

SATSANGA - QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

with Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati

The Dilemma of Effort versus Effortlessness

Question: It is said that to reach the state of Meditation, no effort is required; in fact, it is said that effort is in itself a barrier. Conversely, I have also read that effort is required. This seems to be a contradiction. I have also read that Meditation, in its real sense, only happens and that we cannot do anything. What, therefore, is the point of practice?

Answer: As you correctly pointed out, one cannot create nor do Meditation, for any attempt at doing will be nothing but an extension of the ego, of the known, of conditioning, and not of any real use in expanding the horizons of perception. So what to do? To slightly misquote Shakespeare, the question is: 'To do or not to do?'

Sri Aurobindo spent thousands of words trying to explain this dilemma of whether 'to do' or 'not to do' with his philosophy of *Ascent* and *Descent* on the path of spiritual Realisation.

As individuals, we can put ourselves in a state of receptivity, openness and sensitivity. This is where 'doing' comes in and this is the function of Yoga and all mystical systems. This is the 'doing' part of Meditation and corresponds to Aurobindo's Ascent aspect of spiritual Realisation. Hatha Yoga, Mantra Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Kriya Yoga and so on, all put us in a more receptive and sensitive state. We 'do' practices so that we can realise That which is beyond practice, beyond 'doing' and beyond effort.

Part of this process of 'doing' is also trying to be open, moment to moment, in our daily life, thereby 'creating' or 'encouraging' the necessary 'spaciousness' (Sanskrit, *shunya*) for inner experience and change.

Spiritual experience arises as a process of Descent which comes from beyond the confines and limitations of the personality and the ego - from the currently Unknown spheres of Being. Here 'doing' is not required.

Indeed, the state of Meditation comes unexpectedly when we are ripe for the experience, when our 'normal' ego structures are temporarily relaxed or put to one side. It may happen when we are sitting, chanting our mantra, washing the dishes, or even sitting on the toilet!

Effort is an obstacle because if we are always trying, sweating and puffing, then we are not really open. The Unexpected is waiting, but we are so busy 'doing' that we don't notice. But, paradoxically, effort is also necessary. If we do nothing and just flop around with the attitude 'whatever will be, will be' then we tend to become lazy and complacent. Nothing happens and probably nothing meaningful will happen. It is effort, including the practice of Yoga, that 'tunes' our being, so to say, so that Meditation and Realisation can 'flash forth.'

Only when our personality is harmonious and crystal clear (Sanskrit, *sattva*) can we really let things happen without sinking into a state of slothfulness. But most of us are not, by temperament, full of *sattva*. We are full of passion, desire and ambition (*rajas*) and ignorance and negativity (*tamas*) and so we have to be proactive. We have to work, do, practise and struggle on the Yogic or spiritual path. In time, our personality is transformed into *sattva*, and then we really can let things happen - and they will because the sensitivity is there. The secrets of the Inner Being will be revealed to us.

Therefore, tread the razor's edge. Find the middle path between doing and not doing. Try, but without expecting. Do for the sake of doing; practise for the sake of practice. If we are ripe, we will realise That which is beyond all effort, all doing and all practice.

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