

Japa

॥ श्रीः ॥

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An abridged version of 'Two Talks on Japa Mantra
Meditation' given by Pūjya Śrī Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī
Edited under the guidance of Śrī Svāmī Vāgīśānanda Sarasvatī

Introduction

The first part of this booklet is an abridged version of a booklet titled 'Two Talks On Japa Mantra Meditation', which was first published by the Śrī Gaṅgadhareśvār Trust in 1992. The original publication was based on two live discourses given by the great Vedāntic ācārya Pūjya Śrī Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī at the Arśa Vidyā Gurūkulam in Saylorsburg, PA, USA, during a three-year residential course in Vedānta. It is unknown precisely when this two-part talk was given. It is an analysis of the psychology of japa mantra meditation and its positive impact on an undisciplined mind.

It is the editor's opinion that great live discourses do not necessarily make for good publications without considerable editing. Pūjya Svāmī jī's intentions have, to the best of our abilities, remained intact. However, words, sentences and even entire paragraphs have been rearranged or omitted from this version for the sake of creating a more linear, cohesive booklet on the subject of japa meditation. We sincerely bow in great respect to Pūjya Svāmī jī and ask forgiveness in the case of any errors in this text. The responsibility for errors, if any, lies with the editors and not with Pūjya Svāmī jī.

It is our greatest wish that this collection of discourses profoundly blesses the reader with a greater insight into the practice of japa mantra meditation, and the functioning of the mind.

Compiled and edited under the guidance of Śrī Svāmī Vāgīśānanda Sarasvatī

Japa Mantra Meditation

The practice of japa meditation involves the repetition of a word, a short sentence, or longer phrase which mirrors an aspect of the Lord/Īśvara. One way of unfolding the meaning of the word japa is to break it into two 'roots'. 'Ja' may be unfolded to mean 'that which puts an end to the cycle of death and rebirth' and 'pa'; 'that which removes or destroys all impurities and obstructions'. In this manner, japa mantra meditation is an indirect means for 'gaining' liberation (mokṣa).

The Unpredictability Of Thoughts

Contrary to popular belief, one can only process one thought at any given moment. What one's next thought will be is anyone's guess, but when it does arrive, it will have done so because of some form of logic associating it to the present thought. This connection may be incidental or it may be direct. Yet, the next thought itself is never predictable. Even now, I cannot predict what my next thought might be. My intention is to discuss japa, and I am doing so. Yet, the present thought and accompanying words now arriving were not known to me just a moment ago.

BMW Thinking

Suppose you see a BMW on the road which draws your attention. Your next thought might be "how can I get one?" And then your next thoughts might be "a person at work just bought one/how can she afford such an expensive car?/last year she didn't even have a job/her husband must have a lot of money/I wish my husband came from a wealthy family/when I got married I didn't bother to think about money or my future..." This sequence of thoughts 'happened' because you saw a BMW. They do follow a certain logic, yet this particular line of thinking is only one of an infinite number of possible thought patterns. Here's another possible scenario: You see a BMW on the road which draws your attention. Your next thought might be "how can I get one?..." And then your next thoughts might be "the German people are so industrious/even though their country was devastated during World War II, their economy quickly rebounded/they produce the best scientific equipment in the world..." The external stimulus or trigger for both of these thought patterns was you "seeing a BMW on the road".

In 'BMW-thinking', the connection between thoughts is not a conscious one. The next thought may be about anything; "the BMW badge is different/it is not like the Mercedes badge..." Having a thought about the Mercedes badge gives rise to a thought about a

star, "my astrological sign is not favorable..." This movement from one thought to the next is 'listless' thinking. It is an unconscious meandering of thoughts in which there is no direction. This is what an undisciplined mind does.

Restlessness Requires A Buildup

Listless thinking leads to 'buildup'. One's thoughts 'build up' in a listless mind which increases restlessness. Without this buildup, one will never become restless. The problem is that this buildup is not something that we do consciously. It simply gets 'built up', like a wall building itself. Suppose you have a pile of bricks spontaneously assemble into a wall. You would probably consider this event a miracle. Yet, one does not consider 'mental' buildup a miracle because it seems to be the normal state of the mind. However, it *is* a miracle because it just happens. That one's thought buildup builds itself, and that one has no say over this process, is truly amazing.

