of fire, the presence of kuśa grass (recommended by Lord Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā as one of the materials to sit on for meditation) and/or the presence of crystals. A traditional temple is also considered a favorable setting.

## **Japa: Niścaya, Saṁkalpa & Abhyāsa**

One's resolve to practice japa mantra meditation is called niścaya. For example, one may make a commitment, that over the next 48 days, one's resolve will be to wake every morning at 5 and perform six rounds of japa mantra meditation. This would be one's 'niścaya'. Having a strong niścaya will, among other things, strengthen one's will power and increase the sattva (refined) quality of the individual.

The desired outcome from performing japa meditation made in the form of an explicit intention is called saṁkalpa. Saṁkalpa is set by the student before each practice begins and may be spoken out loud or simply stated under the breath. It is strongly recommended that every sādḥaka (spiritual practitioner) begin each sādḥana (spiritual discipline) with a clear, explicit saṁkalpa. Traditionally, a saṁkalpa would begin with a special hand gesture, where the left hand is placed palm up on the right thigh and the palm of the right hand facing down, is placed on top of it. The practitioner would then state a saṁkalpa, for example; "Oh God/Īśvara, grant me the ability to wield a relaxed mind with precision and compassion for the ultimate goal of gaining freedom from psychological suffering (mokṣa) through Self-knowledge". The Serenity Prayer would also make an excellent saṁkalpa (see page 9).

Abhyāsa is the 'fulfillment of the intention', that is, doing what needs to be done in order to complete niścaya and saṁkalpa.

### **Japa & The Commitment To Bringing The Mind Back**

We shall 'allow' Srī Pūjya Svāmī Dayānanda to discourse on this topic, as his illumination is so beautiful and profound:

"Unlike mechanical thinking, when I give mind an occupation, like chanting a given mantra for a few minutes, I have made a commitment to myself as to what my next thought will be. Because of this commitment, I know that the given mantra will be my next

thought. If any other thought occurs and starts a chain of thoughts, it is clearly an infraction to the commitment I have made to myself. Once one has made a commitment, distraction becomes evident. In the Bhagavad Gītā (Chapter 6, Verse 26) Lord Kṛṣṇa says:

**yato yato niścaraṭi manaścañcalam asthiram  
tatataṭaṭa niyamyaitad ātmanyeva vaśaṁ nayet**

"For whatever reason, the unsteady mind in constant flux gets lost [in habitual, unconnected thought]. One brings the mind back by discipline, wielding [gently and with non-resistance] the power of one's own self-mastery [as witness-awareness]."

Whenever the mind moves away from the object of contemplation, bring it back. Thus, deliberately, the mind is brought back and the commitment is fulfilled."

### **Japa & The Four-Fold Qualifications**

Tattvabodhaḥ is the name of an introductory text that is usually taught to students new to Vedānta. 'Tattvabodhaḥ' may be unfolded to mean 'the knowledge of Truth'. In this case, the truth being unfolded deals with the essential nature of one's self, the world and the Lord/Īśvara. The opening lines of Tattvabodhaḥ discuss 'the four-fold qualifications' for the aspiring student. The four-fold qualifications are viveka (discrimination), vairāgyam (dispassion), the six-fold disciplines beginning with śamaḥ, and mumukṣtvam (desire).

In the context of japa mantra meditation, the focus will be on the six-fold disciplines, which include śamaḥ (emotional mastery; practicing moment-to-moment non-resistance to, and validation of every aspect of one's emotional being), damaḥ (cultivating emotional management that leads to emotional mastery), upamaḥ (cheerfully performing one's daily duties), titikṣā (forbearance; maintaining steadiness and equanimity in the face of challenging situations), śraddhā (having a clear conviction that the teacher and teaching methodology of Vedānta is an independent and valid means for gaining liberation; that the teachings themselves are true) and

samādhānam (single-pointed focus; the ability to concentrate for a length of time; a distraction-free mind).

Japa meditation directly relates to all six of these disciplines. A dedicated, daily japa practice will strengthen the student's commitment to śamaḥ and damaḥ, give a greater awareness regarding the value of upamaḥ, allow the student an increased ability for steadiness regarding titikṣā, strengthen the student's conviction regarding the teaching methodology of Vedānta and increase the student's ability for single-pointed focus (samādhānam).

## Japa Mantraḥ

### Exploration Two

The spiritual seeker may choose any Īśvara nāma for the practice of japa mantra meditation. It is recommended that the nāma chosen be one which the practitioner strongly identifies with. A very common nāma mantra used for japa invokes Lord Śiva. The entire mantra is 'om namaśśivāya'. Repeating 'om namaśśivāya' for one complete round of 108 repetitions, having a strong niścaya; stating a clear saṁkalpa before the practice begins; having an open heart and a clear conviction that the practice has value, will give the student a taste of what a committed japa practice entails.

