

Om Hari Om

In Praise of Japa

William Page

(American Vedantist, Volume 15, No.3, Fall 2009, p.8-11)

Japa is one of the main spiritual practices of the Rama-krishna movement. Combined with prayer and meditation, it forms a triangle—a three-fold method of reaching out for God, establishing him within, and keeping him there.

Prayer is simply the act of talking to God. The words can be spoken aloud, whispered, or uttered mentally. They reach out to God and invite him to come down and take his seat upon the lotus of the heart.

Once he's there, we begin to do japa and meditate. Japa is the continuous, silent repetition of a very short prayer or invocation called a mantra. It can be done on its own or in conjunction with meditation. Meditation is the act of visualizing God within us. Together, these two practices establish God within us and enable us to feel his presence.

In the intervals between meditation sessions, we usually get preoccupied with our daily work. If God gets restless at being neglected and seems inclined to leave his seat, we can bring him back by doing japa.

So prayer draws the Lord from the heavens to the heart, japa and meditation establish him on his throne within, and japa keeps him there. Of course, his grace is also necessary. Without it, nothing happens.

Do it now

Prayer and meditation require our full attention, but one of the advantages of japa is that you can do other things at the same time. Holy Mother, who was famous for doing prodigious amounts of japa, undoubtedly did much of it while busy with her household chores—husking paddy, sweeping and scrubbing the floor, washing and cutting vegetables.

It's also a good way to shut down the endless chatter of the mind. We often find our thoughts wandering. Japa pulls them back and gives them focus. It's like a thread that ties the mind to the lotus feet of the Lord; it reminds us always to pay attention to him.

Sri Ramakrishna taught a variety of spiritual practices, but Swami Brahmananda and Holy Mother placed special emphasis on japa. If you study their teachings, you'll find that they constantly emphasized the necessity of doing it, and especially at fixed times in the morning and evening.

The fixed times establish the habit. Once you get used to doing it at certain times, you get restless to do it when those times come. If you don't do it, you feel guilty. In fact, guilt feelings are common among devotees who skip doing their japa. If you don't want to feel guilty, better not skip it!

A common complaint among beginners is that they don't feel any results. Swami Brahmananda constantly had to reassure his disciples that if they didn't feel any results in the beginning, they would feel them later on. Perseverance is the key. In fact, he told one disciple, "Follow some spiritual discipline for at least three years, and then, if you find you have made no tangible progress, you may come back and slap my face!" (Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion*, Vedanta Press, Hollywood, 1947; p.129.)

Vicarious Japa: A Gift from Holy Mother

Holy Mother said that some of her disciples were incapable of doing much japa, so she did it for them. In her old age, when her attendant noticed that she was doing japa even in bed, she asked, "What can I do, my son? The boys come and entreat me eagerly. They take the mantra and go home. But nobody does any japa regularly. Some don't do it even once. Yet as I have shouldered the burden, should I not look after them? That's why I do japa and pray to the Master, 'O Master, grant them enlightenment, grant them emancipation, and do you take on yourself their care in every way here and hereafter!'" (Swami Gambhirananda, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, Fourth Edition, 1986; p. 397. See also Swami Nikhilananda, Sri Sarada Devi, *The Holy Mother: Her Teachings and Conversations*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2004; pp. 25-26.)

I can imagine some people grumbling, "Holy Mother made it too easy for her disciples. She spoiled them. How could they develop any character if she did everything for them?"

I can also imagine her giving a sharp reply: "I am the Mother! Shall I not do everything for my children? As for their character, you don't need to worry about it. I will take care of it."

Lazy guys like me envy Holy Mother's disciples. What a soft deal they had! We don't have the luxury of knowing that she's doing japa for us. Some of us have to do three rounds of the rosary just to get started. Sometimes it takes that long just to drag the mind away from worldly thoughts and get it settled down. That's especially true in the evening, after a day of being beaten up by the world.

Coffee, Tea, or Japa?

Early-morning japa, which is recommended most highly, is supposed to take hold quickly, because the mind is fresh and doesn't have to wean itself away from worldly thoughts. But you have to make sure that you're fully awake, or you're likely to fall asleep.

People like me, who need three cups of coffee just to wake up in the morning, are always relieved to read about a disciple of Holy Mother who told her that it was impossible for him to do japa before having his morning tea. Fortunately for us all, Holy Mother gave him permission to drink his tea first. (Gambhirananda, p. 410.)

I have been quick to interpret this as permission to drink my three cups of coffee in the morning before trying to do anything that requires the slightest bit of intelligence. I console myself for this weakness by invoking the example of an eminent Tibetan lama, the late Kalu Rim-poche, who used to drink Tibetan tea while meditating.

Don't Mess with the Mantra

Japa is sometimes difficult for Westerners, because the mantra is in Sanskrit, a language we're unfamiliar with. I know an American devotee who once rebelled against his mantra. "I'm tired of this Sanskrit gibberish," he complained. "I want an English mantra." So, although he had been initiated by a perfectly well-qualified teacher, he made up an English mantra and started doing japa with it.

At first it seemed new and fresh, and he was heartened by the results. The image of his Chosen Ideal glowed within him; it seemed to be cheering him on. Novelty is always exciting, and he expected to make rapid progress.

But surprise, surprise! Novelty wears off pretty quickly unless there's some substance behind it. Pretty soon, about halfway through his rosary, he began to nod off, and his old mantra started welling up from the depths of his mind. He stopped it, reimposed his English mantra, and succeeded for awhile; but the old Sanskrit mantra was stubborn, and kept resurfacing when he least expected it. No matter how much he resisted, it kept coming back. Eventually the image of the Chosen Ideal seemed to be grinning at him, and then he got the message.

Finally he gave up and returned to his old mantra. "There's more to this mantra stuff than meets the eye," he admitted. "I guess you can't keep a good mantra down."

But It's Boring!

The big complaint that most people make about japa is that it's boring. Who wants to keep chanting the same old line? What a waste of time! What's the point?

The point, of course, is to recondition the mind. That's what spiritual practice is all about: to recondition the mind so that it will become a fit place for the indwelling of the Lord. But our minds are restless, and scream for more exciting fare. This is especially true in our switched-on era, when cyberspace is crackling with high-tech entertainment. Who wants to pray when you can google? Who wants to chant when you can twitter?

If we're serious about spiritual life, we have to shut down the computer and dig out the old rosary. Swami Brahmananda's remark that his disciples could come back and slap his face if they didn't feel any results within three years is something we ought always to keep in mind. He didn't mean three years of just piddling around. He meant three

years of persistent and intensive effort.

Experience shows that if we keep working on our japa, it gradually takes hold. It stops being boring and eventually becomes sweet. The man-tra becomes an old friend, something solid in the foundation of our minds, an anchor for our wayward thoughts. It can be a healing balm in times of grief, a refuge in times of trouble. It takes on a life of its own, and rises from our subconscious to greet us whenever we turn to it.

It also becomes something very much like the default setting of the mind. When the mind wanders, the mantra often emerges spontaneously. We find it resounding within us without making any effort. All we have to do is listen.

In fact, this may be one answer to the famous Zen koan, "Who is it that recites the Buddha's name?" When we become established in japa, the Buddha's name recites itself.



Circulated as a service by:
John Manetta
Beles 28 (Koukaki)
117 41 Athens. Greece
Phone [+30] 210 923 4682
email: jmanveda@otenet.gr
website: www.vedanta.gr