There is a feeling of helplessness regarding the process of mental buildup. Some event (either internal or external) triggers buildup. It may be hormones, the weather, someone's look, indigestion, a frown, or any number of infinite possibilities. Any seemingly innocuous event may have a dramatic effect on potential buildup. Particularly problematic in terms of buildup are events that one has resistance to. Any event that one has resistance to can start a chain of events leading to buildup, and this process can go on accumulating over an entire day, a week, a month or longer. Restlessness requires a buildup to which I, myself, am not conscious of; yet this buildup is mine and mine alone. I do not look upon it as distinctly different from myself. I see myself fuming and do not know what to do about it. I have to do something because, although I am not conscious of its construction, I happen to be completely consumed by it. I am unable to keep track of this thought-by-thought, brick-by-brick buildup, because my whole approach toward thinking has been BMW-thinking; unconscious, associative, listless and non-directed.

The Beginning Of Thoughts

It would be a great disservice to a student if I were to simply advise her to stop this type of thinking and just 'nip it in the bud', without offering some kind of technique to make this bud-nipping possible. In BMW-thinking, the thought appears as a fully-bloomed flower. By the time 'I' become 'aware' of it, the thought has transformed into a massive jungle and the process of buildup has begun. BMW-thinking is not something that 'buds' and can then be 'nipped'.

The very manifestation of BMW-thinking is its association with 'I'. Without its association with 'I', the listless thinking that leads to buildup would not begin. This type of mechanical thinking, associated with 'I' has no 'history'. It may come from childhood experiences or a behavior that we picked up from our parents, (which may mean that they picked it up from their parents, and so on). If that is so, then this kind of habitual thinking pattern is beginning-less; having no genesis. There is no question about my lack of awareness regarding the 'first' thought, because I have become absorbed by the process of thinking itself. I have become the thought and the thought has become me. Thus, we return to the advice of nipping it in the bud and realize that such advice is meaningless, and will only create more mental dysfunction and guilt in response to the student's seeming inability to 'control' her thoughts.

Learning About The Mind

We have never been properly instructed regarding the functioning of the mind. We only know that we are subjected to a particular type of thinking. If we were lucky, we had some intellectual discipline taught us in school which has given us the capacity for logical thinking. Through this practice, we may have developed some mental discipline, but neither do we understand it as a technique, nor do we utilize it as one.

The Chant And The Interval

There is a tree in India called the areca palm which produces the betel nut. The areca palm is similar to a coconut palm in that its trunk is very thin and fibrous and tapers at the top. By looking at the tree, one may deduce that it would not bend, even if one climbed it to the top. But that is not the case. It may be surprising to learn that the person who climbs an areca palm tree to gather the berries at the top does not need to descend and then climb another areca palm for more fruit. Instead, to reach the closest tree, one simply bends the tree top one is sitting in with one's bodyweight. In this way, one can move directly from tree-top to tree-top without ever descending. This is exactly what we do in BMW-thinking. We are constantly walking the tree-tops without ever grounding ourselves.

The coconut palm does not bend like the areca palm. A coconut-picker must descend to the ground before climbing the next tree. Japa is like this. One descends to the ground; not after a length of time, but immediately. The phrase is chanted and, like harvesting coconuts, one descends. One chants and immediately descends; 'chant/descend/chant/descend/chant/descend...' During the practice of japa, being aware of the interval, the 'climbing down', is as important as the chant itself.

Japa As A Technique

When practicing japa, one has made a commitment as to which thought will be entertained next. When some other thought arises, it is clear that one has gone off the track. The practice of japa may incorporate one word, a short sentence, a section from one of the Vedas or even an entire Veda. However, for the practice to even be considered japa, the utterance must be something that is repeated.

Exercising one's will is an essential aspect of japa. If I choose to repeatedly chant a word or a sentence for a length of time, I have a technique in hand which will give me a greater insight into the workings of the mind. If something other than the chant manifests,

I know that this is not intended, and I bring the mind back to the intended thought. In the process, I then learn, even outside the context of japa, how to dismiss unwanted thoughts and retain the thought I have chosen to entertain. This is an important benefit of japa as a technique.