## Japa Sādhana

1) Sit in a comfortable position and deeply relax the body. It is strongly recommended that one first perform 9 rounds of kapālabhati prāṇāyāma\* and 27 rounds of nāḍī śodhana prāṇāyāma\* (in that order) to help initiate relaxation and inner concentration. It also might be prudent to warm up the voice by performing 18 rounds of classical ujjāyī prāṇāyāma.\*

\*Please refer to the booklet

"Prāṇāyāma: A Practical Handbook"; (Sama Yoga/ॐPress)

2) Place the left hand, palm facing up on the right thigh with the palm of the right hand clasping it. Explicitly state a saṁkalpa for

the practice (for example, the Serenity Prayer).\*

\*Īśvara, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

3) Place the left hand on the left\* thigh, palm facing upward.

\*Reverse sides for a left-handed practitioner.

4) Hold the mālā in your right hand just above the heart and slightly away from the torso (the hand may also be placed on the right knee, with the mālā resting on a cloth or in its dedicated sack). Drape the mālā over the center of the middle joint of the middle finger. The index, ring and little fingers will not be involved in the counting process. The thumb will be used to pull each bead toward the heart as it is counted.

5) Begin by clasping the meru between the thumb and the center of the middle joint of the middle finger. Pull the meru down with the thumb and then begin chanting the mantra as the thumb makes contact with the first small bead. Continue the practice for a total of 108 repetitions of the mantra (one bead per repetition), paying special attention to the silence between each chant.

6) When the meru is next contacted, one round of 108 repetitions will have been completed. The practitioner has two options if further rounds are desired. The first option is to continue in the same direction (by following the directions listed in number 5 above). The second option requires a bit of mālā ballet. Instead of continuing over the meru to begin the next round, the mālā is flipped around using only the thumb and middle finger (the mālā being rolled between the thumb and the middle finger; the middle finger then sliding underneath the thumb and mālā). The meru is now on the inside of the hand and will again fall toward the heart as the next round begins. This choice may be challenging at first, but may also prove to be an excellent technique for keeping one's concentration on the mantra. One is encouraged to perform as many rounds as is comfortable. The longer the time spent practicing japa, the greater the impact the practice will have.

## Conclusion

One falls in love with japa mantra meditation for the purpose of actively earning Īśvara's Grace. By taking joy in directing one's attention to Īśvara, by settling all accounts with Īśvara, one becomes more aware of the importance of Self-inquiry. Japa may be practiced alongside other Vedāntic-friendly sādhanas like prāṇāyāma, yoga āsana, Vedic chanting, yama-niyama, etc. These sādhanas are designed to integrate the student, endowing her with the basic requirements (the four-fold qualifications mentioned on page 7) in preparation for Self-inquiry. Self-inquiry will lead to Self-knowledge, which is born of śravaṇam (consistent and systematic study of the Vedāntic scriptures taught by a traditional teacher for a long period of time). By the rare Grace of human embodiment, and over time, one comes to the realization that the ultimate spiritual goal is that of gaining Self-knowledge (mokṣa). The practice of japa meditation is a crucial step in the process for achieving that purpose. Om, śānti.

## Further Reading

It is recommended that the interested student read the booklet "Japa Mantra Meditation";\* an abridged version of "Two Talks On Japa Mantra Meditation" by the great Vedāntic ācārya Pūjya Śrī Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī. The following booklets are also currently available: "108 Names of Sarasvatī",\* "Shivārādhanam"\* (with accompanying MP3 files), "108 Names of Lakṣmī"\* and "108 Names of Gaṇeśa".\* Please ask your teacher for a copy of any of these booklets if you are sincerely interested in chanting these sacred names, or have an interest in using any of the names for a dedicated japa practice. A very useful booklet available to students of both yoga and Vedānta is "Prāṇāyāma: A Practical Handbook".\*\*

\*Available at no charge from your teacher via ॐPress.

\*\*Available from your teacher via Sama Yoga/ॐPress.

# श्री स्वामी वागीशानन्द सरस्वती

## Śrī Svāmī Vāgīśānanda Sarasvatī

Śrī Svāmī Vāgīśānanda Sarasvatī is a senior disciple of Pūjya Śrī Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī, and has been studying and teaching Vedānta since 1975.

Svāmī jī was in his teens when he became fascinated with mystical poetry and non-dualistic philosophies. In 1975, at the age of 19, he left his home in the United States and traveled to India to study in a traditional gurūkulam. After graduating from a three-year residential course in Vedānta and Sanskrit, he attended four subsequent three-year courses in the United States and in India.

Using the traditional methodology called saṁpradāya, Svāmī Vāgīśānanda 'unlocks' the scriptures of Vedānta, thereby removing the veil of ignorance; the cause of all human suffering. He is a traditional saṁnyāsi (a renunciant who is committed to a life of knowledge and has taken a vow of non-injury). A master of the South Indian Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda style of chanting, Svāmī jī travels the world teaching Sanskrit, Vedic chanting and Vedānta.

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