As one explores the technique of japa, one is strongly urged to see the mind through the lens of compassion; that when one speaks of the 'mind', one is speaking about the whole person. The mind is not a 'whipping-boy', nor is it to be 'manipulated' in any way that creates agitation. The 'goal' of japa is to achieve mental mastery; to be able to wield the mind with prayerful attention.

The Interval Between Thoughts

The advantage of using the technique of repetition is that one will become more aware of the interval between two successive, yet alike thoughts. In BMW-thinking, one's mind is listless, with no specific occupation or focus. The mind moves aimlessly from one thought to another. This type of thinking is like trying to pick up a single, very thin, cooked noodle from a pot of cooked noodles. If one tries to pick up only one noodle, one cannot help but find it associated with other noodles. Similarly, the whole occupation of listless thinking seemingly becomes a single, unbroken thought, even though there are actually many thoughts strung together.

BMW is the brand name of a vehicle and Germany is the name of a country. Because of the direct sequential link between these two different thoughts, the potential space between them does not manifest. However, there is a potential space between two sequential, yet alike thoughts. Repeating a given chant avoids this direct sequential linking of different thoughts, which allows the spaces between them to become evident. This happens because there is no difference between one chant and the next. Each chant is a complete unit. Therefore, one becomes aware of the fact that there is a period (meaning both a momentary pause and a punctuation mark which denotes the stopping of a sentence)

between two chants; `chant/period/chant/period/chant/period...`
There are no commas, only a period; a full-stop.

Peace In The Mind

There is a pause in mental activity between two alike thoughts; an interval, without form or shape. This is what we call `peace` or `silence`. There is no thinking in this silence because there is no particular thought form being manifested. We believe that peace is something that we have to work for. Many will directly ask for it. Because the nature of an undisciplined mind seems to be listlessness and restlessness, we have led ourselves to believe that peace is a `state` which has to be diligently cultivated.

An Occupation For The Mind

I once met Svāmī Rāmayya. He was originally a yogi and then became a disciple of Ramaṇa Mahārṣi. I could sense that he was a person who was at peace with himself. By that time in my life, I had made my commitment to Vedānta. At the same time, I had a lot of conflicts regarding that commitment. I went to Svāmī Rāmayya in an effort to resolve these conflicts. He never talked much, but he said one thing that really hit home: "For restlessness, one has to work a lot. For peace, what is there to do?" After making these statements he became very quiet, which had a profound effect on me.

I can give the mind a meaningful occupation wherein BMW-thinking or listless thinking (also called `chain` thinking) is broken. This, in turn, may reveal a great truth about myself; that I am the silence, the peace, that is in-and-through all thoughts. One can see how restlessness requires buildup, whereas peace is natural, for which we need do nothing. One creates restlessness. Peace is our very nature.

In japa, one deliberately chooses a thought to `entertain`. Because one has a will, one has the ability to make this choice. One becomes the `author` of that given thought. A specific thought is manifested because it has been chosen. However, the silence that is

`revealed` in the spaces between these thoughts is not created by you. In truth, silence is the basis for all thought.

The Nature Of Thought And Silence

Absence of thought is generally understood to be something `achieved`. To this end, thought may be suppressed or negated by certain disciplines, such as the practice of breath control. It is difficult to think during the retention of breath. I challenge you to try it. Hold your breath and try to think. It is very difficult. The thought that will predominate will be the one regarding the need for taking a breath.

The student of Vedānta is not interested in manufacturing the absence of thought. The student of Vedānta is interested in understanding the `nature` of thought and the `nature` of silence. As the thought arrives and departs, one observes the `nature` of the thinker, the `nature` of the thought and the `nature` of the silence itself.

The Mind As A Dancer

In the 10th chapter of the Vedāntic text `Pañcadaśi`,* the mind is likened to a dancer on a stage. The dancer performs a variety of aesthetic sentiments; love, helplessness, anger, cruelty, wonderment, fright. The light which illumines the stage also illumines the dancer as she portrays these sentiments. As she exits the stage, the light remains, illuminating the bare stage. The light itself is not a `do-er`, and certainly not an `enjoy-er` of the dance. Illumining the stage is not the `job` of the light. The nature of light is to illumine and that is what it `does`. The verb `illumine` involves no action or motive on the part of the light. Similarly, what remains after a thought exits is `illumined` silence, just like the `illumined` stage after the dancer has exited.

*Nāṭaka Dīpa Prakaraṇam

I Am Silence

What I experience, or am aware of between two thoughts, is silence. Thoughts arrive and thoughts depart. Before the arrival of the thought I am silence. After the departure of the thought I am silence. I am silence first and I am silence last. Therefore, in spite of thoughts, I am silence. The practice of japa does not give me this knowledge. Yet, by doing japa, I create a situation wherein something that is understood by me is understood more clearly; the understanding that my very nature is silence.

Nipping Thought In Its Bud

By practicing the technique of japa mantra meditation, one actually learns how to 'nip a thought in its bud'. By being aware of the interval between thoughts, one gains the capacity to actually 'observe' a thought as it arrives, thereby giving one the ability to use free will in either choosing to entertain the thought or not.

Sound As Technique

A common practice among many meditators in the West is to chant special syllables as a form of invocation; so-called *bijākṣaras*. For example; *śrīṁ*, *hrīṁ*, *aiṁ*, etc. These *bijākṣaras* are traditionally invoked for the purpose of meditating on a particular deity. The mind will naturally have an occupation when these *bijākṣaras* or any other one-syllable 'word' (such as *Rām* or *śyām*) are chanted. Because the chant is repetitive, BMW-thinking is eliminated.

That any sound will work as a technique for relaxation was demonstrated by a scientist using a meaningless sound while observing changes in her subjects' various physiological functions. While the subjects chanted this sound, their heart rates and breathing rates slowed significantly.

These findings are not surprising, as the subjects were sitting quietly, their minds occupied with the repetition of the meaningless sound. Had their thoughts focused on some personal problem, there

is no doubt that their physiological functions would have become agitated. Based on the results of this study, the scientist wrote a paper in which she concluded that a special chant or mantra is not required to relax the mind; that the repetition of any sound, even a meaningless one, could produce the benefits she had observed.

As a technique, any sound that is repeated will work if the goal is simply relaxation. And for some time the body and the mind will be quieter. Yet, over a longer period of time, one may become aware that one is sitting and chanting a meaningless sound and lose interest in the practice.

A Meaningful Chant

If a sound that is chanted has no meaning, it will only serve as a 'technique'. In the same way, any word chanted will also only be a 'technique'. Neither of these techniques are japa. A meaningless sound will remain meaningless and lack impact. A random word will also lack impact and will only generate thoughts relating to that word.

A Name For The Lord

For this discipline to actually be called japa, a special word or set of words is required for repetition; a mantra. A mantra will be a word or set of words that does not represent any specific material object. One chooses a mantra (or has one chosen for oneself) that represents the entirety of 'creation'. This is how a meaningful word becomes truly meaningful and all-inclusive. Within a mantra, all words are included; all worlds are included; all languages are included; all objects, peoples, places are included. Traditionally the words of the mantra will vary, but in one's mind, the words chosen will stand for everything.

Gāyatrī Mantra

Any action that one undertakes should be meaningful. One need not know the entire meaning of a mantra; one only needs to be aware that the mantra has meaning.

In India, it is quite common for a child to be initiated into a mantra called Gāyatrī. When I was initiated into the Gāyatrī as a young boy, I was not told its full meaning. I was only told that it was a prayer, asking the Lord for a bright mind, and that if I repeated it, my mind would become bright.

Gāyatrī is a Vedic Sanskrit prayer to Lord Sūrya, the sun. Sūrya represents the all-knowing Lord who makes one's mind brilliant. This is all I was told. And although I was not given the mantra's entire meaning, to me it was meaningful enough because it was a prayer. Only later would I gain a full appreciation for this particular mantra.

Chanting the Gāyatrī serves as a discipline, helping a child to learn how to prayerfully manage her mind. It works because, as the child chants the mantra, the child's mind will wander. The child is then instructed to bring the mind back to the mantra, thereby learning how the mind functions. At an early age the child will gain insight into how the mind works. This is not an ordinary habit for a young person, or for that matter, any person to acquire.

Chants And Mantras

There are Vedic 'words' that are sometimes chanted which are not mantras; 'so'ham...so'ham...so'ham...' This 'word' means 'He-I-Am': 'He', referring to the Lord. Nowhere in the scriptures does it say that so'ham is a mantra. So'ham is a fact. It is a sentence to be understood. It has the same meaning as 'tat tvam asi'; 'that-you-are'. If you are the Lord and the Lord is you, then there must be some non-difference or commonality between you. Since the differences are obvious, one need not inquire into them further. It is the non-difference that one needs to 'know'. Understanding this non-difference is the subject matter of Vedānta.

Mastery Over The Mind

Japa mantra meditation is a tool which enables one to negate a distracting or 'improper' thought by deliberately replacing it with a

chosen thought. Japa gives one an opportunity to eliminate BMW-thinking, to stop the cycles of buildup, and to become more aware of the interval, the silence, between thoughts. Japa is helpful in gaining mastery over the mind.

Over a period of time, once a person has made the commitment to the discipline of mentally repeating a given mantra, a person's mind will automatically go to that mantra whenever it is free to do so. Just as water cascading down a mountain slope will create new ravines, a new 'thinking track' is created toward which the mind will repeatedly be drawn. Japa meditation becomes a way of keeping the mind meaningfully occupied. Therefore, japa is a useful and prayerful activity. The mind comes to a place of composure; of equilibrium. One understands that all mental distractions and agitations are transitory. One is not dominated by listless thinking which will, inevitably lead to buildup. A mind that understands this has depth and tranquility.

Japa Is A Mental Prayer: A Conclusion

Japa mantra meditation invokes the Lord/Īśvara. It is neither a meaningless sound, nor does it denote a particular object. Only when the repetition of a mantra becomes a mental prayer to the Lord/Īśvara is the discipline called japa. Japa is recognized as an indirect means for gaining liberation because it destroys all obstructions and impurities, thereby preparing the mind of the devotee for 'knowledge', which is 'liberation'.

Japa is very effective when practiced in conjunction with the study of Vedānta. Even 'outside' of Vedānta, the practice of japa is beneficial, in that it gives mind a purposeful occupation.

In Chapter Ten, Verse 25, of the Bhagavad Gītā, Lord Kṛṣṇa says, "There are many forms of rituals and many means through which I am invoked, but among them all, I am japa."

yajñānām japa-yajño'smi

Japa

A Practical Handbook

॥ श्रीः ॥

Compiled and edited under the guidance of
Śrī Svāmī Vāgīśānanda Sarasvatī

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 108th 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 sādhaḥ (spiritual practitioner) begin each sādhana (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 the Lord, 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 20) 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

The following booklets are currently available: "108 Names of Sarasvatī",* "Shivārādhnam"* (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.

पूज्य श्री स्वामी दयानन्द सरस्वती

Pūjya Śrī Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī

Pūjya Śrī Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī (1930 – 2015) is considered the leading figure in the renaissance of the study of Advaita Vedānta in the late 20th century. A 'teacher of teachers', Pūjya Svāmī jī took dikṣa samnyāsa in 1962 under the guidance of Svāmī Cinmayānanda Sarasvatī. Pūjya Svāmī jī studied the complete traditional teaching methodology from his sadguru, Svāmī Praṇavānanda. He then refined his teaching skills by studying the Brahma Sūtras with Parama Pūjya Svāmī Tārānanda of Rishikesh.

In 1972 Svāmī Dayānanda began the first of what would become 10 three-year courses which would take place over the next 40 years. These courses focused on the study of Advaita Vedānta and Sanskrit.

Pūjya Svāmī jī established four traditional teaching centers for the express purpose of the study of Vedānta and Sanskrit. These centers are located in Rishikesh (Uttarakhand), Annaikatti (Tamil Nadu) and Nagpur (Maharashtra) in India, and in Saylorsburg, PA in the United States.

Current estimates regarding the number of Pūjya Svāmī jī's students who currently teach Vedānta and/or Sanskrit at 200. Saṁghas of these teachers may be found in such diverse locations as California, Madras, Réunion, Sweden, Hawai'i and Brazil and in many other locations around the globe.

Pūjya Śrī Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī's contribution to the study of Vedānta is incalculable. His legacy of centers of learning, recorded discourses, books, and most of all teachers, will continue to bless the world for many years to come.

॥ हरिः ॐ ॥

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 has traveled the world teaching Sanskrit, Vedic chanting and Vedānta.

ॐ Press

॥ हरिः ॐ ॥